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PAPER

THEME:

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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Contents

1. Introduction	page 3
2. Early Life	page 3
3. Ancestry	page 4
4. Childhood	page 6
5. Young Manhood	page 6
6. Politics and Law	page 6
7. Illinois Legislator	page 6
8. Marriage	page 6
9. Congressman	page 7
10. Disillusionment with Politics	page 7
11. Return to Politics	page 8
12. Campaigns of 1856 and 1858	page 8
13. Election of 1860	page 9
14. Presidency	page 9
15. Sumter Crisis	page 10
16. Military Policy	page 11
17. Emancipation	page 12
18. Foreign Relations	page 12
19. Wartime Politics	page 13
20. Life in the White House	page 14
21. Reconstruction	page 14
22. Death	page 15
23. Source	page 16

Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), 16th PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES. Lincoln entered office at a critical period in U. S. history, just before the Civil War, and died from an assassin's bullet at the war's end, but before the greater implications of the conflict could be resolved. He brought to the office personal integrity, intelligence, and humanity, plus the wholesome characteristics of his frontier upbringing. He also had the liabilities of his upbringing--he was self-educated, culturally unsophisticated, and lacking in administrative and diplomatic skills. Sharp-witted, he was not especially sharp-tongued, but was noted for his warm good humor. Although relatively unknown and inexperienced politically when elected president, he proved to be a consummate politician. He was above all firm in his convictions and dedicated to the preservation of the Union.

Lincoln was perhaps the most esteemed and maligned of the American presidents. Generally admired and loved by the public, he was attacked on a partisan basis as the man responsible for and in the middle of every major issue facing the nation during his administration. Although his reputation has fluctuated with changing times, he was clearly a great man and a great president. He firmly and fairly guided the nation through its most perilous period and made a lasting impact in shaping the office of chief executive. Once regarded as the "Great Emancipator" for his forward strides in freeing the slaves, he was criticized a century later, when the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, for his caution in moving toward equal rights. If he is judged in the historical context, however, it can be seen that he was far in advance of most liberal opinion. His claim to greatness endures.

Early Life

The future president was born in the most modest of circumstances in a log cabin near Hodgenville, Ky., on Feb. 12, 1809. His entire childhood and young manhood were spent on the brink of poverty as his pioneering family made repeated fresh starts in the West. Opportunities for education, cultural activities, and even socializing were meager.

Ancestry

Lincoln's paternal ancestry has been traced, in an unbroken line, to Samuel Lincoln, a weaver's apprentice from Hingham, England, who settled in Hingham, Mass., in 1637. From him the line of descent came down through Mordecai Lincoln of Hingham and of Scituate, Mass.; Mordecai of Berks county, Pa.; John of Berks county and of Rockingham county, Va.; and Abraham, the grandfather of the president, who moved from Virginia to Kentucky about 1782, settled near Hughes Station, east of Louisville, and was killed in an Indian ambush in 1786.

Abraham's youngest son, Thomas, who became the father of the president, was born in Rockingham county, Va., on Jan. 6, 1778. After the death of his father, he roamed about, settling eventually in Hardin county, Ky., where he worked at carpentry, farming, and odd jobs. He was not the shiftless ne'er-do-well sometimes depicted, but an honest, conscientious man of modest means, well regarded by his neighbors. He had practically no education, however, and could barely scrawl his name.

Nancy Hanks, whom Thomas Lincoln married on June 12, 1806, and who became the mother of the president, remains a shadowy figure. Her birth date is uncertain, and descriptions of her are contradictory. Scholars despair of penetrating the tangled Hanks genealogy, and the legitimacy of Nancy's birth is a subject of argument. Lincoln, himself, apparently believed that his mother was born out of wedlock. In either case, Nancy came of lowly people. Reared by her aunt, Betsy Hanks, who married Thomas Sparrow, she was utterly uneducated.

Childhood

Thomas and Nancy Lincoln set up housekeeping in Elizabethtown, Ky., where their first child, Sarah, was born on Feb. 10, 1807. In December 1808, Thomas bought a hard-scrabble farm on the South Fork of Nolin Creek, where Abraham was born. Soon after Abe's second birthday the family moved to a more productive farm along Knob Creek, a branch of the Rolling Fork, in a region of fertile bottomland surrounded by crags and bluffs. The old Cumberland Trail from Louisville to Nashville passed close by, and the boy could see a vigorous civilization on the march--settlers, peddlers, circuit-riding preachers, now and then a coffle of slaves. This was probably his first view of human bondage, for the small landholdings of the region were not suited to slaveowning, and local sentiment, especially among the Baptists, with whom the Lincolns had affiliated, was hostile to slavery.

Like most frontier children, Abraham performed chores at an early age, but occasionally he and his sister Sarah attended classes in a log schoolhouse some two miles (3 km) from home. Nancy bore a third child, Thomas, but he died in infancy.

Faulty land titles, which were a constant problem to Kentucky settlers, were especially troublesome to Thomas Lincoln. Because of a flaw in title, he lost part of a farm he had bought before his marriage, and both his other Kentucky farms became involved in litigation. For this reason, and because of his roving disposition, he resolved to move to Indiana, where land could be bought directly from the government.

Abraham was seven years old when, in December 1816, the Lincolns struck out northwestward. They crossed the Ohio River on a ferry near the village of Troy, made their way 16 miles (26 km) farther north through thick woods and tangled underbrush, and settled near Pigeon Creek, in present Spencer county, Ind. Thomas hastily threw up a half-faced camp, a rude shelter of logs and boughs, closed on three sides and warmed only by a fire at the open front. Here the family lived while Thomas built a cabin. The region was gloomy, with few settlers, and wild animals prowled in the forest.

By spring Thomas had cleared a few acres for a crop. In an autobiography that Abraham Lincoln composed in 1860, he said of himself: "Abraham, though very young, was large of his age, and had an axe put into his hands at once; and from that till within his twenty-third year, he was almost constantly handling that most useful instrument--less, of course, in plowing and harvesting seasons." So, year by year the clearing grew, and the family's diet became more varied as farm products supplemented game and fowl. At first, Thomas was a mere squatter on the land, but on Oct. 15, 1817, he applied for 160 acres (65 hectares) at the government land office in Vincennes. Unable to complete payment on so large a tract, he later gave up half, but paid for the rest.

The Lincolns had not been long in Indiana when they were joined by Thomas and Elizabeth Sparrow, the relatives by whom Nancy had been reared. They arrived from Kentucky with Dennis Hanks, the illegitimate son of another of Nancy's aunts. An energetic youth of 19, he became Abraham's companion. Within a year, however, the Sparrows became victims of the "milk-sick" (milk sickness), a disease dreaded by Indiana settlers, and soon afterward, on Oct. 5, 1818, Nancy Lincoln, too, died of this malady. Without a woman to keep the household functioning, the Lincolns lived almost in squalor.

To remedy this intolerable condition, Thomas Lincoln returned to Elizabethtown, where, on Dec. 2, 1819, he married Sarah Bush Johnston, a widow with three children. A kindly, hard-working woman, she brought order to the Lincolns' Indiana homestead. She also saw to it that at intervals over the next two years Abraham received enough additional schooling to be able, as he said later, "to read, write and cipher to the Rule of Three." All told, however, he attended school less than a year.

Young Manhood

During the 14 years the Lincolns lived in Indiana, the region became more thickly settled, mostly by people from the South. But conditions remained primitive, and farming was backbreaking work. Superstitions were prevalent; social functions consisted of such utilitarian amusements as corn shuckings, house raisings, and hog killings; and religion was dogmatic and emotional. Abe, growing tall and strong, won a reputation as the best local athlete and a rollicking storyteller. But his father kept him busy at hard labor, hiring him out to neighbors when work at home slackened.

Abe's meager education had aroused his desire to learn, and he traveled over the countryside to borrow books. Among those he read were *Robinson Crusoe*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, Aesop's *Fables*, William Grimshaw's *History of the United States*, and Mason Weems' *Life of Washington*. The Bible was probably the only book his family owned, and his abundant use of scriptural quotations in his later writings shows how earnestly he must have studied it.

Young Lincoln worked for a while as a ferryman on the Ohio River, and at 19 helped take a flatboat cargo to New Orleans. There he encountered a manner of living wholly unknown to him. Soon after he returned, his father decided to move to Illinois, where a relative, John Hanks, had preceded him. On March 1, 1830, the family set out with all their possessions loaded on three wagons. Their new home was located on the north bank of the Sangamon River, west of Decatur. When a cabin had been built and a crop had been planted and fenced, young Lincoln hired out to split fence rails for neighbors.

In the autumn all the Lincoln family came down with fever and ague. That winter the pioneers experienced the deepest snow they had ever known, accompanied by subzero temperatures. In the spring the family backtracked eastward to Coles county, Ill. But this time Abraham did not accompany them, for during the winter he, his stepbrother John D. Johnston, and his cousin John Hanks had agreed to take another cargo to New Orleans for a trader, Denton Offutt. A new life was opening for young Lincoln. Henceforth he could make his own way. Supposedly it was on this second trip to New Orleans that young Lincoln, watching a slave auction, declared: "If I ever get a chance to hit that thing, I'll hit it hard." But the story is almost certainly untrue. Lincoln at this period of his life could scarcely have believed himself to be a man of destiny, and John Hanks, who originated the story, was not with Lincoln, having left his fellow crewmen at St. Louis.

Near the outset of this voyage, at the little village of New Salem on the Sangamon River, Lincoln had impressed Offutt by his ingenuity in moving the flatboat over a milldam. Offutt, impressed likewise by the prospects of the village, arranged to open a store and rent the mill. On Lincoln's return from New Orleans, Offutt engaged him as clerk and handyman.

By late July 1831, when Lincoln came back, New Salem was enjoying what proved to be a short-lived boom based on a local conviction that the Sangamon River would be made navigable for steamboats. For a time the village served as a trading center for the surrounding area and numbered among its enterprises three stores, a tavern, a carding machine for wool, a saloon, and a ferry. Among its residents were two physicians, a blacksmith, a cooper, a shoemaker, and other craftsmen common to a pioneer settlement. The people were mostly from the South, though a number of Yankees had also drifted in. Community pastimes were similar to those Lincoln had previously known, and life in general differed only in being somewhat more advanced.

Lincoln gained the admiration of the rougher element of the community, who were known as the Clary's Grove boys, when he threw their champion in a wrestling match. But his kindness, honesty, and efforts at self-betterment so impressed the more reputable people of the community that they, too, soon came to respect him. He became a member of the debating society, studied grammar with the aid of a local schoolmaster, and acquired a lasting fondness for the writings of Shakespeare and Robert Burns from the village philosopher and fisherman.

Offutt paid little attention to business, and his store was about to fail, when an Indian disturbance, known as the Black Hawk War, broke out in April 1832, in Illinois. Lincoln enlisted

and was elected captain of his volunteer company. When his term expired, he reenlisted, serving about 80 days in all. He experienced some hardships, but no fighting.

Politics and Law

Returning to New Salem, Lincoln sought election to the state legislature. He won almost all the votes in his own community, but lost the election because he was not known throughout the county. In partnership with William F. Berry, he bought a store on credit, but it soon failed, leaving him deeply in debt. He then got a job as deputy surveyor, was appointed postmaster, and pieced out his income with odd jobs. The story of his romance with Ann Rutledge is rejected as a legend by most authorities, but he did have a short-lived love affair with Mary Owens.

Illinois Legislator

In 1834, Lincoln was elected to the Illinois House of Representatives, and he was reelected in 1836, 1838, and 1840. Political alignments were in a state of flux during his first two candidacies, but as the WHIG and DEMOCRATIC parties began to take form, he followed his political idol, Henry Clay, and John T. Stuart, a Springfield lawyer and friend, into the Whig ranks. Twice Lincoln was his party's candidate for speaker, and when defeated, he served as its floor leader.

His greatest achievement in the legislature, where he was a consistent supporter of conservative business interests, was to bring about the removal of the state capital from Vandalia to Springfield, by means of adroit logrolling. When certain resolutions denouncing antislavery agitation were passed by the house, Lincoln and a colleague, Dan Stone, defined their position by a written declaration that slavery was "founded on both injustice and bad policy, but that the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends rather to increase than abate its evils." An internal improvement project that Lincoln promoted in the legislature turned out to be impractical and almost bankrupted the state. On national issues Lincoln favored the United States Bank and opposed the presidential policies of Andrew JACKSON and Martin VAN BUREN.

Law Practice

His friend Stuart had encouraged him to study law, and he obtained a license on Sept. 9, 1836. By this time New Salem was in decline and would soon be a ghost town. It has since been restored as a state park. On April 15, 1837, Lincoln moved to Springfield to become Stuart's partner. His conscientious efforts to pay off his debts had earned him the nickname "Honest Abe," but he was so poor that he arrived in Springfield on a borrowed horse with all his personal property in his saddlebags.

With the courts in Springfield in session only a few weeks during the year, lawyers were obliged to travel the circuit in order to make a living. Every year, in spring and autumn, Lincoln followed the judge from county to county over the 12,000 square miles (31,000 sq km) of the Eighth Circuit. In 1841 he and Stuart dissolved their firm, and Lincoln formed a new partnership with Stephen T. Logan, who taught him the value of careful preparation and clear, succinct reasoning as opposed to mere cleverness and oratory. This partnership was in turn dissolved in 1844, when Lincoln took young William H. Herndon, later to be his biographer, as a partner.

Marriage

Meanwhile, on Nov. 4, 1842, after a somewhat tumultuous courtship, Lincoln had married Mary Todd. Brought up in Lexington, Ky., she was a high-spirited, quick-tempered girl of excellent education and cultural background. Notwithstanding her vanity, ambition, and

unstable temperament and Lincoln's careless ways and alternating moods of hilarity and dejection, the marriage turned out to be generally happy. Of their four children, only Robert Todd Lincoln, born on Aug. 1, 1843, lived to maturity. Edward Baker, who was born on March 10, 1846, died on Feb. 1, 1850; William Wallace, born Dec. 21, 1850, died on Feb. 20, 1862; and Thomas ("Tad"), born April 4, 1853, died on July 15, 1871.

Though Mrs. Lincoln was by no means such a shrew as has been asserted, she was difficult to live with. Lincoln responded to her impulsive and imprudent behavior with tireless patience, forbearance, and forgiveness. Borne down by grief and illness after her husband's death, Mrs. Lincoln became so unbalanced at one time that her son Robert had her committed to an institution.

Congressman

Having attained a position of leadership in state politics and worked strenuously for the Whig ticket in the presidential election of 1840, Lincoln aspired to go to **CONGRESS**. But two other prominent young Whigs of his district, Edward D. Baker of Springfield and John J. Hardin of Jacksonville, also coveted this distinction. So Lincoln stepped aside temporarily, first for Hardin, then for Baker, under a sort of understanding that they would "take a turn about." When Lincoln's turn came in 1846, however, Hardin wished to serve again, and Lincoln was obliged to maneuver skillfully to obtain the nomination. His district was so predominantly Whig that this amounted to election, and he won handily over his Democratic opponent.

Lincoln worked conscientiously as a freshman congressman, but was unable to gain distinction. Both from conviction and party expediency, he went along with the Whig leaders in blaming the Polk administration for bringing on war with Mexico, though he always voted for appropriations to sustain it. His opposition to the war was unpopular in his district, however. When the annexations of territory from Mexico brought up the question of the status of slavery in the new lands, Lincoln voted for the Wilmot Proviso and other measures designed to confine the institution to the states where it already existed.

Disillusionment with Politics

In the campaign of 1848, Lincoln labored strenuously for the nomination and election of Gen. Zachary **TAYLOR**. He served on the Whig National Committee, attended the national convention at Philadelphia, and made campaign speeches. With the Whig national ticket victorious, he hoped to share with Baker the control of federal patronage in his home state. The juiciest plum that had been promised to Illinois was the position of commissioner of the General Land Office in Washington. After trying vainly to reconcile two rival candidates for this office, Lincoln tried to obtain it for himself. But he had little influence with the new administration. The most that it would offer him was the governorship or secretaryship of the Oregon Territory. Neither job appealed to him, and he returned to Springfield thoroughly disheartened.

Never one to repine, however, Lincoln now devoted himself to becoming a better lawyer and a more enlightened man. Pitching into his law books with greater zest, he also resumed his study of Shakespeare and mastered the first six books of Euclid as a mental discipline. At the same time, he renewed acquaintances and won new friends around the circuit. Law practice was changing as the country developed, especially with the advent of railroads and the growth of corporations. Lincoln, conscientiously keeping pace, became one of the state's outstanding lawyers, with a steadily increasing practice, not only on the circuit but also in the state supreme court and the federal courts. Regular travel to Chicago to attend court sessions became part of his routine when Illinois was divided into two federal districts.

Outwardly, however, Lincoln remained unchanged in his simple, somewhat rustic ways. Six feet four inches (1.9 meters) tall, weighing about 180 pounds (82 kg), ungainly, slightly stooped, with

a seamed and rugged countenance and unruly hair, he wore a shabby old top hat, an ill-fitting frock coat and pantaloons, and unblacked boots. His genial manner and fund of stories won him a host of friends. Yet, notwithstanding his friendly ways, he had a certain natural dignity that discouraged familiarity and commanded respect.

Return to Politics

Lincoln took only a perfunctory part in the presidential campaign of 1852, and was rapidly losing interest in politics. Two years later, however, an event occurred that roused him, he declared, as never before. The status of slavery in the national territories, which had been virtually settled by the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the Compromise of 1850, now came to the fore. In 1854, Stephen A. Douglas, whom Lincoln had known as a young lawyer and legislator and who was now a Democratic leader in the U. S. [SENATE](#), brought about the repeal of a crucial section of the Missouri Compromise that had prohibited slavery in the Louisiana Purchase north of the line of 36degrees 30&;. Douglas substituted for it a provision that the people in the territories of Kansas and Nebraska could admit or exclude slavery as they chose.

The congressional campaign of 1854 found Lincoln back on the stump in behalf of the antislavery cause, speaking with a new authority gained from self-imposed intellectual discipline. Henceforth, he was a different Lincoln--ambitious, as before, but purged of partisan pettiness and moved instead by moral earnestness.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act so disrupted old party lines that when the Illinois legislature met to elect a U.S. senator to succeed Douglas' colleague, James Shields, it was evident that the Anti-Nebraska group drawn from both parties had the votes to win, if the antislavery Whigs and antislavery Democrats could united on a candidate. However, the Whigs backed Lincoln, and the Democrats supported Lyman Trumbull. though Lincoln commanded far more strength than Trumbull, the latter's supporters were resolved never to desert him for a Whig. As their stubbornness threatened to result in the election of a proslavery Democrat, Lincoln instructed his own backers to vote for Trumbull, thus assuring the latter's election.

Campaigns of 1856 and 1858

With old party lines sundered, the antislavery factions in the North gradually coalesced to form a new party, which took the name [REPUBLICAN](#). Lincoln stayed aloof at the beginning, fearing that it would be dominated by the radical rather than the moderate antislavery element. Also, he hoped for a resurgence of the Whig party, in which he had attained a position of state leadership. But as the presidential campaign of 1856 approached, he cast his lot with the new party. In the national convention, which nominated John C. Frémont for president, Lincoln received 110 ballots for the [VICE-PRESIDENTIAL](#) nomination, which went eventually to William L. Dayton of New Jersey. Though Lincoln had favored Justice John McLean, he worked faithfully for Frémont, who showed surprising strength, notwithstanding his defeat by the Democratic candidate, James [BUCHANAN](#).

With Senator Douglas running for reelection in 1858, Lincoln was recognized in Illinois as the strongest man to oppose him. Endorsed by Republican meetings all over the state and by the Republican State Convention, he opened his campaign with the famous declaration: "A house divided against itself cannot stand.' I believe this government cannot endure permanently *half slave and half free*." Lincoln challenged Douglas to a series of seven joint debates, and these became the most spectacular feature of the campaign. Douglas refused to take a position on the rightfulness or wrongfulness of slavery, and offered his "popular sovereignty" doctrine as the solution of the problem. Lincoln, on the other hand, insisted that slavery was primarily a moral issue and offered as his solution a return to the principles of the Founding Fathers, which tolerated slavery where it existed but looked to its ultimate extinction by preventing its spread.

The Republicans polled the larger number of votes in the election, but an outdated apportionment of seats in the legislature permitted Douglas to win the senatorship.

Election of 1860

Friends began to urge Lincoln to run for president. He held back, but did extend his range of speechmaking beyond Illinois. On Feb. 27, 1860, at Cooper Union, in New York City, he delivered an address on the need for restricting slavery that put him in the forefront of Republican leadership. The enthusiasm evoked by this speech and others overcame Lincoln's reluctance. On May 9 and 10, the Illinois Republican convention, meeting in Decatur, instructed the state's delegates to the national convention to vote as a unit for him.

When that convention met in Chicago on May 16, Lincoln's chances were better than was generally supposed. William H. Seward, the acknowledged party leader, and other aspirants all had political liabilities of some sort. As Lincoln's managers maneuvered behind the scenes, more and more delegates lined up behind the "Illinois Rail Splitter." Seward led on the first ballot, but on the third ballot Lincoln obtained the required majority.

A split in the Democratic party, which resulted in the nomination of Douglas by one faction and of John C. Breckinridge by the other, made Lincoln's **ELECTION** a certainty. Lincoln polled 1,865,593 votes to Douglas' 1,382,713, and Breckinridge's 848,356. John Bell, candidate of the Constitutional Union party, polled 592,906. The **ELECTORAL** vote was Lincoln, 180; Breckinridge, 72; Bell, 39; and Douglas, 12.

Presidency

On Feb. 11, 1861, Lincoln left Springfield to take up his duties as president. Before him lay, as he recognized, "a task ... greater than that which rested upon [George] Washington." The seven states of the lower South had seceded from the Union, and Southern delegates meeting in Montgomery, Ala., had formed a new, separate government. Before Lincoln reached the national capital, Jefferson Davis was inaugurated as President of the Confederate States of America. The four states of the upper South teetered on the brink of secession, and disunion sentiment was rampant in the border states of Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri.

When Lincoln reached Washington on February 23, he found the national government incapable of meeting the crisis. President James Buchanan deplored secession but could not check it, and Congress fruitlessly debated compromise. The national treasury was near bankruptcy; the civil service was riddled with secessionists; and the miniscule armed forces were being weakened by defection of officers to the South.

It was not immediately evident that Lincoln could avert the dissolution of the United States. Few American presidents have assumed office under greater handicaps. Warned of an attempt on his life being planned in Baltimore, Lincoln had to enter the national capital surreptitiously, arriving after a secret midnight journey from Harrisburg, Pa. Widely publicized, the episode did little to inspire public confidence in the government or to create an image of Lincoln as a dynamic leader. That so many citizens could believe their new president a coward was evidence of a more serious handicap under which Lincoln labored: he was virtually unknown to the American people. Lincoln's record as an Illinois state legislator, as a one-term member of the House of Representatives in the 1840's, and as an unsuccessful senatorial candidate against Douglas was not one to inspire confidence in his abilities. Even the leaders of the Republican party had little acquaintance with the new President.

Almost at the outset, Lincoln demonstrated that he was a poor administrator. Accustomed, as his law partner William H. Herndon said, to filing legal papers in his top hat, Lincoln conducted the administration of the national government in the same fashion. Selecting for his cabinet spokesmen of the diverse elements that constituted the Republican party, he surrounded himself with men of such conflicting views that he could not rely on them to work together. Cabinet

sessions rarely dealt with serious issues. Usually, Lincoln permitted cabinet officers free rein in running their departments.

Nor was Lincoln an effective leader of his party in the Congress, where after secession the Republicans had overwhelming majorities. Long a Whig, vigilant against executive "usurpation," he earnestly felt that as president he ought not to exert even "indirect influence to affect the action of congress." In consequence there was poor rapport between Capitol Hill and the [WHITE HOUSE](#). Even those measures that the President earnestly advocated were weakened or defeated by members of his own party. But on important issues relating to the conduct of the war and the restoration of the Union, Lincoln followed his own counsel, ignoring the opinions of Congress.

More than counterbalancing these deficiencies, however, were Lincoln's strengths. Foremost was his unflinching dedication to the preservation of the Union. Convinced that the United States was more than an ordinary nation, that it was a proving ground for the idea of democratic government, Lincoln felt that he was leading a struggle to preserve "the last, best hope of earth." Despite war-weariness and repeated defeats, he never wavered in his "paramount object." To restore national unity he would do what was necessary, without regard to legalistic construction of the [CONSTITUTION](#), political objections in Congress, or personal popularity.

Partly because of that single-minded dedication, the American people, in time, gave to Lincoln a loyalty that proved to be another of his great assets. Making himself accessible to all who went to the White House, Lincoln learned what ordinary citizens felt about their government. In turn, his availability helped create in the popular mind the stereotype of "Honest Abe," the people's president, straightforward, and sympathetic.

Lincoln's mastery of rhetoric further endeared him to the public. In an age of pretentious orators, he wrote clearly and succinctly. Purists might object when he said that the Confederates in one engagement "turned tail and ran," but the man in the street approved. Lincoln's 268-word address at the dedication of the national cemetery at Gettysburg meant more than the preceding two-hour oration by Edward Everett.

Another of Lincoln's assets was the fact that he was a genius at the game of politics. He astutely managed the patronage at his disposal, distributing favors so as to bind local politicians to his administration and to undermine potential rivals for the presidency. He understood the value of silence and secrecy in politics and refrained from creating divisive issues or causing needless confrontations. He was extraordinarily flexible and pragmatic in the means he employed to restore the Union. "My policy," he frequently said, "is to have no policy." That did not mean that his was a course of drift. Instead, it reflected his understanding that, as president, he could only handle problems as they arose, confident that popular support for his solutions would be forthcoming.

Lincoln believed that the ultimate decision in the Civil War was beyond his, or any other man's, control. "Now, at the end of three years struggle," he wrote, as the war reached its climax, "the nation's condition is not what either party, or any man, devised or expected. God alone can claim it."

Sumter Crisis

In 1861, Lincoln's weaknesses were more evident than his strengths. Immediately after his inauguration he faced a crisis over Fort Sumter in the Charleston (S. C.) harbor, one of the few remaining U.S. forts in the seceded states still under federal control. Informed that the troops would have to be supplied or withdrawn, the inexperienced President anxiously explored solutions. Withdrawal would appear a cowardly backdown, but reinforcing the fort might precipitate hostilities. Lincoln painfully concluded that he would send supplies to Sumter and let the Confederates decide whether to fire on the flag of the Union. Historians differ as to whether Lincoln anticipated that hostilities would follow his decision, but they agree that Lincoln was determined that he would not order the first shot fired. Informed of the approach of the federal

supply fleet, Confederate authorities at Charleston during the early hours of April 12 decided to bombard the fort. Thus, the Civil War began.

Because Congress was not in session, Lincoln moved swiftly to mobilize the Union by executive order. His requisition to the states for 75,000 volunteers precipitated the secession of Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas. Kentucky tried to adopt an official policy of "neutrality," while secession sentiment in Maryland was so strong that for a time Washington, D.C., was cut off from communication with the North. In order to restore order, Lincoln directed that the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus be suspended, at first along the line between Washington and Philadelphia and later throughout most of the North, so that known secessionists and persons suspected of disloyalty could be held without trial. At the same time the President, without congressional authorization--and thus in direct violation of the Constitution--ordered an increase in the size of the regular Army and Navy. Doubting the loyalty of certain government officials, he also entrusted public funds to private agents in New York to purchase arms and supplies.

When the 37th Congress assembled in special session on July 4, 1861, it was thus confronted with a *fait accompli*. The President, acting in his capacity as commander in chief, had put himself at the head of the whole Union war effort, arrogating to himself greater powers than those claimed by any previous American president. His enemies termed him a dictator and a tyrant. In fact, his power was limited, partly by his own instincts, partly by the knowledge that his actions would be judged in four years at the polls, and chiefly by the inadequacy of the federal bureaucracy.

Nevertheless, the role of Congress was sharply defined: it could appropriate money to support the war, it could initiate legislation on issues not related to the war, it could debate questions relating to the conflict. But direction of the Union war effort was to remain firmly in Lincoln's hands.

Military Policy

The first responsibility of the President was the successful prosecution of the war against the Confederate States. In this duty he was hampered by the lack of a strong military tradition in America and by the shortage of trained officers. During the early months of the conflict the War Department was headed by Simon Cameron, and corruption and inefficiency were rife. Not until January, 1862, when Lincoln replaced Cameron with the imperious but efficient Edwin M. Stanton, was some semblance of order brought to the procurement of supplies for the federal armies. Navy secretary Gideon Welles was above suspicion, but he was inexperienced in nautical affairs and cautious in accepting innovations, such as the ironclad monitors.

Even more difficult was the task of finding capable general officers. At first the President gave supreme command of the Union forces to the elderly Gen. Winfield Scott. After the Confederate victory at the first battle of Bull Run (July 21, 1861), Lincoln increasingly entrusted power to George B. McClellan, a brilliant organizer and administrator. But McClellan's caution, his secretiveness, and his willingness to strip the defenses of Washington the better to attack Richmond led Lincoln to look elsewhere for military advice. Borrowing "a large number of strategical works" from the Library of Congress, he attempted to direct the overall conduct of the war himself by issuing a series of presidential general war orders. Gen. Henry W. Halleck, whom Lincoln brought to Washington as a strategic planner, served more as a glorified clerk, and the President repeatedly exercised personal supervision over the commanders in the field.

Not until the emergence of Ulysses S. **GRANT**, hero of Vicksburg and Chattanooga, did Lincoln find a general to whom he could entrust overall direction of the war. Even then, the President kept a close eye on military operations, advising and even occasionally overruling the general, but mostly supporting and encouraging him.

Emancipation

Strongly opposed to slavery, Lincoln made a sharp distinction between his personal views and his public responsibilities. He had been elected on a platform that pledged not to interfere with the "peculiar institution" in states where it already existed and had sworn to uphold a Constitution that protected Southern rights. From the first day of the war, however, he was under pressure from the more extreme antislavery men in his own party to strike at slavery as the mainspring of the rebellion. Counterbalancing this pressure was the need to conciliate opinion in the border states, which still recognized slavery but were loyal to the Union. Any move against slavery, Lincoln feared, would cause their secession.

Wartime pressure inescapably forced the president toward emancipation. Foreign powers could not be expected to sympathize with the North, when both the Union and the Confederate governments were pledged to uphold slavery. As the war dragged on, more and more northerners saw the absurdity of continuing to protect the "peculiar institution," which, by keeping a subservient labor force on the farms, permitted the Confederates to put proportionately more of their able-bodied white men into their armies. When Union casualties mounted, even racist northerners began to favor enlisting blacks in the Union armies.

As sentiment for emancipation mounted, Lincoln was careful to keep complete control of the problem in his own hands. He sharply overruled premature efforts by two of his military commanders, Frémont in Missouri and David Hunter in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina, to declare slaves in their military theaters free. At the same time, the President urged the border states to accept a program of gradual emancipation, with federal compensation.

By midsummer of 1862, however, it was evident that these efforts would not be successful. Still troubled by divided Union sentiment and still uncertain of his constitutional powers to act, Lincoln prepared to issue an emancipation proclamation. Secretary of State William H. Seward, however, persuaded him that such an order, issued at the low point of Union military fortunes, would be taken as evidence of weakness. The President postponed his move until after the Battle of Antietam. Then, on Sept. 22, 1862, he issued his preliminary proclamation, announcing that after 100 days all slaves in states still in rebellion would be forever free. This was followed, in due course, by the definitive Emancipation Proclamation of Jan. 1, 1863.

Because the proclamation exempted slavery in the border states and in all Confederate territory already under the control of Union armies and because Lincoln was not certain that his action would be sustained by the Supreme Court, he strongly urged Congress to adopt the 13th Amendment, forever abolishing slavery throughout the country. Congressional action on this measure was completed in January 1865. Lincoln considered the amendment "the complete consummation of his own work, the emancipation proclamation."

Foreign Relations

Never having traveled abroad and having few acquaintances in the courts of Europe, Lincoln, for the most part, left the conduct of foreign policy to Seward. Yet, at critical times he made his influence felt. Early in his administration, when Seward recklessly proposed to divert attention from domestic difficulties by threatening a war against Spain and perhaps other powers, the President quietly squelched the project. Again, in 1861, Lincoln intervened to tone down a dispatch Seward wrote to Charles Francis Adams, the U.S. minister in London, which probably would have led to a break in diplomatic relations with Britain. In the *Trent* affair, that same year, when Union Capt. Charles Wilkes endangered the peace by removing two Confederate emissaries from a British ship and taking them into custody, Lincoln took a courageous but unpopular stand by insisting that the prisoners be released.

Wartime Politics

Throughout the war Lincoln was the subject of frequent, and often vitriolic, attacks, both from the Democrats who thought he was proceeding too drastically against slavery and from the Radicals in his own party--men like Charles Sumner, Benjamin F. Wade, and Zachariah Chandler--who considered him slow and ineffective. Partisan newspapers abused the President as "a slangwhanging stump speaker," a "half-witted usurper," a "mole-eyed" monster with "soul ... of leather," "the present turtle at the head of the government." Men of his own party openly charged that he was "unfit," a "political coward," a "dictator," "timid and ignorant," "shattered, dazed, utterly foolish."

A minority president in 1861, Lincoln lost further support in the congressional elections of 1862, when Democrats took control of the crucial states of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. As the 1864 election approached, it was clear that Lincoln would face formidable opposition for reelection, not merely from a Democratic candidate but from rivals within his own party. Republican anti-Lincoln sentiment centered on treasury secretary Salmon P. Chase, who was working with the Radical critics of Lincoln in Congress. The Chase boom failed, however, chiefly because Lincoln insisted upon keeping the ambitious secretary in his cabinet. At the same time, Lincoln's own agents were working quietly to sew up the state delegations to the Republican national convention. Even Chase's own state of Ohio pledged to vote for Lincoln. Facing certain defeat, Chase withdrew from the race, but Lincoln kept him in the cabinet until after the Republican national convention, which met in Baltimore in June 1864.

Lacking a prominent standard bearer, some disgruntled Republicans gathered in Cleveland in May 1864 to nominate Frémont, but the movement never made much headway. Radical pressure was powerful enough, however, to persuade Lincoln to drop the most outspokenly conservative member of his cabinet, Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, and Frémont withdrew from the race. Lincoln's Republican critics continued to hope they could summon a new national convention, which would replace the President with a more Radical candidate, but this scheme died with news of Union military victories.

For a time Democratic opposition in 1864 to Lincoln's reelection also appeared to be formidable, for people were tired of the endless war and disinclined to fight for the liberty of black men. But the Democrats found it impossible to bring together the two major groups of Lincoln's critics--those who wanted the President to end the war, and those who wanted him to prosecute it more vigorously. Meeting at Chicago in August, the Democratic national convention nominated a candidate, Gen. George B. McClellan, pledged to the successful conclusion of the war on a platform that called the war a failure. McClellan's repudiation of this peace plank showed how fundamentally split were the Democrats.

Whatever chance the Democrats had in 1864 was lost when the war at last began to favor the Union cause. By the late summer of 1864, Grant had forced Lee back into the defenses of Richmond and Petersburg. In the West, Sherman's advancing army captured Atlanta on September 2. At the same time, Admiral Farragut's naval forces closed the key Confederate port of Mobile.

When the ballots were cast in November, the results reflected both these Union triumphs and the rift among the opposition. Lincoln carried every state except Kentucky, Delaware, and New Jersey. He polled 2,206,938 popular votes to McClellan's 1,803,787 and won an electoral vote victory of 212 to 21. It must be remembered, however, that voters in the seceded states, the strongholds of the Democratic party, did not participate in the election.

Life in the White House

Beset by military, diplomatic, and political problems, the President tried to keep his family life as normal as possible. The two youngest Lincoln boys, Thomas (Tad) and William Wallace (Willie), were high spirited lads. Their older brother, the sober Robert Todd Lincoln, was less frequently in Washington, because he was first a student at Harvard and later an aide to General Grant. Despite the snobbishness of Washington society and criticisms from those who wanted all social affairs suspended because of the war, the Lincolns continued to hold receptions in the White House. But the President found these affairs costly and tiring. He would slip away late at night after a White House party to visit the telegraph room of the War Department to read the latest dispatches from the front. He never took a vacation, but in summer he moved his family to the cooler and more secluded Soldier's Home in Washington.

Lincoln visibly aged during the war years, and by 1865 he appeared almost haggard. His life was made harder by personal trials. Early in 1862, Willie died of typhoid. His mother, always high-strung and hysterical, suffered a nervous breakdown, and Lincoln had to watch over her with careful solicitude. But Lincoln emerged from his public and private agonies with a new serenity of soul. Any trace of vanity or egotism was burned out by the fires of war. In his second inaugural address, his language reached a new level of eloquence. Urging his countrymen to act "with malice toward none; with charity for all," he looked beyond the end of the war toward binding up the nation's wounds, so as to "achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace."

Reconstruction

From the start of the Civil War, Lincoln was deeply concerned about the terms under which the Southern states, once subdued, should be restored to the Union. He had no fixed plan for reconstruction. At the outset, he would have welcomed a simple decision on the part of any Southern state government to rescind its ordinance of secession and return its delegation to Congress. By 1863, however, to this war aim of union he added that of liberty, for he now insisted that emancipation of the slaves was a necessary condition for restoration. By the end of the war he was beginning to add a third condition, equality, for he realized that minimal guarantees of civil rights for blacks were essential. Privately, he let it be known that he favored extending the franchise in the Southern states to some of the blacks--"as, for instance, the very intelligent, and especially those who have fought gallantly in our ranks."

As to means by which to achieve these goals, Lincoln was also flexible. When Union armies advanced into the South, he appointed military governors for the states that were conquered. Most notable of these was the military governor of Tennessee, Andrew [JOHNSON](#), who became Lincoln's running mate in 1864. In December 1863, Lincoln enunciated a comprehensive reconstruction program, pledging pardon and amnesty to Confederates who were prepared to swear loyalty to the Union and promising to turn back control of local governments to the civil authorities in the South when as few as 10% of the 1860 voting population participated in the elections. Governments operating under this 10% plan were set up in Louisiana and Arkansas and soon were petitioning for readmission to Congress.

Inevitably Lincoln's program ran into opposition, both because it represented a gigantic expansion of presidential powers and because it appeared not to give adequate guarantees to the freedmen. Defeating an attempt to seat the senators from the new government in Arkansas, Radical Republicans in Congress in July 1864 set forth their own terms for restoration in the far harsher Wade-Davis Bill. When Lincoln pocket-vetoed this measure, declaring that he was "unprepared to be inflexibly committed to any single plan of reconstruction," Radicals accused him of "dictatorial usurpation."

The stage was set for further conflict over reconstruction when Congress reassembled in December 1864, just after Lincoln's reelection. Assisted by the Democrats, the Radicals forced Lincoln's supporters to drop the bill to readmit Louisiana. Lincoln was deeply saddened by the

defeat. "Concede that the new government of Louisiana is only to what it should be as the egg is to the fowl," he said, "shall we sooner have the fowl by hatching the egg than by smashing it?" On April 11, 1865, in his last public address, the President defended his reconstruction policy.

Death

Three days later, the President was shot by the actor John Wilkes Booth while attending a performance at Ford's Theater in Washington. He died at 7:22 the following morning, April 15, 1865. After lying in state in the Capitol, his body was taken to Springfield, Ill., where he was buried in Oak Ridge Cemetery.

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Source

<http://gi.grolier.com/presidents/ea/prescont.html>