

In the Spotlight: Abraham Lincoln

Overview

By almost every standard, Abraham Lincoln is rated as America's greatest president. This recognition stems from five factors. First, Lincoln presided, with ultimate success, over the direst crisis in American history. Had he been less skilled or less determined, the Civil War might very well have ended in the permanent division of the nation. Second, Lincoln accomplished the abolition of slavery in the United States and led the nation in taking its first steps toward racial justice. Third, Lincoln was one of the most impeccable craftsmen of the English language to ever hold political office in the United States. Indeed, with the possible exception of Thomas Jefferson, no other national politician ever demonstrated such a stunning ability to express himself and inspire others through language and text. Fourth, Lincoln came from the humblest background of any person elected to the presidency. Born in a log cabin on the Kentucky frontier, lacking any formal education, scrupulously honest, and enormously hard working, Lincoln embodied values that almost all Americans admire while symbolizing the idea that any American can escape poverty to achieve greatness. His two nicknames—"Honest Abe" and "the Rail Splitter"—convey his honesty, his humble roots, and his willingness to work hard to improve himself and his nation. Finally, Lincoln's death at the hands of an assassin mere days after the U.S. army's triumph in the Civil War made him into a hero and a national martyr of almost mythic proportions. The national outpouring of grief at his death, even in parts of the defeated South, was unprecedented.

Lincoln's Milestone Documents

Lincoln was a master of the English language. He was largely self-educated but was widely read and had a fine ear for language. He clearly stated the complicated and difficult issues facing his audience and the nation. Lincoln was also brilliant at creating phrases that would resonate with his audience. His appeal to the "better angels of our nature" in his first inaugural was a remarkable plea to the people of the nation to act on their highest principles. Similarly, his phrasing in the last sentence of the Gettysburg address brilliantly conveyed two remarkable ideas. First, he asserted that the Civil War was justified to create "a new birth of freedom," which included an end to slavery. Second he tied the war to the preservation of democracy, saying that if the war was won, "government of the people, by the people, for the people" would not "perish from the earth." These ideas were easily captured by those who heard him speak or who read the speech. Likewise, in his second inaugural, he memorably asked Americans—"with malice toward none, with charity for all"—to avoid vengeance and retaliation in the wake of such a bloody war.

- **"House Divided" Speech (1858).** Delivered on June 16, 1858, at the Illinois Republican Convention upon his nomination to the U.S. Senate, this speech helped catapult Lincoln to national prominence. The speech was an extended attack on Lincoln's opponent, Stephen A. Douglas, as well as on President James Buchanan and Chief Justice Roger Taney. It was also a warning that if the nation continued on its present path, the conspiracy of those men would be fulfilled, and slavery would become legal throughout

the nation. Lincoln warns his fellow citizens, “We shall lie down pleasantly dreaming that the people of Missouri are on the verge of making their State free, and we shall awake to the reality instead, that the Supreme Court has made Illinois a slave State.” While the statement is seen as an exaggeration today, many Republicans truly feared that the supporters of slavery would never stop until it was protected everywhere in the nation. The election of Lincoln would help prevent this. As a campaign document, the “house divided” speech was enormously successful in defining Lincoln and his issues as well as his opponent. Throughout the campaign, Douglas was forced to both defend and disassociate himself from the Supreme Court’s *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision, written by Taney. Lincoln ended up losing the election among the state legislators in part because that body had not been reapportioned in many years. By 1858 a majority of the Illinois population lived in the northern part and were underrepresented; had there been a popular election, Lincoln probably would have won.

- **First Inaugural Address (1861)**. Lincoln’s first address as president may have been the most important inaugural address in history. As he stood to take the oath of office, the nation was collapsing. Seven states had declared that they were no longer in the United States but were part of a new nation, the Confederate States of America. Lincoln’s ambitious goal in his inaugural was to bring these states back into the Union. In the end Lincoln’s plea for unity failed, and, as he would say in his second inaugural address, “the war came.” But with his entreaty on behalf of the Union and his promise not to harm slavery in the South, Lincoln placed his administration on the side of peace and compromise. Thus, when the Civil War began, most northerners saw the South as a relentless aggressor against an administration that offered peace. This helped rally northerners to defend the nation after the Confederate firing on Fort Sumter.
- **Gettysburg Address (1863)**. Only 266 words long, the Gettysburg address is perhaps the most famous short speech in the English language; whole books have been written analyzing it. The address was part of a ceremony to dedicate the military cemetery located at the site of the Battle of Gettysburg, fought in early July 1863. Lincoln was not the featured speaker, and his speech was so short that much of the day’s audience probably missed it. However, when published, the address immediately captivated the nation for its simplicity, directness, and somber yet uplifting message. Six months before Gettysburg, Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation, making the war a struggle for liberty as well as a conflict necessary to save the nation. Lincoln was thus able to use the dedication of the Gettysburg military cemetery, four and a half months after the battle, to underscore the high moral purposes of the war, for which so many U.S. soldiers died on this battlefield and all the others.
- **Second Inaugural Address (1865)**. The circumstances of Lincoln’s second inaugural address were far different from those of the first. For almost four years the nation had been at war. Nearly one million Americans, in Union blue and Confederate gray, had already been killed or wounded in battle. Huge amounts of property had been destroyed. Most of the Confederacy had been conquered, but still the rebel armies fought on, in an inevitably losing cause. Union victory was in sight and, with it, a total end to slavery. At the beginning of the war, blacks were not even considered citizens of the United States and had almost no legal rights. By the time Lincoln gave his second inaugural, nearly two hundred thousand African Americans had served in the army and navy, many with great distinction. Laws discriminating against blacks had been repealed in a number of states,

and federal laws were beginning to establish equality. Lincoln's second inaugural address reflected these massive changes. He notes that when the war began, "neither party expected ... the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained." Indeed, both sides had expected a short war with few casualties. But the conflict had lasted for four years, with staggering numbers of soldiers dead and wounded. He ends this speech with an appeal for peace, even as he understood that there would be more violence before the war was over. But, once it was over, he would seek some measure of reconciliation, not vengeance. Above all else, the speech is remembered as a call for reconciliation and mercy toward the vanquished South.

Key Sources

The records of Lincoln's presidency and life are scattered across the nation. Most of his letters and speeches can be found in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (1953–1955), and its continuations, Roy P. Basler, ed., Supplement, 1832–1865 (1974), and Roy P. Basler and Christian O. Basler, eds., Second Supplement, 1848–1865 (1990). The original collection by Basler is available online through the Abraham Lincoln Association and the University of Michigan (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln>). Documents from Lincoln's legal work are in Daniel W. Stowell, ed., *The Papers of Abraham Lincoln: Legal Documents and Cases* 4 vols. (2008), and Martha L. Benner and Cullom Davis, eds., *The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: Complete Documentary Edition* (2000), an electronic resource on three discs. Online collections of Lincoln's papers include the Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress (<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/alhtml/malhome.html>) and the Papers of Abraham Lincoln as presented by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (<http://www.papersofabrahamlincoln.org>).

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