

The Impeachment Trial of Andrew Johnson



ABOUT THE SOURCE Andrew Johnson became president after Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in April 1865. The new president soon clashed with Congress. Many Republicans believed that Johnson's Reconstruction program was too lenient. Congress passed several bills, launching its own Reconstruction program. Johnson vetoed the bills, calling them unconstitutional. When Congress overrode the vetoes, Johnson tried to prevent the enforcement of the legislation. In 1868 Johnson fired Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, an ally of his Republican enemies in Congress. The House of Representatives then voted to impeach the president. In the passage below, Congressman George Julian describes the impeachment trial in the Senate.



*As you read note how Julian describes the senators who voted against impeachment. The following words may be new to you: **unabated**, **overmastering**, **animosity**, **inextricably**, **preposterous**. You may want to use a dictionary to look them up.*

The trial proceeded with **unabated** interest, and on the afternoon of the eleventh of May the excitement reached its highest point. Reports came from the Senate, then in secret session, that Grimes, Fessenden and Henderson were certainly for acquittal, and that other senators were to follow them. An indescribable gloom now prevailed among the friends of impeachment, which increased during the afternoon, and at night when the Senate was again in session. At the adjournment there was some hope of conviction, but it was generally considered very doubtful . . .

The vote was first taken on the eleventh article. The galleries were packed, and an indescribable anxiety was written on every face. Some of the members of the House near me grew pale and sick under the burden of suspense. Such stillness prevailed that the breathing in the galleries could be heard at the announcement of each senator's vote. This was quite noticeable when any of the doubtful senators voted, the people holding their breath as the words "guilty" or "not guilty" were pronounced, and then giving it simultaneous vent . . . Nearly all hope of conviction fled when Senator Ross, of Kansas, voted "not guilty," and a long breathing of disappointment and despair followed the like vote of Van Winkle, which settled the case in favor of the President.

It is impossible now to realize how perfectly **overmastering** was the excitement of these days. The exercise of calm judgment was simply out of the question. As I have already stated, passion ruled the hour, and constantly strengthened the tendency to one-sidedness and exaggeration.

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

Reconstruction

Primary Source

The attempt to impeach the President was undoubtedly inspired, mainly, by patriotic motives; but the spirit of intolerance among Republicans toward those who differed with them in opinion set all moderation and common sense at defiance. Patriotism and party **animosity** were so **inextricably** mingled and confounded that the real merits of the controversy could only be seen after the heat and turmoil of the strife had passed away. Time has made this manifest. Andrew Johnson was not the Devil-incarnate he was then painted, nor did he monopolize, entirely, the "wrong-headedness" of the times. No one will now dispute that the popular estimate of his character did him very great injustice. It is equally certain that great injustice was done to Trumbull, Fessenden, Grimes and other senators who voted to acquit the President, and gave proof of their honesty and independence by facing the wrath and scorn of the party with which they had so long been identified. The idea of making the question of impeachment a matter of party discipline was utterly indefensible and **preposterous**.

Source: *Political Recollections, 1840-1872*, George W. Julian

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. What was the atmosphere at the impeachment trial?

2. How did Julian assess the attempt to impeach President Andrew Johnson?

3. How did Julian feel about Senators Trumbull, Fessenden, and Grimes?
