since I have been in this chair to uphold the Constitution which they trample under foot?"

In the embattled White House, Johnson wondered and waited, kept informed of the proceedings in the Senate chamber through eyewitness reports. And then, after more than a month, the day of decision arrived. In the end it all came down to one man's vote, that of Edmund G. Ross, a Republican senator from Kansas, to whom Johnson had promised that he would soften his opposition to congressional Reconstruction. "Not guilty!" Ross intoned. The news was run by foot to the White House, where on hearing it, the President wept. "I intend to devote the remainder of my life," he said, "to the vindication of my own character."

Never before had two branches of the government been at such odds, or the office of the presidency been so diminished. And much of it—though not all—had been Andrew Johnson's fault. Stubborn and independent, at his best moments heroically so, he was also crude and uncompromising and lacking in any sympathy for black Americans. And he was unable to lead the country through the massive challenges of Reconstruction.

In November 1868, General Ulysses S. Grant was elected president, and after four months Johnson returned to Tennessee. "I have performed my duty to my God, my country, and my family," he would insist. "I have nothing to fear." Five years later, in an attempt to restore his reputation, Johnson ran for a seat in the U.S. Senate. When news of his victory in Tennessee reached him—making him the only former president ever to be elected to the Senate—the old fighter grew emotional. "I'd rather have this information than to learn that I had been elected president of the United States. Thank God for the vindication."

CHESTER A. ARTHUR
1881–1885

“Gentleman Boss”

If Andrew Johnson represented a nadir for the presidency, at least no one ever charged him with graft or corruption. But with the administration of Ulysses S. Grant, a new era, dominated by spoilsmen, began. And in 1880 the Republicans nominated for vice president a man many considered the epitome of corrupt politics—New York City's infamous former customs officer, Chester Arthur.

Raised as a preacher's son in northeastern Vermont, Chester Arthur as a young man was an idealistic lawyer whose chief interest was civil rights. After serving in the Civil War as a quartermaster general, in the mid-1860s he became active in New York City politics, home of some of the worst party corruption in the country. "It was customary to station 'heelers' in the lines of voters," Arthur related of the period before his arrival, "and these fellows would at a signal break up the lines. On one occasion these ruffians were provided with awls, which they
prodded into the flesh of the majority, thus dispersing them. Ballot boxes were stuffed almost openly.

Arthur liked money and he liked power, and he climbed rapidly in the city’s Republican organization, becoming a favorite of New York’s new senator, Roscoe Conkling. Always impeccably dressed, Arthur found his darkening nature particularly suited to the spoils system. He was a smooth back-slapper, willing to follow orders and give up his nights to drinking with the boys in the assemblage of power. And he became especially noted for his loyalty. “I was always to be counted on to stand by the friends who have for so long acted together,” he once boasted.

It was President Grant who appointed Arthur to the highest-paying civil service job in the federal government—customs collector for New York City. Seventy-five percent of the nation’s customs receipts came through the sprawling New York port, creating countless ways to siphon off money—from fixed scales and rigged measurements to out-and-out bribery. Though Arthur was never personally charged with bribery or payoffs, he tolerated the crookedness of others. And when this was pointed out to him by a friend, the portly spoilsman bridled. “You are one of those goody-goody fellows,” he blurted out, “who set up a high standard of morality that other people cannot reach.”

Civil Service reform swept in during the Hayes administration, and the Customhouse was accused of dishonesty from top to bottom. When Arthur tried to stonewall the investigating commission, President Hayes fired him. But the “Gentleman Boss” Chester Arthur continued to oversee party strategy, and became the permanent president of New York’s Republican Central Committee. When Grant lost the 1880 nomination to Ohio’s Senator Garfield, Arthur made a successful bid for the vice presidential nomination.

Considered the shrewdest political manager in the country, Arthur assumed overall charge of the Republican campaign—raising money, booking speakers, and organizing publicity throughout the pivotal state of New York. Later, at a celebration dinner following the Garfield-Arthur victory, a partially inebriated Arthur all but admitted his orchestration of the ballot box. “I don’t think we had better go into the minute secrets of the campaign because I see the reporters are present,” he laughed. “If I should get to going about the secrets . . . there is no saying what I might say.”

Only three months into his term as vice president, as he was debarking from a steamer from Albany, Arthur received the news that Garfield had been shot, by an assassin who claimed he did it to get Arthur into the White House. As rumors spread that Arthur had hired the assassin, a wave of panic swept across the nation. Though there was no truth to the rumors, for the next ten weeks, as President Garfield hovered between life and death, Arthur avoided a suspicious press. “I am overwhelmed with grief,” he admitted privately. “The most frightful responsibility which ever devolved upon any one would be the casting of the Presidency upon me.”

On September 19, 1881, a messenger brought Arthur the dreaded news of Garfield’s death. “It cannot be,” Arthur reacted. “I hope, my God, I do hope it is a mistake.” Alone in his home in New York City, with his head on his desk and his face buried in his hands, Arthur wept.

Soon a telegram arrived from members of Garfield’s cabinet. “It becomes our painful duty,” it read, “to advise you to take the oath of office as President of the United States without delay. We will be very glad if you will come here on the earliest train tomorrow morning.”

Arthur now made an all-important decision. He would put aside his past, and disown his old cronies. He wanted to go down in history as an admired pres-
ident. Unlike Fillmore or Johnson, he went on to deliver an inaugural address designed to prove the seriousness with which he took his new position. “For the fourth time in the history of the Republic,” he proclaimed, “its Chief Magistrate has been removed by death. . . . Men may die, but the fabric of our free institutions remain unshaken.”

As president, Arthur surprised all by becoming a champion of civil service reform, though it took him two years to finally join the movement. In addition to signing the Pendleton Act of 1883, he put forward an array of thoughtful presidential actions. He argued for the establishment of a government for Alaska, for decent housing for the Library of Congress, and for a line item veto. He championed naval development and received praise for his sometimes courageous vetoes. And he took interest in the West, in particular the natural resources of that part of the country. “The conditions of the forests,” he wrote in 1882, “and the wasteful manner in which their destruction is taking place give cause for serious apprehension.”

But if Arthur became a creditable president, he also soon found he hated the office. Bored by the endless desk work and by matters of state, he routinely arrived late to the office and procrastinated on duties. He lived for his time off, and for his regular vacations, which he spent fishing or cruising on the presidential yacht. “I need a holiday as much as the poorest of my fellow citizens,” he once said; “but it is generally supposed that we people at Washington do not want any rest.”

What Arthur liked best was entertaining. To enhance the White House atmosphere, he refurbished its interior, hiring a New York decorator to make extensive alterations and adding an expensive Tiffany screen at the north entrance. Then he instituted weekly black tie state dinners at which as many as fourteen courses were served, along with eight varieties of wine.

Hidden from the public at Arthur’s insistence was the fact that he was suffering from Bright’s disease, a fatal kidney ailment that produced lethargy and depression. Diagnosed in his second year in office, the illness increased Arthur’s distaste for the presidency, and led him eventually to oppose his own renomination. “I have been so ill,” he confided to his son in early 1883, “that I have hardly been able to dispose of the . . . business . . . before me.” And later he came out and said it plainly, “I do not want to be reelected.”

Arthur’s wife Nell had died shortly before his presidency. With no one now to share his retirement, and knowing that he was dying, the outgoing President had few plans for the future. “There doesn’t seem anything for an ex-president to do,” he told a friend, “but to go out into the country and raise big pumpkins.”

Once out of office, Arthur’s health deteriorated quickly. Consumed by worries about his early shaky history, and about his place in American history, the day before he died in 1886 he made sure that no damning evidence would be left behind. From his bedside, calling upon a friend, Arthur had all his private and public papers stuffed into garbage cans—and burned.