**Abraham Lincoln**

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Abraham Lincoln is perhaps the most loved of all the U.S. presidents. A photograph of Lincoln taken toward the end of the Civil War shows a gaunt, exhausted leader whose visible anguish moves nearly every American. His words, always simple and eloquent, exhorting preservation of the Union, then asking forgiveness and peace for all who fought and suffered in the war, are equally familiar and moving. For most people, Lincoln personifies the American spirit of freedom and equality.

Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809 and grew up on frontier farms in Kentucky and Indiana. From an early age, despite his father's discouragement, he was obsessed with obtaining an education. The goal had to be innate, for, as he observed later, Indiana offered "absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education." Lincoln always attributed his love of books to his mother. "I owe everything I am to her," he said. She died when he was nine, but his stepmother encouraged him to continue his studying.

The year after the family moved to Illinois in 1830, Lincoln decided to live on his own. A job as a store clerk in New Salem gave him access to books and plenty of time to read. During the Black Hawk War, a conflict between the Sac and Fox Indians and the United States in 1832, Lincoln served a short stint in the militia but did not see combat. When he returned to New Salem, he ran unsuccessfully for the state assembly in a predominantly Democratic district as an anti-Jackson Whig. After his defeat, he purchased a general store with a partner. Their venture failed because of the partner's alcoholism. Although it took Lincoln 15 years, he paid off all their debts in full, earning the nickname "Honest Abe."

In 1834, Lincoln won the first of his four two-year terms to the Illinois state assembly. As a state legislator, he generally supported internal improvements and the development of the nation's resources and was soon the leader of the Whig minority. In addition to his work in the assembly, Lincoln began to study law. After moving to the new state capital in Springfield, he was admitted to the bar in 1836. In 1842, Lincoln married Mary Todd, and in 1846, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. In his single term in the House, Lincoln opposed the Mexican-American War and the extension of slavery into the territories and supported the right of voters in the District of Columbia to be able to abolish slavery.

In 1848, Lincoln vigorously campaigned across New England for Zachary Taylor. He was so disappointed when he did not obtain an expected appointment as commissioner of the general land office that he withdrew from politics and concentrated on his law practice for five years.

Lincoln returned to the political arena when reaction to the Kansas-Nebraska Act helped forge the new Republican Party. In 1856, he campaigned throughout Illinois, delivering speeches in favor of antislavery Republican presidential candidate John C. Frémont. In 1858, the Illinois Republican Party nominated him to run for the Senate against Democrat Stephen A. Douglas.

In his acceptance speech, Lincoln succinctly summed up his view of the situation the nation was in due to slavery: "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free." Slavery, he warned, was a threat to free labor, and there was no way to reconcile it with a free society. By preventing its expansion, its ultimate extinction could be gradually obtained. Lincoln's preferred solution to this vexing social problem was to recolonize African Americans outside the country. Though he opposed slavery, he was not free of his era's pervasive racism.

The Republican platform in 1860 called for noninterference in the slave states, the exclusion of slavery from the territories, a homestead act to give free land to settlers, government support for the construction of a transcontinental railroad, and protective tariffs. Against a divided Democratic Party, Lincoln was able to win election by securing the electoral votes of every nonslave state (180), even though he won only 40% of the popular vote.

Warned of an assassination plot, Lincoln had to enter Washington, D.C. by secret train to assume office. He promised not to interfere with slavery in the South. However, the month before he took the oath of office, seven Southern states met at Montgomery, Alabama to proclaim the Confederate States of America. One month after he assumed the presidency, Fort Sumter was fired upon. The Civil War, which would claim the lives of at least 620,000 Americans, had begun.

Lincoln moved swiftly to deal with the rebellion. At first, he left the conduct of the war up to his generals; but following the dismal performance of the Union Army in 1861, Lincoln began studying military tactics. After George B. McClellan's lack of success, Lincoln even tried to direct military operations himself. In 1864, he finally found a general he had faith in, Ulysses S. Grant. By executive decree, Lincoln increased the size of the army and navy, suspended the writ of habeas corpus where necessary, placed treason suspects in military custody, and forbade the use of the mails for treasonable correspondence.

By mid-1862, Lincoln had decided that the war aims of the North had to include ending slavery. He felt, however, that he couldn't say so publicly as long as the South appeared to be doing well. Thus, as late as August, he still spoke of preserving the Union as the only goal. Then, on September 22, 1862, after interpreting the bloody Battle of Antietam as a victory, Lincoln issued his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. (He signed the final version on January 1, 1863.) He described the proclamation as "an act of justice as well as a fit and necessary war measure. . . . " The Emancipation Proclamation freed only the slaves in the Southern states that had seceded from the Union, leaving the system intact in those states that fought with the Union. Emancipation as a war goal, however, even in this incomplete fashion, made it extremely difficult for the British government to side with the South.

As the war dragged on and the casualties mounted, Lincoln's popularity fell to an all-time low. He despaired of being reelected but was re-nominated in 1864 for a second term by the Republicans. When the Democrats in turn nominated McClellan on a platform of stopping the war and negotiating a settlement, Lincoln admitted to his Cabinet: "It seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be reelected." But when a string of Union victories, especially General William T. Sherman's capture of Atlanta, indicated that the end of the war was in sight, Lincoln was elected for a second term. At his inauguration, he recalled the sacrifice made to preserve the Union and looked forward to the need for reconciliation.

Confederate general Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse on April 9, 1865, effectively ending the war. Two days later, Lincoln addressed a crowd at the White House on reconstruction. He took a bold stand concerning a politically volatile issue. If the Confederate states had left the Union, as Northern radical politicians claimed, then they had abrogated their constitutional rights and could be treated as foreign territories. But if secession was impossible, the view favored by Lincoln and other moderates, then the citizens of the Confederate states who had remained loyal, as well as those who would promise to be loyal again, could reestablish state governments that supported civil liberties for African Americans and elect representatives and senators to Congress. "Finding themselves safely at home," argued Lincoln, "it would be utterly immaterial whether they had ever been abroad." Lincoln cited the procedures followed in Louisiana and Arkansas, where 10% of the 1860 voting population was considered a sufficient number to set up state governments capable of petitioning for readmission to Congress, as a model for how the course of Reconstruction might proceed.

The agony of the war, the death of his young son from typhoid in 1862, and the subsequent emotional breakdown of his wife caused Lincoln to age dramatically in office. However, he had acquired tremendous wisdom about the underlying principles of American political institutions. His eloquent speeches expressed the vision he had of the long-term prospects for the nation. In his Gettysburg Address, he began with the immortal lines, "Four score and seven years ago our forefathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal . . ." and concluded with the promise "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

On the evening of April 14, 1865, Lincoln was fatally shot by the actor and Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth as he watched a play at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. Lincoln's tragic death the next day became a symbol of the human toll the Civil War cost the nation.