

Abraham Lincoln



Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States, guided his country through the most devastating experience in its national history--the CIVIL WAR. He is considered by many historians to have been the greatest American president.

Early Life

Lincoln was born on Feb. 12, 1809, in a log cabin in Hardin (now Larue) County, Ky. Indians had killed his grandfather, Lincoln wrote, "when he was laboring to open a farm in the forest" in 1786; this tragedy left his father, Thomas Lincoln, "a wandering laboring boy" who "grew up, literally without education." Thomas, nevertheless, became a skilled carpenter and purchased three farms in Kentucky before the Lincolns left the state. Little is known about Lincoln's mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln. Abraham had an older sister, Sarah, and a younger brother, Thomas, who died in infancy.

In 1816 the Lincolns moved to Indiana, "partly on account of slavery," Abraham recalled, "but chiefly on account of difficulty in land titles in Kentucky." Land ownership was more secure in Indiana because the Land Ordinance of 1785 provided for surveys by the federal government; moreover, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 forbade slavery in the area. Lincoln's parents belonged to a faction of the Baptist church that disapproved of slavery, and this affiliation may account for Abraham's later statement that he was "naturally anti-slavery" and could not remember when he "did not so think, and feel."

Indiana was a "wild region, with many bears and other wild animals still in the woods." The Lincolns' life near Little Pigeon Creek, in Perry (now Spencer) County, was not easy. Lincoln "was raised to farm work" and recalled life in this "unbroken forest" as a fight "with trees and logs and grubs." "There was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education," Lincoln later recalled; he attended "some schools, so called," but for less than a year altogether. "Still, somehow," he remembered, "I could read, write, and cipher to the Rule of Three; but that was all."

Lincoln's mother died in 1818, and the following year his father married a Kentucky widow, Sarah Bush Johnston. She "proved a good and kind mother." In later years Lincoln could fondly and poetically recall memories of his "childhood home." In 1828 he was able to make a flatboat trip to New Orleans. His sister died in childbirth the same year.

In 1830 the Lincolns left Indiana for Illinois. Abraham made a second flatboat trip to New Orleans, and in 1831 he left home for New Salem, in Sangamon County near Springfield. The separation may have been made easier by Lincoln's estrangement from his father, of whom he spoke little in his mature life. In New Salem, Lincoln tried various occupations and served briefly in the Black Hawk War (1832). This military interlude was uneventful except for the fact that he was elected captain of his volunteer company, a distinction that gave him "much satisfaction." It opened new avenues for his life.

Illinois Legislator

Lincoln ran unsuccessfully for the Illinois legislature in 1832. Two years later he was elected to the lower house for the first of four successive terms (until 1841) as a Whig. His membership in the Whig Party was natural. Lincoln's father was a Whig, and the party's ambitious program of national economic development was the perfect solution to the problems Lincoln had seen in his rural, hardscrabble Indiana past. His first platform (1832) announced that "Time and experience . . . verified . . . that the poorest and most thinly populated countries would be greatly benefited by the opening of good roads, and in the clearing of navigable streams. . . . There cannot justly be any objection to having rail roads and canals."

As a Whig, Lincoln supported the Second Bank of the United States, the Illinois State Bank, government-sponsored internal improvements (roads, canals, railroads, harbors), and protective tariffs. His Whig vision of the West, derived from Henry Clay, was not at all pastoral. Unlike most successful American politicians, Lincoln was unsentimental about agriculture, calling farmers in 1859 "neither better nor worse than any other people." He remained conscious of his humble origins and was therefore sympathetic to labor as "prior to, and independent of, capital." He bore no antagonism to capital, however, admiring the American system of economic opportunity in which the "man who labored for another last year, this year labors for himself, and next year he will hire others to labor for him." Slavery was the opposite of opportunity and mobility, and Lincoln stated his political opposition to it as early as 1837.

Lawyer and U.S. Representative

Encouraged by Whig legislator John Todd Stuart, Lincoln became a lawyer in 1836, and in 1837 he moved to Springfield, where he became Stuart's law partner. With a succession of partners, including Stephen T. Logan and William H. Herndon, Lincoln built a successful practice. Lincoln courted Mary Todd, a Kentuckian of much more genteel origins than he. After a brief postponement of their engagement, which plummeted Lincoln into a deep spell of melancholy, they were married on Nov. 4, 1842. They had four sons: Robert Todd (1843-1926), Edward Baker (1846-50), William Wallace (1850-62), and Thomas "Tad" (1853-71). Mary Todd Lincoln was a Presbyterian, but her husband was never a church member.

Lincoln served one term (1847-49) as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, where he opposed the Mexican War--Whigs did everywhere--as unnecessary and unconstitutional. This opposition was not a function of internationalist sympathy for Mexico (Lincoln thought the war inevitable) but of feeling that the Democratic president, James Polk, had violated the Constitution. Lincoln had been indifferent about the annexation of Texas, already a slave territory, but he opposed any expansion that would allow slavery into new areas; hence, he supported the Wilmot Proviso, which would have barred slavery from any territory gained as a result of the Mexican War. He did not run for Congress again, returning instead to Springfield and the law.

The Slavery Issue and the Lincoln-Douglas Debates

Lincoln "was losing interest in politics" when the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed by Congress in 1854. This legislation opened lands previously closed to slavery to the possibility of its spread by local option (popular sovereignty); Lincoln viewed the provisions of the act as immoral. Although he was not an abolitionist and thought slavery unassailably protected by the Constitution in states where it already existed, Lincoln also thought that America's founders had put slavery on the way to "ultimate extinction" by preventing its spread to new territories. He saw this act, which had been sponsored by Democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas, as a new and alarming development.

Lincoln vied for the U.S. Senate in 1855 but eventually threw his support to Lyman Trumbull. In 1856 he joined the newly formed Republican Party, and two years later he campaigned for the Senate against Douglas. In his speech at Springfield in acceptance of the Republican senatorial nomination (June 16, 1858) Lincoln suggested that Douglas, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, and Democratic presidents Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan had conspired to nationalize slavery. In the same speech he expressed the view that the nation would become either all slave or all free: "A house divided against itself cannot stand."

The underdog in the senatorial campaign, Lincoln wished to share Douglas's fame by appearing with him in debates. Douglas agreed to seven debates: in Ottawa, Freeport, Jonesboro, Charleston, Galesburg, Quincy, and Alton, Ill. Lincoln knew that Douglas--

now fighting the Democratic Buchanan administration over the constitution to be adopted by Kansas--had alienated his Southern support; and he feared Douglas's new appeal to eastern Republicans now that Douglas was battling the South. Lincoln's strategy, therefore, was to stress the gulf of principle that separated Republican opposition to slavery as a moral wrong from the moral indifference of the Democrats, embodied in legislation allowing popular sovereignty to decide the fate of each territory. Douglas, Lincoln insisted, did not care whether slavery was "voted up or voted down." By his vigorous showing against the famous Douglas, Lincoln won the debates and his first considerable national fame. He did not win the Senate seat, however; the Illinois legislature, dominated by Democratic holdovers in the upper house, elected Douglas.

Election to the Presidency

In February 1860, Lincoln made his first major political appearance in the Northeast when he addressed a rally at the Cooper Union in New York. He was now sufficiently well known to be a presidential candidate. At the Republican national convention in Chicago in May, William H. Seward was the leading candidate. Seward, however, had qualities that made him undesirable in the critical states the Republicans had lost in 1856: Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, and New Jersey. As a result Lincoln won the nomination by being the second choice of the majority.

He went on to win the presidential election, defeating the Northern Democrat Douglas, the Southern Democrat John C. Breckinridge, and the Constitutional Union candidate John Bell. Lincoln selected a strong cabinet that included all of his major rivals for the Republican nomination: Seward as secretary of state, Salmon P. Chase as secretary of the treasury, and Edward Bates as attorney general.

By the time of Lincoln's inauguration in March 1861, seven states had seceded from the Union. His conciliatory inaugural address had no effect on the South, and, against the advice of a majority of his cabinet, Lincoln decided to send provisions to Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor. The fort was a symbol of federal authority--conspicuous in the state that had led secession, South Carolina--and it would soon have had to be evacuated for lack of supplies. On Apr. 12, 1861, South Carolina fired on the fort, and the Civil War began.

The Civil War

As a commander in chief Lincoln was soon noted for vigorous measures, sometimes at odds with the Constitution and often at odds with the ideas of his military commanders. After a period of initial support and enthusiasm for George B. McClellan, Lincoln's conflicts with that Democratic general helped to turn the latter into his presidential rival in 1864. Famed for his clemency for court-martialed soldiers, Lincoln nevertheless took a realistic view of war as best prosecuted by killing the enemy. Above all, he always sought a general, no matter what his politics, who would fight. He found such a general in Ulysses S. Grant, to whom he gave overall command in 1864. Thereafter, Lincoln took

a less direct role in military planning, but his interest never wavered, and he died with a copy of Gen. William Sherman's orders for the March to the Sea in his pocket.

Politics vied with war as Lincoln's major preoccupation in the presidency. The war required the deployment of huge numbers of men and quantities of materiel; for administrative assistance, therefore, Lincoln turned to the only large organization available for his use, the Republican Party. With some rare but important exceptions (for example, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton), Republicans received the bulk of the civilian appointments from the cabinet to the local post offices. Lincoln tried throughout the war to keep the Republican Party together and never consistently favored one faction in the party over another. Military appointments were divided between Republicans and Democrats.

Democrats accused Lincoln of being a tyrant because he proscribed civil liberties. For example, he suspended the writ of habeas corpus in some areas as early as Apr. 27, 1861, and throughout the nation on Sept. 24, 1862, and the administration made over 13,000 arbitrary arrests. On the other hand, Lincoln tolerated virulent criticism from the press and politicians, often restrained his commanders from overzealous arrests, and showed no real tendencies toward becoming a dictator. There was never a hint that Lincoln might postpone the election of 1864, although he feared in August of that year that he would surely lose to McClellan. Democrats exaggerated Lincoln's suppression of civil liberties, in part because wartime prosperity robbed them of economic issues and in part because Lincoln handled the slavery issue so skillfully.

The Constitution protected slavery in peace, but in war, Lincoln came to believe, the commander in chief could abolish slavery as a military necessity. The preliminary Emancipation Proclamation of Sept. 22, 1862, bore this military justification, as did all of Lincoln's racial measures, including especially his decision in the final proclamation of Jan. 1, 1863, to accept blacks in the army. By 1864, Democrats and Republicans differed clearly in their platforms on the race issue: Lincoln's endorsed the 13th Amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery, whereas McClellan's pledged to return to the South the rights it had had in 1860.

Lincoln's victory in that election thus changed the racial future of the United States. It also agitated Southern-sympathizer and Negrophobe [John Wilkes Booth](#), who began to conspire first to abduct Lincoln and later to kill him. On Apr. 14, 1865, five days after Robert E. Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox Court House, Lincoln attended a performance of *Our American Cousin* at [Ford's Theatre](#) in Washington. There Booth entered the presidential box and shot Lincoln. The next morning at 7:22 Lincoln died.

Lincoln's achievements--saving the Union and freeing the slaves--and his martyrdom just at the war's end assured his continuing fame. No small contribution was made by his eloquence as exemplified in the [Gettysburg Address](#) (Nov. 19, 1863), in which he defined the war as a rededication to the egalitarian ideals of the Declaration of Independence, and in his second inaugural address (Mar. 4, 1865), in which he urged "malice toward none" and "charity for all" in the peace to come.

Nickname: "Honest Abe"; "Illinois Rail-Splitter"

Marriage: Nov. 4, 1842, to Mary Todd (1818-82) Children: Robert Todd Lincoln (1843-1926); Edward Baker Lincoln (1846-50); William Wallace Lincoln (1850-62); Thomas "Tad" Lincoln (1853-71)