

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Abraham Lincoln

By **Orville Vernon Burton and Lewie Reece**

Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809 in a log cabin near Hodgenville, Kentucky. His mother, Nancy (Hanks) Lincoln, and his father, Thomas, were from Virginia. In 1816 the family moved to a farm near Little Pigeon Creek, Indiana. Nancy Lincoln died in 1818, and two years later Thomas married Sarah Bush Johnston, whom the Lincoln children loved. In February 1830 the family moved again, this time to Illinois.

As a young man on his own, Lincoln moved to the town of New Salem, Illinois, and worked as a store clerk. When Denton Offut's store went bankrupt, Lincoln enlisted in the Black Hawk War, where he was elected captain of his militia unit. In 1832, when he had lived in New Salem only half a year and was only twenty-three, he announced in the *Sangamo Journal* his candidacy for the Illinois General Assembly as a Whig. He addressed local issues—internal improvements, rising interest rates, and, notable for a man with less than a year's formal schooling, public education, declaring it “the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in.” Lincoln lost this bid, but two years later, after jobs as store clerk, day laborer, postmaster, and surveyor, Lincoln was elected, winning reelection in 1836, 1838, and 1840. Lincoln's anti-slavery commitment was evident early in his political life as the freshman representative from Sangamon County.¹

In the meantime the self-taught Lincoln had also been studying law. In 1837 he relocated to Springfield, and received his license to practice law. As an attorney, Lincoln and his partners took cases as they came. His legal work in Springfield and touring the circuit gave him a broad following of friends and colleagues interested in supporting his political ambitions. Also helpful to his political future was his marriage to Kentuckian Mary Todd, November 4, 1842. Both Mr. and Mrs. Abraham Lincoln were hard-working and ambitious.

In 1846 Lincoln was elected to Congress as a Whig. He opposed the popular Mexican War, and, while he avoided debate on the sensitive subject of slavery, he voted numerous times for the anti-slavery Wilmot Proviso. Lincoln also introduced a bill calling for a referendum to eliminate slavery, with compensation for the slaveholders,

¹ Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 1:5-9.

from the District of Columbia. Working behind the scenes, Lincoln got backing from northerners and southerners, but the bill was dropped quickly when it became public. Following a prior agreement, Lincoln did not run for re-election, and with a growing family (Robert (1843-1926), Edward (1846-1850), William (1850-1862) and Thomas (1853-1871) Lincoln concentrated on his legal practice. .

Lincoln's temporary political retirement reflected the difficulties in following his conscience. His opposition to the war with Mexico was deeply unpopular in this strongly Democratic state. While Lincoln's not seeking another term was part of a longstanding agreement to rotate political office in the district, it also demonstrated that he could not be re-elected. For the next six years Lincoln was an unhappy political observer, while the sectional divide over slavery grew worse. Lincoln reluctantly accepted the Compromise of 1850, including the obnoxious Fugitive Slave Clause, as the price to be paid to preserve the country. When his longtime adversary, Stephen Douglas, pushed the Kansas-Nebraska Act through congress, however, Lincoln returned to the political fracas to lead opposition to the measure in Illinois.

While part of the Kansas-Nebraska Act simply provided for territorial government, more troubling for many northerners was the repeal of the 1820 Missouri Compromise line of 36 20. This measure had essentially allowed most of the Louisiana Purchase to come into the Union as free territory. To secure sufficient Democratic and southern support, Senator Stephen Douglas had agreed to repeal of that provision. Douglas viewed this as an acceptable compromise, as he believed that the doctrine of popular sovereignty would allow voters to decide for themselves whether their state would be slave or free. Douglas justified popular sovereignty as the people exercising democracy. He called it "the sacred right of self-government," although in his franker moments he said it was to make sure government was "for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever." In reply to Douglas, Abraham Lincoln said of popular sovereignty, "I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world." Lincoln decried equating slaves with other property rights, asserting that slaves were humans, and that all humans had rights.²

Northern voters deeply resented the process through which the Kansas-Nebraska Act had been passed. In response new political coalitions were formed and re-formed in the mid-1850s. Lincoln's Whig party essentially collapsed, but a confusing mishmash of anti-Nebraska Democrats, antislavery Whigs, antislavery nativists, and more radical Free Soilers all sought popular support in the electorate. Eventually, the new strongly antislavery Republican Party would emerge from this discord. In some parts of the North, the new Republican Party emerged in the 1854 state elections, but in most states the process of party formation would not be settled until two years later in 1856. In 1854 Lincoln was still a Whig, but worked with other antislavery elements, although he still hoped that a more strongly antislavery Whig party would be developed.. That this was unrealistic was made clear when antislavery Democrats refused to support Lincoln's

² Ibid., 3:207-44; 2:247-83

candidacy for the Senate in the state legislature in 1855. Refusing to allow a Democrat to win the seat, Lincoln ordered antislavery Whigs in the state legislature to support Lyman Trumbull, an antislavery Democrat who had been elected to congress. While disappointed to not be elected to the senate, a philosophical Lincoln saw that the election of an antislavery Democrat demonstrated that principle was more important than previous party affiliation. The trauma of defeat, would be offset by the union of antislavery elements in a new Republican party in the state. Antislavery Democrats in the new Republican Party would become stout allies of Lincoln in the years that followed. By 1856, Lincoln had helped to develop the new Republican Party in the state, whose values he not only accepted, but shaped. In 1856, Lincoln campaigned for the Republicans and John C. Frémont for president, and he emerged the champion of an Illinois Republican Party.

Lincoln had been especially troubled by the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision, which had declared that an African-American could never be a citizen of the United States, and that congress lacked the power to prevent slavery from spreading to the territories. As someone who had great reverence for the Constitution, Lincoln affirmed that the decision had to be accepted. “We offer no resistance to it,” Lincoln asserted in a speech to Illinois Republicans in 1857. Nevertheless, a determined Lincoln made the point that the court’s opinion was only legally binding on *Dred Scott*, and the party could continue to work to have the court’s opinion eventually overturned. Since the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Lincoln especially worried that this pro-slavery activity was part of an ongoing effort to water down the Declaration of Independence, and to dramatically undermine the rights of African-Americans. For African-Americans Lincoln suggested, “their ultimate destiny has never appeared so hopeless as in the last three or four years.” It was with these set of concerns that Lincoln was determined to challenge Senator Stephen Douglas’ re-election, although the odds of defeating him were slim.³

Two different factors served as obstacles to Lincoln displacing Douglas in the United States Senate. The first was certainly the difficulty in convincing an Illinois electorate that Douglas needed to be retired. Unlike other Northern Democrats, Douglas had separated himself from the national party by courageously opposing the admission of Kansas as a slave state. Nevertheless, Lincoln remained convinced that this was but a temporary maneuver on Douglas’ part, and in no way meant a rethinking of his attitudes toward slavery and the Democratic Party. Moreover, much to Lincoln’s annoyance, out of state Republicans suggested that it might be useful for Douglas to be re-elected. Beyond these factors, Douglas was also a powerful speaker, a cagy debater, and understood that his political career hung in the balance. The second other difficulty confronting Lincoln was the political geography of Illinois politics. While Northern Illinois was strongly Republican, it was more than offset by the strongly Democratic counties of Southern Illinois. Determining the election in many ways would be Central Illinois, areas where very conservative Whigs would fashion the result. While Lincoln’s

³ *Ibid.*, 2:398-410.

past in the Whig Party would be helpful, even moderate antislavery was too much for many of this faction.

Chosen by the Illinois Republican Convention in June 1858 to be their candidate for the U.S. Senate, Lincoln continued to affirm his opposition to slavery. In a speech at Springfield, Illinois on June 16, 1858, Lincoln declared, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” His opponent, Democrat Stephen Douglas, turned his considerable talents into discrediting him, but Lincoln refuted Douglas’s assertion that the United States government was “made by the white man, for the benefit of the white man, to be administered by white men.” He claimed remarkable privilege for the Declaration of Independence and its implications about race and equality. The Lincoln-Douglas debates presented Illinois and America with two visions of democracy. Douglas and the Democrats proffered pure white supremacy, Abraham Lincoln a more inclusive vision of liberty and democracy. Nevertheless, the ardor with which Douglas engaged in race baiting had its effect. The critical counties in the central part of the state cast their ballots for Douglas, and allowed him to squeak out a narrow triumph.⁴

Lincoln lost the election, but the well-publicized debates brought him attention nation-wide and helped to establish him as a national figure in the party. Lincoln repaid a political debt to Governor Salmon Chase of Ohio, by speaking in behalf of the Ohio Republican Party in the 1859 election. Lincoln also received an invitation to speak in New York City in February 1860. Addressing a large audience of political leaders and sophisticated Easterners at Cooper Union, Lincoln used clear and compelling arguments, and his analysis of slavery and the Founding Fathers moved along conservative lines. The speech struck a resounding chord. Few knew prior to this speech that Lincoln had presidential aspirations, but with its delivery he substantially advanced that goal.

In May 1860 Lincoln won the Republican nomination for president. It is perhaps difficult for modern audiences to comprehend the nature of how antebellum national conventions chose party nominees. The delegation from each state was often uninstructed, and therefore had the freedom to select in theory the best choice. Frequently, those candidates who were frontrunners for their parties’ nomination were denied a majority by other factions within their party. Lincoln had a number of advantages that made his nomination possible. The Republican convention was held in Chicago, in his home state of Illinois. As a former Whig, Lincoln would appeal to an important constituency in the party, and as a protectionist, a supporter of the protectionist tariff, he would also help to carry the battleground state of Pennsylvania. If Lincoln did not have a reputation as being too radical on slavery, it was also true that he stood in the antislavery mainstream and was acceptable to Republicans on the left, center, and right. Moreover, Lincoln also came from the right part of the country in that he had close ties to Indiana Republicans, and also represented the critical state of Illinois that had to be carried to win the presidency. It was these factors, and not the myth of skillful bargains concocted by Lincoln supporters, that ultimately proved critical in securing the nomination.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:461-9; 3:207-44.

Lincoln's involvement in the presidential campaign was minimal. He did not even try to campaign in the southern states, and indeed he garnered almost no votes there, and did not even appear on the ballot of many southern states. That handicap should have been enough to assure Republican's defeat. That represents another difference from modern elections in which the candidate drives the agenda of the race. But in the nineteenth century, at least until the nomination of William Jennings Bryan in 1896, it was considered unpresidential for a candidate to actively seek voter's support. The campaign was to be conducted by the national party, and candidates were often urged to remain quiet. As a former Whig, Lincoln would also be aware of how letters Henry Clay had written in 1844 had played a critical factor in his defeat. The Election of 1860 also revealed a nation divided by section. The Democratic Party had divided in Charleston, South Carolina, and ran two presidential candidates in the fall. Lincoln's opposition was split three ways. The remnant of the Whig Party ran as the Constitutional Union Party, but had little support outside of the Border South. Lincoln garnered just forty percent of the vote (versus 29.5% for Democrat Stephen Douglas, 18% for the Southern Democrat John Breckinridge, and 12.5% for Constitutional Union Party's John Bell). In the Electoral College, however, that plurality translated into 180 of 303 electoral votes—a thumping victory. The roots of that triumph lay in the ability of Lincoln to solidify the antislavery northern majority. American presidents are selected not by popular vote, but by the division of votes in the Electoral College apportioned based on representation in congress. While Lincoln's popular majority vote was relatively small, this was mainly due to the impossibility of a Republican ticket being able to campaign in the pro-slavery South. It would be an error, however, to conclude that Lincoln's triumph suggests weakness. Lincoln swept the northern states, and the anti-Republican ticket had coalesced in only three northern states, California, New Jersey, and Oregon, where Lincoln had less than 50% of the popular vote. Democratic division and a ticket run by former Whigs were irrelevant factors in Lincoln and the Republican Party's triumph that fall.

The election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 signaled that a minority of people from a sectional political party could decide the presidency. Lincoln's anti-slavery sentiments were fervent and real, and such formulations go far toward explaining why southerners—and a significant cluster of northern Democrats as well—saw Lincoln's elevation to the presidency as a dangerous step. Yet, Lincoln strove repeatedly in 1860 to allay fears that his party aimed at dismantling slavery. What Lincoln failed to renounce—as all southerners noted—was the Republican opposition to slavery's advance in the territories, and though Lincoln was willing even to sign a 13th amendment not to interfere with slavery in the states where it existed, the extension of slavery remained the point of conflict between free and slave states

Victory presented its own complications for the new president-elect. Lincoln's triumph had not just been a personal one, but the vindication of antislavery principles that had struggled against long odds for many generations. Now, Lincoln had to balance the ideological differences within the party, while also taking into consideration geographical balance in both composing his cabinet and in the use of political patronage. The nature

of the Republican coalition was revealed in some choices: former nativists, Whigs, Democrats, Free Soilers, and Liberty Party members were all well represented. Nineteenth century presidents had always to be mindful about the need for geographic diversity, and to balance the various regions against one another. At times, therefore cabinet members could represent various constituencies. Gideon Welles, who was appointed Secretary of the Navy, was thus not only New England's representative in the cabinet, but also a former Democrat. Discussions about southern representation proved to be more difficult, especially as in large parts of the South the Republican Party did not yet exist. Nevertheless, the appointments of Edward Bates of Missouri and Montgomery Blair of Maryland spoke to Lincoln's desire to include southern voices in the new government. Perhaps, the most acrimonious and complicated issue was the Pennsylvania appointment to the cabinet. This revolved principally around the debate between pro and anti-Simon Cameron factions within the state. At first, Lincoln had wanted to appoint Simon Cameron as Secretary of the Treasury, a move that drew a very negative response among business leaders. Eventually, Lincoln concluded that Pennsylvania simply had to be in the cabinet, and that Cameron was the choice of most Republicans in his state. It proved to be a poor decision to make Cameron Secretary of War, but is only understandable if one considers the way that cabinets were constructed in Lincoln's era. It is also evident that Lincoln gave little consideration to reining in rivals or as a reward for deals supposedly made at the Republican convention. The pressure of events during the Civil War would also reveal that some would be inspired choices, while others less so. It should also be remembered that in creating the cabinet Lincoln could not know a four year war would ensue. The coming of that conflict would also be a major consideration for Lincoln in the months before assuming the presidency.

Government in the nineteenth century included plenty of lag time in which one term ended and another started. As a result, nineteenth century presidents would be elected in November, and not yet take office until the next March. It therefore left Lincoln with an exceptionally long waiting period between his election and taking the oath of office as president. In the interim, Lincoln was thus forced largely to watch as congress debated various compromise proposals that were ultimately incapable of bridging the gap between those who wanted to protect slavery and those who sought its destruction. Moreover, such discussion also took place against a backdrop of southern states considering secession and slowly aligning with the new Confederate States of America. Lincoln resisted calls for a public statement that could mollify white southerners worried about what policies the Republican Party would follow in government. However, Lincoln also resisted efforts at compromise that would entail a betrayal of the party's first principles. Writing to Republican Senator Lyman Trumbull, in December of 1860, Lincoln urged congressional Republicans to "Stand firm. The tug has to come, & better now, than any time hereafter." Republican opposition to a compromise on the territories was centered in an unwillingness to approve the spread of

slavery. Lincoln's long waiting period ultimately came to an end, which made his Inaugural Address of great importance in defining the policies of the new administration.⁵

Abraham Lincoln's Inaugural Address, given on 4 March 1861, two weeks after Jefferson Davis was sworn in as the Confederacy's first president, pleaded for rationality and calm. He asked the seceding states to reconsider their actions. "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly," he promised, "to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists." In only another four years, he pointed out, those dissatisfied might elect a president more to their liking. For all his rational argument, for all his emotional appeals, Lincoln's First Inaugural Address had an iron lining. It makes clear his underlying, non-negotiable premise that the Union is perpetual, and that he would defend it against insurrection.⁶

While some advocated letting the South go in peace, Lincoln understood that secession would mean the end of the American democratic experiment and the end of the best hope for the world. Lincoln's understanding of Southern honor cautioned him against striking the first blow. Moreover, time's passage might permit moderates to solve the impasse, or at worst force Confederates into the aggressor's role. Secessionists ultimately forced the issue, and on April 12, 1861, the South Carolina militia, now constituted as Confederate troops, fired on Fort Sumter. Lincoln responded with a call for seventy-five thousand military volunteers, which gave Confederates the evidence they required: Lincoln meant to coerce the South. Lincoln's call for troops spawned a new wave of secession activity, as many Upper South states joined the Confederacy, decrying the "unjust wanton war" caused by Abraham Lincoln.

Lincoln had to be careful to keep the Border States on the Union side. For that reason, he steered clear of slavery and focused on rebellion as the main issue before the nation. His wisdom and forbearance paid off in Kentucky, where Union sentiments outshouted the strains of *Dixie*. In Maryland Union troops held thirty-one legislators prisoner until after the November elections when voters elected pro-Union men. Neither did Missouri join the Confederacy, though it was troubled with guerrilla fighting throughout the war and after.

Lincoln recognized the danger of fifth column organizations on the home front. Southern sympathizers worked to disrupt Federal efforts and intimidate potential Union recruits. "dark lantern" societies like the Knights of the Golden Circle rallied Confederate loyalists in the North and comforted antiwar politicians like Ohio's Clement Vallandigham. Lincoln's efforts to curb such resistance included suspending the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus. Lincoln was not sympathetic to cries of civil liberty and Republican "tyranny." His job, as he saw it, his one major objective was preservation of the Union.

⁵ Ibid., 4:149-50.

⁶ Ibid., 4:262-71.

To do that he had to win the war. Without victory, naught else would matter. As commander-in-chief, Lincoln watched over the military situation, sending telegrams, visiting troops, recommending strategy, appointing commanders. Throughout the war he strove to find generals who would be sufficiently aggressive and attack Southern forces, rather than holding Southern real estate. Lincoln had trouble with his generals until he found the one man, Lieutenant General Ulysses Simpson (Hiram Ulysses) Grant, whose relentless prosecution of the war in the Eastern Theatre ultimately led to Union victory. Together they developed the winning line of attack.

The common expectation of both sides was that the war would be over quickly. For southerners this took the form of believing that northerners lacked the ability to fight. Conversely, many in the North saw the Confederacy as being the creation of coercion and hysteria, and that one big battle would bring the war to a quick end. In the South, white southerners scoffed at the idea that there would be bloodshed. South Carolina's Senator James Chesnut and former Congressman Armistead Burt, both offered to drink any blood shed. It became a common saying in the South during the secession winter that a "lady's thimble will hold all the blood that will be shed." Others vowed that a single handkerchief could sop up all the blood that fell during the war. Horace Greeley, the publisher of the New York Tribune, had made conquest of Richmond the prime goal of the Union war effort with daily headlines calling for a rush to the Confederate capitol. That led to the First Battle of Bull Run in which Confederate forces defeated the Union Army. But the true legacy of that campaign was the sober realization that the war would not be over quickly for either side. Outside of some minor skirmishing, the fall and winter of 1861 would be spent in training the armies that would fight in the years to come.⁷

The year 1862 would see important victories for the Union side, but also frustrations. In the west, the larger goal was the consolidation and control of the Mississippi River. The Mississippi River was important not simply as a web of commerce, but also as a means of dividing and occupying the region. Holding Missouri meant St. Louis was the northern anchor, and after the Union Navy seized New Orleans, the southern point had been claimed as well. What remained was gaining control of key points in the region from the city of Memphis to the last key Confederate holdout of Vicksburg. Vicksburg's geographic location and internal defenses would make its capture a difficult proposition, but it too would fall in the summer of 1863. For the Confederacy this would seal off important agricultural and other resources from the war effort. Vicksburg's capture also made possible the occupation and division of the region.

Less successful would be efforts in the eastern theater, especially to inflict a decisive defeat in Virginia. Lincoln was done in by his relations with the mercurial and hesitant General George Brinton McClellan. McClellan had risen to prominence after waging a series of winning battles, and in the process securing West Virginia for the Union. McClellan had proven to be skilled in the planning and reorganization of the Union Army of the Potomac. McClellan's world view was that of a conservative

⁷ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 238.

Democrat, however, and he was hostile to any suggestion that the war would bring about freedom for African-Americans. Additionally, McClellan's caution and pessimism led him to delay his offensive, eventually convincing Lincoln to approve an attack from the Peninsula that would move north to Richmond. Despite numerical advantage, McClellan moved slowly, and when casualties became too heavy broke off his attack. Eventually, Lincoln temporarily suspended McClellan from command after a lengthy debate about various issues related to war policy. When Major General John Pope performed equally poorly in the Second Battle of Bull Run, Lincoln brought McClellan back into command. While McClellan was able to blunt a Confederate invasion of Western Maryland, he failed once again to use all of his resources to achieve overwhelming victory at the Battle of Antietam. Recognizing that McClellan was more worried about losing a battle than winning one, it became clear to Lincoln that he had no choice but to fire McClellan. The failures in the east were bad for morale, and they foreshadowed an unwanted protracted war. Eastern defeats also encouraged President Lincoln to think about emancipation and the need to wage a "total war." But while the war was bogged down, the Republican majority in congress was restructuring American society in a totally new direction.

With Southern states out of Congress, Lincoln easily approved Republican legislators' agenda. To finance war, Lincoln signed legislation creating National Banks and encouraged and signed an Internal Revenue Law. Other legislation included a Department of Agriculture, and the Morrill Act, passed in 1862, which allowed states a grant of 90,000 acres and more to establish colleges. Lincoln also signed a far-reaching Homestead Act, providing a quarter-section (160 acres) of farmland to any household head (including women) at a nominal price (\$200). The Pacific Railway Act set the terms for construction of a transcontinental line. In April, 1862, Lincoln signed the bill for compensated emancipation in the District of Columbia.

With no quick and easy end to the rebellion, Union recruitment trailed off dramatically. By the autumn of 1862, desperate for men, Lincoln moved from hesitation to boldness on a decision he had been contemplating. He decided to combine two essential aspects of making war. His military problem was to find more soldiers for the ranks. His ideological problem was to articulate a stronger rationale for war—a higher purpose. However moral, complex, and far-reaching this decision; Lincoln understood very well that the Emancipation Proclamation was a weapon of war. He also understood that emancipation dovetailed with a larger understanding of what was at stake in the war. Moreover, tens of thousands of African Americans had been walking away from slavery as soon as Union forces came close enough. Theirs was a journey toward freedom.

Lincoln and the Union soldiers knew how much the enslaved labor force helped the rebellion. Freedom for that very large minority of southern Americans would hinder the Confederate war effort on the front lines and on the southern home front. In addition, Lincoln wanted to preclude involvement of European countries on the southern side. Finally, northern consensus was building for emancipation, as northerners were growing in their own conviction that freedom could no longer include slavery. In July 1862 Lincoln told his cabinet that he had decided to issue an emancipation proclamation.

Secretary of State William Seward persuaded him to wait for a Union victory so as not to look desperate. After the Battle at Antietam, Lincoln announced his emancipation plan, which was to take effect on New Year's Day, 1863.

The proclamation had a major effect on the course of the war. Immediately southerners had to put an even greater emphasis on controlling their slaves, leaving less time and money available for the war effort. Moreover, it ended any question of European intervention. The measure also clarified war aims: the war for the Union was now also undeniably a war for freedom. The proclamation also called for allowing African Americans to serve in the Union armed services at a time when manpower needs were critical. Fully two hundred thousand African American men mustered into Federal service over the next two years.

Rivers of blood continued to flow. In November 1863 at a military cemetery in Gettysburg, President Abraham Lincoln articulated the meaning of the battle, of the war, of the American dream. He called for a "new birth of freedom." In the end, it took many more deaths before the last rebel surrendered. The failures of the battlefield confirmed Lincoln in a simple method of slaughter: if the South could not be outwitted on the battlefield, it could be out-bludgeoned. After McClellan's dismissal that fall, Lincoln chose a series of generals he called "fighters" but those closer to the front labeled "butchers." In the spring of 1864, Lincoln brought the relentlessly hard-hitting Grant from the Tennessee front and appointed him lieutenant general overseeing all Union forces.

Confederates knew full well that their main chance for success was for Lincoln's political defeat at the polls in November of 1864, and that possibility was a real one if the Confederacy could prevent Union victory in battle. Lincoln fully expected to lose that election to the Democratic nominee, George McClellan, writing in August of that year, "it seems exceedingly probably that this Administration will not be re-elected." All told, it was the close relationship between the battlefield and the home front that ultimately proved determining, as Major General William Tecumseh Sherman's victory in the Atlanta campaign promised an eventual end to the conflict.⁸

The election of 1864 was close: Lincoln garnered 2.2 million votes or 55 percent; McClellan 1.8 million or 45 percent. Confederates, of course, did not vote in this election, nor did most northern African Americans. Some of the northern states authorized a new system of absentee voting so soldiers, widely anticipated to be pro-Lincoln, could cast ballots. Among absentee votes tabulated separately, Lincoln received 119,754 to McClellan's 34,291. The end of the Confederacy was assured. If Lincoln's first term had been about preserving the country, his second would clearly involve efforts to reconstruct the republic.

Reconstruction policy was a frequent concern of the Lincoln Administration throughout the war. Yet, the Lincoln Administration's focus was always on the larger

⁸ Basler, *Collected Works*, 7:514-5.

task of winning the war, rather than in defining a coherent policy. What direction the administration would have taken had Lincoln lived, will always have to be a matter more for speculation than anything else. Lincoln had tried to make a test case of efforts at Reconstruction in Louisiana. But factional disputes, along with congressional unhappiness about the threshold for voter participation prevented that state from being readmitted. The differences between the executive and legislative branch had been largely resolved by the time of Lincoln's death. Lincoln was more open to African-American advancement than his successor, Andrew Johnson. Like most Republicans in 1865, Lincoln was focused more on African American access to economic prosperity and legal rights, than in expanding suffrage. Lincoln, however, had moved to embrace African American property owners and black Union veterans having the right to vote. From Lincoln's position it was but a very small step to ultimately embracing full suffrage for African American males. Lincoln also lacked the fear of African American empowerment that was a motivating concern of Johnson. While Johnson seemed to accept the draconian post-Civil War Black Codes which limited the rights and liberties of African-Americans, it is hard to imagine Lincoln having a similar response. The end of the war was therefore for President Lincoln an opportunity to not simply celebrate victory, but an opportunity to move the country forward.

In his Second Inaugural Address in March 1865, Lincoln acknowledged that "American slavery" was a national sin, and that God gave the punishment of war "to both North and South." The end of war was in sight. Questions would now involve the aftermath of war, the unification of the country, the role of the freed peoples. On April 11 from the White House balcony, Lincoln made some remarks to the gathering crowd: "We must simply begin with, and mould from, disorganized and discordant elements." Earlier Abraham Lincoln had called for allowing "the very intelligent, and those who served our cause as soldiers" to vote, and he again spoke about the need for citizenship for the valiant African Americans who fought for the Union. One man in this audience understood perfectly what Lincoln intimated. John Wilkes Booth told his companion, "That means nigger citizenship. Now, by God, I'll put him through. That is the last speech he will ever make." And indeed, the assassin struck a blow from which America has never recovered. The North lost a hero. African Americans lost an ally for fair and equal opportunity. The South lost a leader who called for charity without malice. By murdering the president, on Good Friday no less, Booth guaranteed Father Abraham's place in history as a beloved martyr for freedom.⁹

The nearly hundred and fifty years since Lincoln's death have seen him continue to exert a powerful hold on American culture. While historical interest in Lincoln has never waned, the new contours of scholarship suggest that his life remains an important touchstone. Judging Lincoln as simply a matter of history fails to consider the many different ways he continues to speak to people. For Lincoln in art, literature, and even popular culture in the form of television, music, and film continues to present an important fixture on the development of American society. Lincoln also continues to

⁹ Ibid., 8:399-405; Ibid., 7:243; Orville Vernon Burton, *The Age of Lincoln* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2007), 240.

exert a global impact as the struggle for democracy, freedom, and liberty has frequently spoken to a worldwide audience as well. In understanding Lincoln's life we therefore understand the past, but also situate ourselves in an ongoing struggle for freedom everywhere.

Abraham Lincoln

Born	February 12, 1809 Hodgenville, Kentucky
Died	April 15, 1865 Petersen House, Washington, D.C
Buried	Oak Ridge Cemetery, Springfield, Illinois,
Father	Thomas Lincoln
Mother	Nancy (Hanks) Lincoln
Career Milestones	Captain Illinois Militia Black Hawk War 1832 Illinois State Representative 1834-1842 Admitted to the bar 18367 Congressman US House of Representatives 1846-1848 President of the United States 1860-1865
