

Abraham Lincoln

Lincoln, Abraham (1809-65), 16th president of the United States (1861-65), who steered the Union to victory in the American Civil War and abolished slavery.

Early Life

Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809, near Hodgenville, Kentucky, the son of Nancy Hanks and Thomas Lincoln, pioneer farmers. At the age of two he was taken by his parents to nearby Knob Creek and at eight to Spencer County, Indiana. The following year his mother died. In 1819 his father married Sarah Bush Johnston, a kindly widow, who soon gained the boy's affection. Lincoln grew up a tall, gangling youth, who could hold his own in physical contests and also showed great intellectual promise, although he had little formal education. In 1831, after moving with his family to Macon County, Illinois, he struck out on his own, taking cargo on a flatboat to New Orleans, Louisiana. He then returned to Illinois and settled in New Salem, a short-lived community on the Sangamon River, where he split rails and clerked in a store. He gained the respect of his fellow townspeople, including the so-called Clary Grove boys, who had challenged him to physical combat, and was elected captain of his company in the Black Hawk War (1832). Returning from the war, he began an unsuccessful venture in shopkeeping that ended when his partner died. In 1833 he was appointed postmaster but had to supplement his income with surveying and various other jobs. At the same time he began to study law. That he gradually paid off his and his deceased partner's debts firmly established his reputation for honesty. The story of his romance with Ann Rutledge, a local young woman whom he knew briefly before her untimely death, is unsubstantiated.

Illinois Politician and Lawyer

Defeated in 1832 in a race for the state legislature, Lincoln was elected on the Whig ticket two years later and served in the lower house from 1834 to 1841. He

quickly emerged as one of the leaders of the party and was one of the authors of the removal of the capital to Springfield, where he settled in 1837. After his admission to the bar (1836), he entered into successive partnerships with John T. Stuart, Stephen T. Logan, and William Herndon, and soon won recognition as an effective and resourceful attorney. In 1842 Lincoln married Mary Todd, the daughter of a prominent Kentucky banker, and despite her somewhat difficult disposition, the marriage seems to have been reasonably successful. The Lincolns had four children, only one of whom reached adulthood. His birth in a slave state notwithstanding, Lincoln had long opposed slavery. In the legislature he voted against resolutions favorable to the "peculiar institution" and in 1837 was one of two members who signed a protest against it. Elected to Congress in 1846, he attracted attention because of his outspoken criticism of the war with Mexico and formulated a plan for gradual emancipation in the District of Columbia. He was not an abolitionist, however. Conceding the right of the states to manage their own affairs, he merely sought to prevent the spread of human bondage.

National Recognition Disappointed in a quest for federal office at the end of his one term in Congress (1847-49), Lincoln returned to Springfield to pursue his profession. In 1854, however, because of his alarm at Senator Stephen A. Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act, he became politically active again. Clearly setting forth his opposition to the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, he argued that the measure was wrong because slavery was wrong and that Congress should keep the territories free for actual settlers (as opposed to those who traveled there mainly to vote for or against slavery). The following year he ran for the U.S. Senate, but seeing that he could not win, he yielded to Lyman Trumbull, a Democrat who opposed Douglas's bill. He campaigned for the newly founded Republican party in 1856, and in 1858 he became its senatorial candidate against Douglas. In a speech to the party's state convention that year he warned that "a house divided against itself cannot stand" and predicted the eventual triumph of

freedom. Meeting Douglas in a series of debates, he challenged his opponent in effect to explain how he could reconcile his principles of popular sovereignty with the Dred Scott decision (see Dred Scott Case). In his reply, Douglas reaffirmed his belief in the practical ability of settlers to keep slavery out of the territories despite the Supreme Court's denial of their right to do so. Although Lincoln lost the election to Douglas, the debates won him national recognition.

Election and Secession Crisis In 1860 the Republicans, anxious to attract as many different factions as possible, nominated Lincoln for the presidency on a platform of slavery restriction, internal improvements, homesteads, and tariff reform. In a campaign against Douglas and John C. Breckinridge, two rival Democrats, and John Bell, of the Constitutional Union party, Lincoln won a majority of the electoral votes and was elected president. Immediately after the election, South Carolina, followed by six other Southern states, took steps to secede from the Union. Declaring that secession was illegal but that he had no power to oppose it, President James Buchanan preferred to rely on Congress to find a compromise. The success of this effort, however, depended on Lincoln, the president-elect, who was open to concessions but refused to countenance any possible extension of slavery. Thus, the Crittenden Compromise, the most promising scheme of adjustment, failed, and a new Southern government was inaugurated in February 1861. See Confederate States of America.

Lincoln as President When Lincoln took the oath of office on March 4, 1861, he was confronted with a hostile Confederacy determined to expand and threatening the remaining federal forts in the South, the most important of which was Fort Sumter in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina. Anxious not to offend the upper South, which had not yet seceded, Lincoln at first refused to take decisive action. After the failure of an expedition to Fort Pickens, Florida, however, he decided to relieve Fort Sumter and informed the governor of South Carolina of his intention to send food to the beleaguered garrison. The Confederates, unwilling to permit continued federal occupation of their soil,

opened fire to reduce the fort, thus starting the Civil War. When Lincoln countered with a call for 75,000 volunteers, the North responded with enthusiasm, but the upper South seceded.

Military Leadership As commander in chief, Lincoln encountered great difficulties in the search for capable generals. After the defeat of Irvin McDowell at the First Battle of Bull Run, the president appointed George B. McClellan to lead the eastern army but found him excessively cautious. His Peninsular campaign against Richmond, Virginia, the Confederate capital, failed, and Lincoln, whose own strategy had not succeeded in trapping Stonewall Jackson in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, virtually superseded McClellan with John Pope. When Pope was defeated at the Second Battle of Bull Run, the president turned once more to McClellan, only to be disappointed again. Despite his victory at Antietam, Maryland, the general was so hesitant that Lincoln finally had to remove him. The president's next choice, Ambrose Burnside, was also unfortunate. Decisively beaten at Fredericksburg, Virginia, Burnside gave way to Joseph Hooker, who in turn was routed at Chancellorsville, Virginia. Then Lincoln appointed George G. Meade, who triumphed at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, but failed to follow up his victory. Persisting in his determination to discover a general who could defeat the Confederates, the president in 1864 entrusted overall command to Ulysses S. Grant, the victor at Fort Donelson, Tennessee, Vicksburg, Mississippi, and Chattanooga, Tennessee. This choice was a good one. Grant, in a series of coordinated campaigns, finally brought the war to a successful conclusion.

Emancipation

In dealing with the problem of emancipation, Lincoln proved himself a masterful statesman. Carefully maneuvering to take advantage of radical pressure to move forward and conservative entreaties to hold back, he was able to retain the loyalty of the Democrats and the border states while still bringing about the final abolition of slavery. Lincoln pleased the radicals in 1861, when he signed

the first Confiscation Act, freeing slaves used by the Confederates for military purposes. He deferred to the conservatives when he countermanded emancipation orders of the Union generals John C. Frémont and David Hunter, but again courted the radicals by reverting to a cautious antislavery program. Thus, he exerted pressure on the border states to inaugurate compensated emancipation, signed the bill for abolition in the District of Columbia, and consented to the second Confiscation Act. On July 22, 1862, in response to radical demands and diplomatic necessity, he told his cabinet that he intended to issue an emancipation proclamation but took care to soften the blow to the border states by specifically exempting them. Advised to await some federal victory, he did not make his proclamation public until September 22, following the Battle of Antietam, when he announced that all slaves in areas still in rebellion within 100 days would be "then, thenceforward, and forever, free." The final Emancipation Proclamation followed on January 1, 1863. Promulgated by the president in his capacity as commander in chief in times of actual armed rebellion, it freed slaves in regions held by the insurgents and authorized the creation of black military units. Lincoln was determined to place emancipation on a more permanent basis, however, and in 1864 he advocated the adoption of an antislavery amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The amendment was passed after Lincoln's reelection, when he made use of all the powers of his office to ensure its success in the House of Representatives (January 31, 1865).

Political Skill A consummate politician, Lincoln sought to maintain harmony among the disparate elements of his party by giving them representation in his cabinet. Recognizing former Whigs by the appointment of William H. Seward as secretary of state and Edward Bates as attorney general, he also extended invitations to such former Democrats as Montgomery Blair, who became postmaster general, and Gideon Welles, who became secretary of the navy. He honored local factions by appointing Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania secretary of war and Caleb B. Smith of Indiana secretary of the interior, while satisfying the border states with Bates and Blair. At the same time, he offset the conservative Bates

with the radical Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase and later with Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton. Although Lincoln was much closer to the radicals and gradually moved toward ever more radical measures, he did not needlessly offend the conservatives and often collaborated with them. His careful handling of the slavery issue is a case in point, as is his appointment of Democratic generals and his deference to the sensibilities of the border states. In December 1862 he foiled critics demanding the dismissal of the conservative Seward. Refusing to accept Seward's resignation and inducing the radical Chase to offer to step down as well, he maintained the balance of his cabinet by retaining both secretaries. Lincoln's political influence was enhanced by his great gifts as an orator. Able to stress essentials in simple terms, he effectively appealed to the nation in such classical short speeches as the Gettysburg Address and his second inaugural address. Moreover, he was a capable diplomat. Firmly rejecting Seward's proposal in April 1861 that the country be united by means of a foreign war, he sought to maintain friendly relations with the nations of Europe, used the Emancipation Proclamation to win friends for the Union, and effectively countered Confederate efforts to gain foreign recognition.

Reelection and Reconstruction In 1864 a number of disgruntled Republicans sought to prevent Lincoln's renomination. Adroitly outmaneuvering his opponents, especially the ambitious Chase, he succeeded in obtaining his party's endorsement at Baltimore, Maryland, even though a few extremists nominated Fremont. Lincoln's renomination did not end his political problems, however. Unhappy with his Proclamation of Amnesty (December 1863), which called for the restoration of insurgent states if 10 percent of the electorate took an oath of loyalty, Congress in July 1864 passed the Wade-Davis Bill, which provided for more onerous conditions and their acceptance by 50 percent of the voters. When Lincoln used the pocket veto to kill it, some radicals sought to displace him and in the so-called Wade-Davis Manifesto passionately attacked the administration. The president, nevertheless, prevailed again. His poor prospects

in August 1864 improved when the Democrats nominated General McClellan on a peace platform. Subsequent federal victories and the withdrawal of Frémont, coupled with the resignation of the conservative Blair, reunited the party, and in November 1864 Lincoln was triumphantly reelected. The president's success at the polls enabled him to seek to establish his own Reconstruction policies. To blunt conservative criticism, he met with leading Confederates at Hampton Roads, Virginia, and demonstrated the impossibility of a negotiated peace. The radicals, however, were also dissatisfied. Because of their demand for black suffrage, Lincoln was unable to induce Congress to accept the members-elect of the free state government of Louisiana, which he had organized. In addition, after the fall of Richmond, he alarmed his critics by inviting the Confederate legislature of Virginia to repeal the secession ordinance. His Reconstruction policies, however, had been determined by military necessity. As soon as the Confederate general Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia, Lincoln withdrew the invitation to the Virginians. He again proved how close he was to the radicals by endorsing a limited black franchise.

The Assassination At his second inaugural, Lincoln, attributing the war to the evil consequences of slavery, summed up his attitude in the famous phrase "with malice toward none, with charity for all." A few weeks later, he publicly announced his support for limited black suffrage in Louisiana. This open defiance of conservative opinion could only have strengthened the resolve of one in his audience, John Wilkes Booth, a well-known actor who had long been plotting against the president. Aroused by the prospect of votes for blacks, he determined to carry out his assassination scheme and on April 14, 1865, shot Lincoln at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. The president died the next day. The subject of numerous myths, Lincoln ranks with the greatest of American statesmen. His humanitarian instincts, brilliant speeches, and unusual political skill ensured his hold on the electorate and his success in saving the Union. That he also gained fame as the Great Emancipator was due to a large degree to

his excellent sense of timing and his open-mindedness. Thus, he was able to bring about the abolition of slavery and to advocate a policy of Reconstruction that envisaged the gradual enfranchisement of the freedmen. It was a disaster for the country that he did not live to carry it out.

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