
Background Information for the Trial of Andrew Johnson

In 1864 Abraham Lincoln was re-elected to the presidency, and the Union armies were successfully invading the Deep South. There would still be another year of terrible fighting between the North and the South. Yet, Lincoln and the conservative elements within the Republican Party were already establishing governments in some of the secessionist states that fell under the control of the federal government. There were many politicians in Congress, in both the Senate and the House of Representatives, which were not happy with the course of events. They did not like Abraham Lincoln's plan of reconstruction. Many felt that Lincoln should concern himself with waging the war against the Rebels and leave the reconstruction program to Congress. Because of their opposition to Lincoln and Lincoln's policies, they were labeled Radical Republicans.

The Radical Republicans represented the fanatical abolitionists, the urban businessmen, and the emerging industrial class of the North. The Civil War destroyed the power and the influence of the agrarians, the planters and slaveholders who had dominated the federal government in the decades before Fort Sumter. The policies and programs of the Radical Republicans focused on building the great transcontinental railroads, developing the nation's natural resources, applying high tariffs to protect growing industries, and instituting unrestricted immigration so the nation would have the cheap labor for expanding mills, foundries, and factories. The Radical Republicans also wanted to punish the South, to make the secessionists pay for the pain, misery, and sorrow that had been inflicted upon the nation. They were angered by Lincoln's reconstruction plan that offered mercy to the secessionists.

In the ranks of the Radical Republicans were powerful politicians—Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, Benjamin Butler of Massachusetts, Benjamin F. Wade of Ohio, Zachariah Chandler of Michigan, G. W. Julian of Indiana, Henry Wilson of Massachusetts, Richard Yates of Illinois, and James M. Ashley of Ohio—who began to take steps that would enable Congress to exercise control over the reconstruction program for the former Confederate states. It is Charles Sumner in the Senate and Thaddeus Stevens in the House of Representatives that stand out and were Lincoln's most significant opponents.

Abraham Lincoln's reconstruction program was called the ten percent plan. A full pardon and restoration of property was given to all who took the oath of allegiance to uphold the Constitution and who willingly complied with the abolition of slavery as enacted by executive proclamation and the Congress. In any of the defeated states, as soon as ten percent of the population that had voted in the 1860 elections had taken the oath, they could take the necessary steps to set up a government that was loyal to the United States. The former officials of the secessionist states and Confederate officers above a certain rank were denied the right to hold public office and were deprived of citizenship and, especially, the right to vote. Abraham Lincoln possessed the authority to put new governments in place as the Union armies conquered the South piece by piece, but no state could take its rightful place in the Union without the approval of Congress. The Congress could question and reject the validity of these new governments being formed in the South, and they could effectively prevent senators and representatives from taking their seats in the Capitol. It was in Congress that the Radical Republicans challenged Abraham Lincoln.