

CHASE, Salmon Portland (1808–1873), American political leader, who was secretary of the treasury in Lincoln's Civil War cabinet and chief justice of the United States during Reconstruction. An outspoken opponent of slavery, he was a leader of the radical wing of the Republican party and a frequent aspirant to the presidency. He was an influential member of the cabinet, but differences with President Lincoln led to his resignation. As chief justice he expanded the power of the Supreme Court, and he conducted the impeachment trial of President Andrew Johnson with admirable restraint.

Early Career. Chase was born in Cornish, N. H., on Jan. 13, 1808. On the death of his father, when Salmon was nine years old, he was sent to Ohio under the guardianship of his uncle, Episcopal Bishop Philander Chase. In 1821 he entered Cincinnati College, of which Bishop Chase had become president. He transferred to Dartmouth College in 1824, graduating in 1826. For three years he ran a boys' school in Washington, D. C., and studied law.

Admitted to the bar in 1829, Chase began legal practice in Cincinnati in 1830. He established a solid reputation with the publication of the compiled *Statutes of Ohio* (3 vols., 1833–1835). At the same time he became active in the abolitionist movement, lecturing and writing. He also defended a number of escaping slaves, arguing before the courts that persons could not be claimed as property.

Chase was married and widowed three times: to Catherine Jane Garniss (1834–1835), Eliza Ann Smith (1839–1845), and Sarah Dunlop Ludlow (1846–1852). Of his six daughters, only two grew

to maturity. The effervescent Catherine became her father's hostess and shared his political ambitions. She married Sen. William Sprague of Rhode Island in 1863, and for many years "Kate" was a reigning belle in Washington.

Politician. At first a Whig, Chase joined the Ohio Liberty party in 1840, and in 1848 he was prominent in the Free Soil movement. While vociferously antislavery, he felt himself at variance with the policies of the more radical abolitionists. In 1849 he was elected to the U. S. Senate by a coalition of Free Soilers and Democrats. As a senator, Chase attempted to turn the Democratic party toward opposition to slavery and campaigned against the Kansas-Nebraska bill of 1854. He then gravitated to the new Republican party, which nominated him for governor of Ohio in 1855. He was elected and then reelected in 1857.

At the first Republican convention in 1856, Chase attempted to obtain the presidential nomination, but stood little chance. He was elected to the Senate again in 1860 and was a presidential contender at the 1860 convention, representing the stronger antislavery elements of the Republican party. However, he was considered too controversial, and he lost to Abraham Lincoln.

Cabinet Member. President Lincoln appointed Chase secretary of the treasury, and he held that post from March 1861 to July 1864. While it is sometimes debated, Chase apparently was a capable secretary, and his policies enabled the Union to find the financial backing to fight the Civil War. Floating immense loans, handling trade in the war zone, suspending specie payments and issuing greenbacks, instituting a national banking system, increasing taxation, and dealing with the problems of confiscated property were major concerns in his conscientious administration of the Treasury.

Chase was an active cabinet member, participating in many discussions and decisions and often differing emphatically with the other secretaries and with the President. He was particularly firm in advocating the abolition of slavery, feeling that Lincoln did not go far enough in the Emancipation Proclamation. He also urged vigorous prosecution of the war, and he was free with advice on military matters.

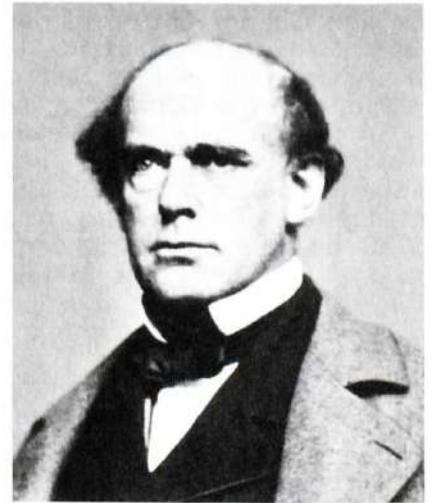
Chase offered to resign on three occasions, but was turned down; he was probably surprised when Lincoln accepted his fourth resignation. The first two incidents, in December 1862 and May 1863, had to do with Chase's feeling that his policies and appointments were not being given proper weight. In February 1864 a paper known as the *Pomeroy Circular* was published, opposing Lincoln's renomination and calling for Chase for president. Chase may or may not have known of the circular, but he certainly knew of efforts to nominate him. He offered to resign a third time, but Lincoln refused, and nothing came of the boom for Chase's nomination. However, after a dispute over patronage in June, Chase tendered his resignation and Lincoln accepted it.

Chief Justice. On Dec. 6, 1864, after the death of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, Lincoln nominated Chase to the post despite some doubts and their previous differences. Chase had indicated a desire for the position.

Coming as it did during the disruptive period of Reconstruction, Chase's term as chief justice required judicial capacity of the highest degree. One of his tasks was to preside at the impeachment trial of President Andrew Johnson in 1868. While not retreating from his strong stand politically,

Chase, as chief justice, handled this role with eminent fairness. He was against the quick reopening of federal courts in the South and in favor of some aspects of Radical Reconstruction, but he was reluctant to preside at the proposed trial of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, which never took place. The Radical Congress generally was opposed to Chase after the Johnson trial, and in some instances it appeared as though the Supreme Court was trying to avoid political entanglements.

A number of important cases came before the Supreme Court during Chase's tenure. In *Ex parte Milligan* (1866) the chief justice agreed with the majority that military commissions had no authority to try civilians in areas far from the theater of war, although he dissented over details. In 1870, Chase delivered the opinion that the Legal Tender Act of 1862 was unconstitutional, even though,



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when in the Treasury, he had issued the greenbacks. He dissented in the Slaughterhouse cases (q.v.), which retained most civil rights under the protection of the states.

While chief justice, Chase again sought the presidency in 1868. He attracted no attention from the Republicans, who had Ulysses S. Grant as a candidate, so he tried for the Democratic nomination. His daughter Kate was active in Chase's behalf, but he lost out at the convention. In 1872, he appeared to be "available" for the Liberal Republican nomination, but his health was poor, and he failed again. He died of a stroke in New York City on May 7, 1873.

Handsome and impressive, Chase had a determined, powerful appearance. He was always strong in displaying religious and moral conviction. While not a profound scholar, he had some literary ability as is indicated by his diaries. Capable and honest in many ways, he was so swayed by flattery, so ambitious for the presidency, so aloof, so difficult to work with, so lacking in humor, and so self-righteous that his value to the country was diminished. Even so, he must be accounted one of the nation's leading cabinet members and justices.

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Director of Research, Bruce Catton's
Centennial History of the Civil War

Further Reading: Belden, Thomas G., and Belden, Marva R., *So Fell the Angels* (Boston 1956); Donald, David, ed., *Inside Lincoln's Cabinet: The Civil War Diaries of Salmon P. Chase* (New York 1954); Hart, Albert B., *Salmon Portland Chase* (Boston 1899); Warden, Robert V., *Account of the Private Life and Public Services of Salmon Portland Chase* (Cincinnati 1874).