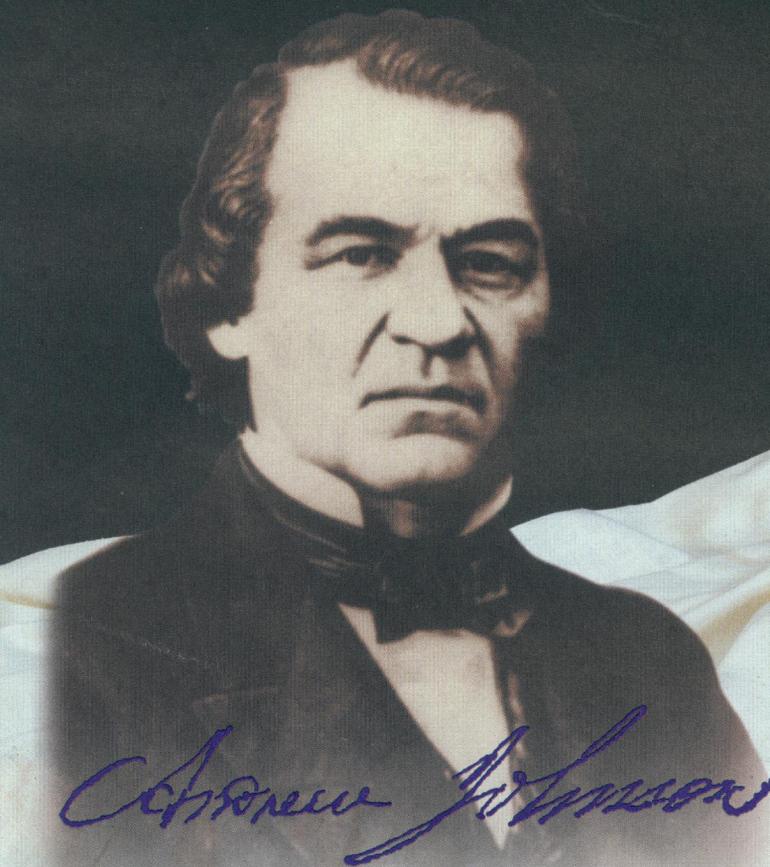


# The Constitution shall be saved and the Union Preserved.

—Andrew Johnson, 1869

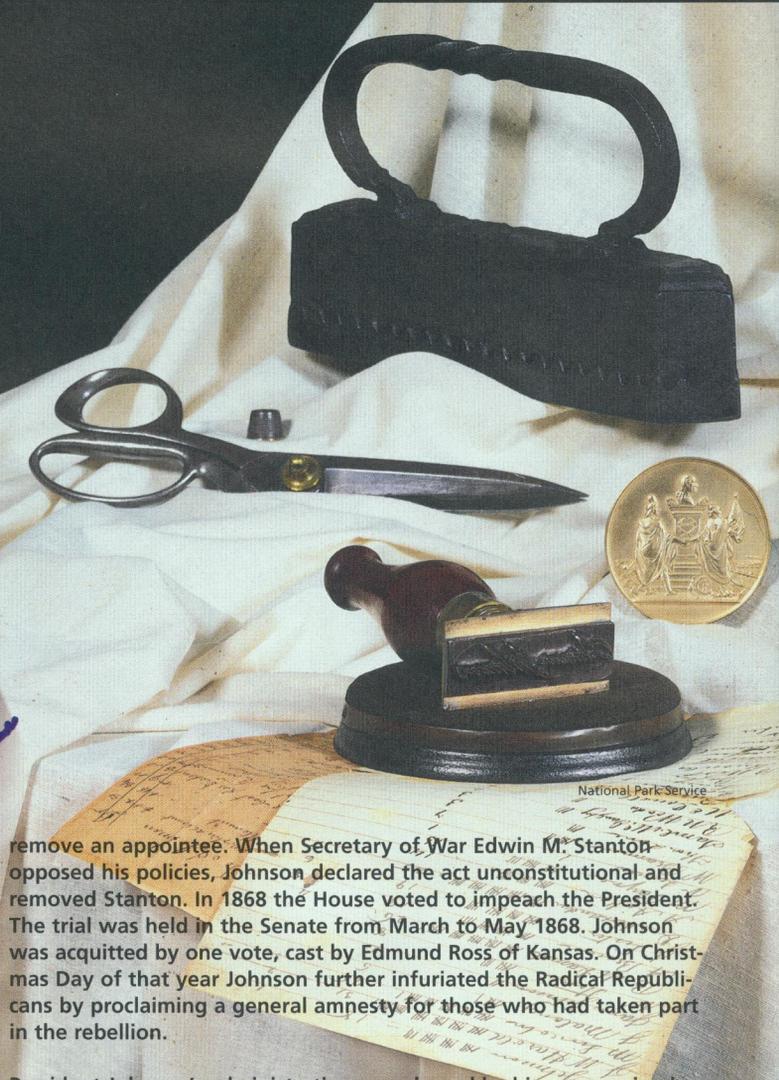


The public image of Andrew Johnson was always that of an uncompromising idealist, extolling the agrarian democracy of Thomas Jefferson and fellow Tennessean Andrew Jackson. In time of trial, he sought support from the people. Johnson formulated his political philosophy early on: a strict interpretation of the U.S. Constitution, a belief in states' rights, a notion that the public lands belonged literally to the people, and an aversion to government spending. At first, Johnson was able to reconcile the words of the Constitution with the idea of slavery. He needed the pro-slavery votes and even owned slaves himself. His defense of slavery waned as Southern secession threatened to destroy the Union.

As a local and state official, the perennial working-class candidate built a loyal constituency and solidified his position as a leader of the Democratic Party. His terms as U.S. Representative and Senator gave him a chance to put his philosophy into action on the national level. The Homestead Act, which some consider his greatest contribution, was the practical outgrowth of his agrarian ideals. He introduced a bill to open public lands to anyone who would farm a 160-acre parcel. It became law in 1862.

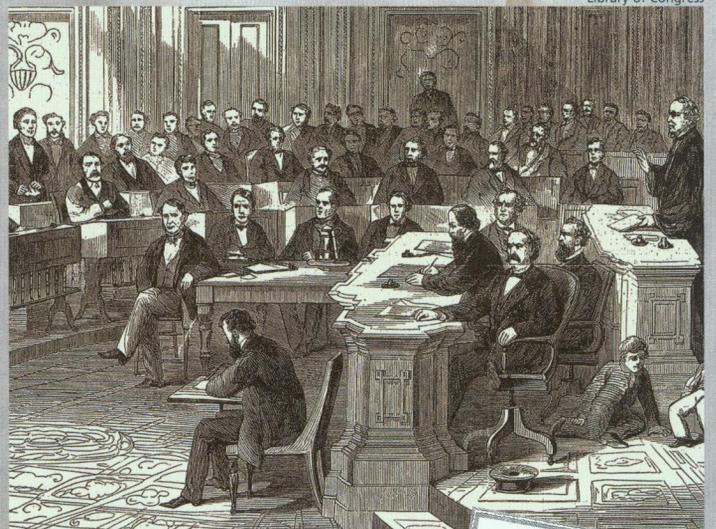
When the Civil War broke out, Johnson was the only senator from a seceding state to remain in Congress. Like President Lincoln, Johnson believed that secession was unconstitutional. Therefore, he had every right to keep his seat. In December 1860, in a speech to Congress, he proclaimed, "I intend to stand by the Constitution as it is, insisting upon a compliance with all its guaranties...It is the last hope of human freedom." If that meant abolishing slavery, so be it. Most of his fellow Southerners felt betrayed. Johnson was nearly killed by hostile crowds during a train ride through Virginia in 1861. In the North he was a hero. Lincoln appointed him military governor of Tennessee in 1862. In 1864 Johnson replaced Hannibal Hamlin as Lincoln's running mate; "Andy Johnson, I think," said Lincoln, "is a good man." On April 15, 1865, upon Lincoln's assassination, Andrew Johnson became the 17th President of the United States.

President Johnson battled with Thaddeus Stevens and the Radical Republicans over the course of Reconstruction. Johnson wanted to readmit the southern states much as they were before the war, minus slavery. The Radicals, who controlled Congress, sought to demolish the South's capacity for reviving a sectional conflict. Fearful that Johnson would replace Radicals in the South, Congress passed the Tenure of Office Act requiring Senate approval before a President could



remove an appointee. When Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton opposed his policies, Johnson declared the act unconstitutional and removed Stanton. In 1868 the House voted to impeach the President. The trial was held in the Senate from March to May 1868. Johnson was acquitted by one vote, cast by Edmund Ross of Kansas. On Christmas Day of that year Johnson further infuriated the Radical Republicans by proclaiming a general amnesty for those who had taken part in the rebellion.

President Johnson's administration was shaped by his unwavering belief in the Constitution. He opposed the 14th Amendment and vetoed the Civil Rights Act and statehood for Nebraska and Colorado—all of whose constitutionality he questioned. Amid the political turmoil Johnson managed to reopen seaports, federal courts, and post offices in the South. His most far-reaching achievement, the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867, remained unappreciated until long after Johnson left office. Johnson returned to Greeneville in 1869, no less ambitious than ever. He was again elected to the Senate in January 1875. Six months later Andrew Johnson died. The memorial over his grave reads: "His Faith In The People Never Wavered."



Senator Edmund Ross of Kansas (standing, far left) cast the vote that acquitted Johnson in his 1868 impeachment trial.

