

## DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints  
in Primary Source Documents

# The Impeachment of Andrew Johnson

*Was Andrew Johnson guilty, or was he the victim of an unprincipled political witch hunt?*



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*Debating* the  
**DOCUMENTS**

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# Teacher Introduction

## ★ Using Primary Sources

Primary sources are called “primary” because they are first-hand records of a past era or historical event. They are the raw materials, or the evidence, on which historians base their “secondary” accounts of the past.

A rapidly growing number of history teachers today are using primary sources. Why? Perhaps it's because primary sources give students a better sense of what history is and what historians do. Such sources also help students see the past from a variety of viewpoints. Moreover, primary sources make history vivid and bring it to life.

However, primary sources are not easy to use. They can be confusing. They can be biased. They rarely all agree. Primary sources must be interpreted and set in context. To do this, students need historical background knowledge. *Debating the Documents* helps students handle such challenges by giving them a useful framework for analyzing sources that conflict with one another.



*“Multiple,  
conflicting  
perspectives are  
among the truths  
of history.  
No single  
objective or  
universal account  
could ever put an  
end to this endless  
creative dialogue  
within and  
between the past  
and the present.”*

From the 2011 Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct of the Council of the American Historical Association.

## INTRODUCTION

### ★ *The Debating the Documents Series*

Each *Debating the Documents* booklet includes the same sequence of reproducible worksheets. If students use several booklets over time, they will get regular practice at interpreting and comparing conflicting sources. In this way, they can learn the skills and habits needed to get the most out of primary sources.

#### **Each *Debating the Documents* Booklet Includes**

- **Suggestions for the Student and an Introductory Essay.** The student gets instructions and a one-page essay providing background on the booklet's topic. A time line on the topic is also included.
- **Two Groups of Contrasting Primary Source Documents.** In most of the booklets, students get one pair of visual sources and one pair of written sources. In some cases, more than two are provided for each. Background is provided on each source. *Within each group, the sources clash in a very clear way.* (The sources are not always exact opposites, but they do always differ in some obvious way.)
- **Three Worksheets for Each Document Group.** Students use the first two worksheets to take notes on the sources. The third worksheet asks which source the student thinks would be most useful to a historian.
- **One DBQ.** On page 20, a document-based question (DBQ) asks students to write an effective essay using all of the booklet's primary sources.

### ★ *How to Use This Booklet*

#### **1. Have students read “Suggestions for the Student” and the Introductory Essay.**

Give them copies of pages 5–7. Ask them to read the instructions and then read the introductory essay on the topic. The time line gives them additional information on that topic. This reading could be done in class or as a homework assignment.

#### **2. Have students do the worksheets.**

Make copies of the worksheets and the pages with the sources. Ask students to study the background information on each source and the source itself. Then have them take notes on the sources using the worksheets. If students have access to a computer, have them review the primary sources digitally.



### 3. “Debate the documents” as a class.

Have students use their worksheet notes to debate the primary source documents as a class. Urge students to follow these ground rules:

- Use your worksheets as a guide for the discussion or debate.
- Try to reach agreement about the main ideas and the significance of each primary source document.
- Look for points of agreement as well as disagreement between the primary sources.
- Listen closely to all points of view about each primary source.
- Focus on the usefulness of each source to the historian, not merely on whether you agree or disagree with that source’s point of view.

### 4. Have students do the final DBQ.

A DBQ is an essay question about a set of primary source documents. To answer the DBQ, students write essays using evidence from the sources and their own background knowledge of the historical era. (See the next page for a DBQ scoring guide to use in evaluating these essays.)

The DBQ assignment on page 20 includes guidelines for writing a DBQ essay. Here are some additional points to make with students about preparing to write this kind of essay.

#### **The DBQ for this Booklet (see page 20):**

“Andrew Johnson’s impeachment trial was a political trial much more than it was a trial for any actual ‘crimes and misdemeanors’ by a president.” Assess the validity of this statement. That is, explain why you do or do not agree with it.

- Analyze the question carefully.
- Use your background knowledge to set sources in their historical context.
- Question and interpret sources actively. Do not accept them at face value.
- Use sources meaningfully to support your essay’s thesis.
- Pay attention to the overall organization of your essay.

## INTRODUCTION

### ★ *Complete DBQ Scoring Guide*

Use this guide in evaluating the DBQ for this booklet. Use this scoring guide with students who are already familiar with using primary sources and writing DBQ essays.

#### **Excellent Essay**

- Offers a clear answer or thesis explicitly addressing all aspects of the essay question.
- Does a careful job of interpreting many or most of the documents and relating them clearly to the thesis and the DBQ. Deals with conflicting documents effectively.
- Uses details and examples effectively to support the thesis and other main ideas. Explains the significance of those details and examples well.
- Uses background knowledge and the documents in a balanced way.
- Is well written; clear transitions make the essay easy to follow from point to point. Only a few minor writing errors or errors of fact.

#### **Good Essay**

- Offers a reasonable thesis addressing the essential points of the essay question.
- Adequately interprets at least some of the documents and relates them to the thesis and the DBQ.
- Usually relates details and examples meaningfully to the thesis or other main ideas.
- Includes some relevant background knowledge.
- May have some writing errors or errors of fact, as long as these do not invalidate the essay's overall argument or point of view.

#### **Fair Essay**

- Offers at least a partly developed thesis addressing the essay question.
- Adequately interprets at least a few of the documents.
- Relates only a few of the details and examples to the thesis or other main ideas.
- Includes some background knowledge.
- Has several writing errors or errors of fact that make it harder to understand the essay's overall argument or point of view.

#### **Poor Essay**

- Offers no clear thesis or answer addressing the DBQ.
- Uses few documents effectively other than referring to them in "laundry list" style, with no meaningful relationship to a thesis or any main point.
- Uses details and examples unrelated to the thesis or other main ideas. Does not explain the significance of these details and examples.
- Is not clearly written, with some major writing errors or errors of fact.

# Suggestions to the Student

## ★ *Using Primary Sources*

A primary source is any record of evidence from the past. Many things are primary sources: letters, diary entries, official documents, photos, cartoons, wills, maps, charts, etc. They are called “primary” because they are first-hand records of a past event or time period. This *Debating the Documents* lesson is based on two groups of primary source documents. Within each group, the sources conflict with one another. That is, they express different or even opposed points of view. You need to decide which source is more reliable, more useful, or more typical of the time period. This is what historians do all the time. Usually, you will be able to learn something about the past from each source, even when the sources clash with one another in dramatic ways.

## ★ *How to Use This Booklet*

### 1. Read the one-page introductory essay.

This gives you background information that will help you analyze the primary source documents and do the exercises for this *Debating the Documents* lesson. The time line gives you additional information you will find helpful.



### 2. Study the primary source documents for this lesson.

For this lesson, you get two groups of sources. The sources within each group conflict with one another. Some of these sources are visuals, others are written sources. With visual sources, pay attention not only to the image’s “content” (its subject matter) but also to its artistic style, shading, composition, camera angle, symbols, and other features that add to the image’s meaning. With written sources, notice the writing style, bias, even what the source leaves out or does not talk about. Think about each source’s author, that author’s reasons for writing, and the likely audience for the source. These considerations give you clues as to the source’s historical value.

### 3. Use the worksheets to analyze each group of primary source documents.

For each group of sources, you get three worksheets. Use the “Study the Document” worksheets to take notes on each source. Use the “Comparing the Documents” worksheet to decide which of the sources would be most useful to a historian.

### 4. As a class, debate the documents.

Use your worksheet notes to help you take part in this debate.

### 5. Do the final DBQ.

“DBQ” means “document-based question.” A DBQ is a question along with several primary source documents. To answer the DBQ, write an essay using evidence from the documents and your own background history knowledge.



# *Impeaching Andrew Johnson*

In May, 1868, President Andrew Johnson nearly lost his job.

The House of Representatives had voted to impeach him. That means they charged him with “high crimes and misdemeanors,” part of the phrase in the Constitution defining the reasons for removing a president from office. The House votes to impeach, but the Senate holds the impeachment trial and makes the final decision. By one vote, the Senate decided not to remove Andrew Johnson.

How did this crisis come about? The official reason for impeaching Johnson was that he had violated a law, the Tenure of Office Act. However, this was only a tiny part of a far larger battle. Moreover, it was a political battle, and the trial was a political trial. That is, it was about a political issue that sharply divided the nation, not one fairly minor law.

At the heart of this battle was the question of what to do about the states defeated in the Civil War and what rights to grant the newly freed slaves.

At the start of the Civil War, Andrew Johnson was a slave owner and a Democratic senator from Tennessee. Yet he refused to join the South’s rebellion. In 1864, Abraham Lincoln chose Johnson as his vice president in order to win Democratic support in the election that year. When Lincoln was assassinated in 1865, Johnson became president.

As president, Johnson wanted to treat the defeated South mildly. He pardoned all but the top rebel leaders and allowed Southern states back into the union quickly. Moreover, he refused to demand that the new states give blacks the vote. Soon, these states were passing “black codes” that strictly limited the political and economic rights of blacks.

All this angered Republicans in Congress, especially the so-called “Radicals.” These Radical Republicans had very different ideas about “Reconstruction,” the term for plans to change

the South and readmit it to the union. These Republicans wanted a long period of military government in the South with strict rules for readmitting the Southern states. Most Radical Republicans also wanted to protect blacks and grant them equal civil rights, including the right to vote.

In 1866, the Republicans began to pass Reconstruction acts of their own. Johnson vetoed these acts and sent Congress angry messages about them. But Republicans were soon able to get the two-thirds votes needed to override the vetoes and make their acts the official laws of the land.

In 1867, they then passed the Tenure in Office Act. It said a president could not fire certain officials without the approval of Congress. This new law was specifically meant to keep Johnson from firing Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, who agreed with the Republicans in Congress. Johnson removed Stanton anyway. When Congress came back into session in early 1868, it refused to accept Stanton’s removal. However, Johnson would not back down. On February 21, he appointed Major General Lorenzo Thomas as the “interim” Secretary of War. He planned to take his case to the Supreme Court and have it declare the Tenure of Office Act unconstitutional. Instead, Congress acted first. On February 24, the House voted to impeach Andrew Johnson.

The impeachment trial lasted from April 22 to May 6. It centered on Johnson’s violation of the Tenure of Office Act and on some other angry remarks he had made about Congress. But as the documents for this booklet will show, Reconstruction itself was the issue. In the view of many historians, impeachment was not the way to win on Reconstruction, even if Johnson’s policies were unwise. In the end, the Senate agreed, though only by a single vote.

# Andrew Johnson Time Line

**1808**

- • • Andrew Johnson is born in Raleigh, North Carolina.

**1857**

- • • Johnson becomes a U.S. Senator.

**1861**

- • • Johnson remains loyal to the Union at the outbreak of the Civil War and keeps his Senate seat when Tennessee secedes.

**1862**

- • • Lincoln appoints Johnson as military governor of Tennessee. Johnson then resigns from the Senate.

**1864**

- • • Andrew Johnson is elected vice president of the United States.

**1865**

- • • The Civil War ends with the defeat of the South. President Lincoln is assassinated. Andrew Johnson is sworn in as president. He tries to deal leniently with the defeated South and seeks to restore it to the Union quickly. However, the Southern states begin to pass "Black Codes" limiting the freedom of former slaves. The Ku Klux Klan is formed to terrorize blacks. Led by Thaddeus Stevens, the House denies seats to new Southern members and calls for stricter punishment of the South.

**1866**

- • • Johnson vetoes a Freedmen's Bureau bill and the 1866 Civil Rights Act. Congress passes a new Freedmen's Bureau bill later, and it overrides Johnson's veto of the Civil Rights Act. Congress also passes the Fourteenth Amendment granting full citizenship to blacks and protecting the equal rights of all citizens. To try to persuade the public to elect a Congress more in agreement with him, Johnson tours the Northeast and Midwest in his "Swing Around the Circle" campaign. Yet in the elections in the fall, Republicans increase their majorities in Congress.

**1867**

- • • The First Reconstruction Act passes over Johnson's veto. It places the Southern states under military rule and sets strict rules for their readmittance. The Tenure of Office Act is passed over Johnson's veto. It is designed to prevent him from removing his top appointed officials without Senate approval. Johnson then suspends Secretary of War Edwin Stanton.

**1868**

- • • Johnson seeks to remove Edwin Stanton permanently as Secretary of War. He is then impeached by the House of Representatives. He is acquitted by a single vote in the Senate.

**1869**

- • • Johnson and his family return to Tennessee.

**1874**

- • • The Tennessee legislature elects Johnson to the United States Senate.

**1875**

- • • Johnson attends a special session of the Senate. On July 31, he dies of a stroke while visiting his daughter in Tennessee.

## DOCUMENT 1

## Visual Primary Source Document 1



Currier &amp; Ives, Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-114830

## Information on Document 1

This 1866 Thomas Nast cartoon from *Harper's Weekly* criticizes Andrew Johnson's approach to Reconstruction. It is titled "Andrew Johnson's Reconstruction and How it Works."

In the center, Johnson is the deceitful Iago from Shakespeare's play *Othello*. In that play, Iago betrays Othello. In this cartoon, Othello is shown as a black Union veteran of the Civil War. Some of Johnson's slogans are on the wall behind the two figures. An array of Johnson's pardons and vetoes are shown along the sides.

On top are scenes of a slave auction, and of whites attacking blacks in Memphis and New Orleans after the Civil War.

In the center at the bottom, Johnson charms a Southern snake wrapped around an African American man while his Cabinet officers look on. On the lower left side, a Union general is accepting the surrender of New Orleans in 1862. Yet by 1866, the Union commander on the lower right is shown bowing respectfully to a Louisiana official.