Abraham Lincoln

1809-1865

Born near Hodgenville, Ky. on February 12, 1809, Lincoln was the central figure of the Civil War. With scant formal education, from a poor family, this frontier lawyer held the nation together through the worst crisis in its history. A leader of weaker will or fainter vision might well have failed either to win the Civil War or end the institution of slavery. He is viewed as the savior of the American union and the "Great Emancipator."

Lincoln was born into an obscure backwoods family who moved to Indiana when he was 7. His mother died 2 years later and his father married a widow, Sarah Bush Johnston, who exerted a good influence on the boy. Though his education was limited to a few months in a 1-teacher home-school, Lincoln avidly read books such as the Bible, Pilgrim's Progress and Weems's Life of Washington.

Growing to a muscular 6'4", he supported himself by manual labor until he was 21, when he settled in New Salem, Ill. There he continued his self-education while serving as storekeeper, militia captain in the Black Hawk War, and postmaster. In 1832, he lost a race for the state legislature but won a seat as a Whig 2 years later, serving 4 terms and gaining statewide popularity for his homespun wit and integrity.

During this period, Lincoln also began his private study of law, borrowing books from a local attorney, and was licensed to practice in 1836. Increasingly successful as a circuit rider, he settled in Springfield, the new capital. In 1844, two years after his marriage to Mary Todd of Lexington, Ky., a young woman of aristocratic pretensions, he formed a partnership with William H. Herndon and went on to become one of Illinois ablest lawyers.

In 1847, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives and during his single term became known for both his opposition to the Mexican War and the institution of slavery. After switching allegiance to the new Republican Party in 1856, Lincoln ran for the U.S. Senate against the "Little Giant," Stephen A. Douglas. Though Lincoln lost, the race attracted national attention because of the candidates widely reported debates over the issue of slavery in the territories. Lincoln's standing was further enhanced on February 27, 1860, when, in New York City, before an influential audience, he delivered his brilliant Cooper Union speech, in which he argued the Federal government's power to limit slavery in the territories.

In July the Republicans nominated Lincoln for the presidency on the third ballot at the convention in Chicago. The Democratic Party split into Northern and Southern factions, each with its own presidential candidate. Lincoln's election the following November, over 3 other candidates, with only 40% of the popular vote, was unacceptable to Southern politicians and became the pretext for first South Carolina and in quick order 10 other states to secede from the Union.

By the time Lincoln arrived in Washington to be sworn in as the nation's 16th president, 4 Mar. 1861, the Confederate States of America had been formed. In his first inaugural address, Lincoln tried to woo the South back into the Union, but after the bombardment of Fort Sumter , April 12, he called for 75,000 volunteers to suppress "the insurrection," declared a blockade of Southern ports, and authorized the suspension of Habeas Corpus in areas threatened by pro-secessionist elements. Only after the war was under way and the reins of the presidency were firmly in his hands did Lincoln call Congress to meet July 4, 1861, in a special session that he had already enacted by executive decree. Thereafter the history of Lincoln's administration followed the course of the Civil War.

As commander in chief, Lincoln not only took care to win and keep the affection of the ordinary Union soldier but also displayed a surprising aptitude for military strategy. While he fumbled in his selection of generals, he learned from his mistakes. At considerable political risk, he dismissed the popular Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan because of his failure to lead the Army of the Potomac to victories. And despite pressure from ardent abolitionists, he countermanded premature efforts by army commanders to ban slavery in their jurisdiction.

Ever the masterful politician, he always took care not to alienate his basic constituency, the ordinary citizenry of Northern and Western states, while advancing the progress of the war. His Emancipation Proclamation was carefully framed to avoid offense to loyal but slave-owning states; only those slaves in Confederate-controlled areas were declared free at that early stage of the war.

Though charges of disloyalty were made against his wife because 4 of her brothers and 2 of her brothers-in-law served in the Confederate army, Lincoln ignored them, as he did much brutal criticism of his administration and his personal character. Added to the crushing burdens of his office were private griefs over the death of his 12-year-old son, Willie, in 1862, and the often shrewish behavior of his emotionally unstable wife. To conceal his melancholy, he often told earthy stories, to the disgust of some of his more polished cabinet members.

In general, Lincoln was an inefficient administrator, running his office like a large law firm, with a staff of 2 male secretaries, John Hay and John Nicolay. He also made himself needlessly accessible to office seekers and special pleaders. But he was a superb leader, unswerving in his goal of restoring and preserving the Union. He also used his skills as a speaker to great advantage. His inaugural speeches and his Gettysburg Address are masterpieces of American oratory.

Lincoln showed a surprisingly sure grasp of foreign affairs, skillfully avoiding a war with Great Britain in the Trent Affair and winning European goodwill with his Emancipation Proclamation. In domestic affairs, the Homestead Act of 1862 is the most notable achievement of his administration.

But the war overshadowed nonmilitary congressional concerns. Though by 1864 Federal forces had reopened the Mississippi River and brought large sections of the South under Federal control, many in the North despaired of victory as casualties mounted in Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's offensive against Gen. Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. Lincoln himself doubted first his chances of renomination, then his ability to defeat the Democratic candidate, the still-popular former general McClellan, who ran on a "Peace Platform" and who blamed Lincoln for prolonging the war.

Adm. David C. Farragut's naval success at Mobile Bay, August 5, The fall of Atlanta to Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman September 2, and Maj. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan's successful Shenandoah Valley Campaign later that fall vindicated Lincoln's firm war policy. McClellan carried only 3 states, with 12 electoral college votes to Lincoln's 212. By Christmas, Sherman had marched to the sea and the Confederacy was rapidly falling apart. With the surrender of Lee's army at Appomattox on April 9, 1865, the war ended.

The humane character of Lincoln was best demonstrated by his policy of reconciliation with the South, as expressed in his second inaugural address, March 4, 1865, in which he spoke of "malice toward none" and "charity for all." His death from an assassin's bullet a few weeks later on April 15, not only cut short a great man's life but also delayed the restoration of the American union.

Source: "Historical Times Encyclopedia of the Civil War"

Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865

It was a large and hopeful crowd that awaited the Second Inaugural of President Lincoln. Historian Allan Nevins wrote: “This Inauguration Day was vastly different from that of March 4, 1861, when people awaited the words of the newly elected President on the crisis momentarily descending on the nation..” The end of the war – rather than the beginning of it – was clearly in sight.

After Vice President Andrew Johnson took the oath of office in the Senate chamber and gave a rambling, drunken speech, officials proceeded to the east front of the Capitol for the presidential inauguration. A rainy and stormy morning turned to bright sunlight just as the President took the podium. “As Lincoln rose, he put on and adjusted his steel-rimmed eyeglasses. He held in his left hand his Second Inaugural Address, printed in two columns. The handwritten draft of the address had been set in type. The galley proof was clipped and pasted in an order to indicate pauses for emphasis and breathing,” wrote Ronald C. White, Jr., in *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural.*

The speech itself was remarkably brief. In the Second Inaugural, Lincoln revealed his most deeply held convictions to a national audience in a way that he had not done before. In his religious belief, Lincoln had found strength to persevere, and at the time of his Second Inaugural when it was apparent that the Union cause would eventually be won, he publicly acknowledged his conviction that the final outcome had been foreordained all along. President Lincoln said:

At this second appearing to take the oath of the presidential office, there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then a statement, somewhat in detail, of a course to be pursued, seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the attention, and engrosses the energies of the nation, little that is new could be presented. The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself; and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it--all sought to avert it. While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place, devoted altogether to saving the Union without war--seeking to dissolve the Union, and divide effects, by negotiation. Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came.

One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union, even by war, while the

government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it.

Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the seat of other men's faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.

"Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope--fervently do we pray--that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether."

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

The words were practical as well as beautiful. According to historian Ron White, "In this final paragraph, Lincoln declared that the true test of the aims of war would be how we now treated those who have been defeated... Instead of rallying his supporters, in the name of God, to support the war, he asked his listeners, quietly, to imitate the ways of God."

"As Lincoln concluded his Second Inaugural Address, people were still arriving, He had spoken for only six to seven minutes," noted White.

Frederick Douglass was an astute observer of the meaning of both the event and the address. He wrote, "The whole proceeding was wonderfully quiet, earnest, and solemn. There was a leaden stillness about the crowd. The address sounded more like a sermon than a state paper." Reflecting on Lincoln's words, Douglass said that he "clapped my hands in gladness and thanksgiving at their utterance."

"There were many cheers and many tears as this noble address was concluded. Silence being restored, the President turned toward Chief Justice Chase, who, with his right hand uplifted, directed the Bible to be brought forward by the clerk of the Supreme Court," wrote journalist Noah Brooks. "Then Lincoln, laying his right hand upon the open page, repeated the oath of office administered to him by the Chief Justice, after which, solemnly saying, 'So help me God,' he bent forward and reverently kissed the Book....At the conclusion of the ceremonies, a salute was fired, the band struck up "Hail to the Chief," and the thousands in attendance greeted the President with repeated huzzas."

Although it is the second shortest inaugural address in American history, Lincoln's speech is probably the most memorable in language and content. Despite its brevity, it addresses the nation's relationship to God at great depth. "A feature that sets the address apart is its biblical and theological language," White has written. "Within 701 words Lincoln mentions God fourteen times, quotes the Bible four times and invokes prayer three times."

Later, Supreme Court Chief Justice Chase gave the Bible to Mrs. Lincoln, marking the pages from Isaiah 5:27-28 which the President kissed:
None shall be weary nor stumble among them; none shall slumber nor sleep; neither shall the girdle of their loins be loosed, nor the latchet of their shoes be broken:
Whose arrows are sharp, and all their bows best, their horses' hoofs shall be counted like flint, their wheels like a whirlwind.

Forty-one days after delivering the Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln was dead. But Lincoln's powerful words did not die. "The spirit of Lincoln's words inspire awe," wrote White. "Neither vindication nor triumphalism is present in the Second Inaugural. At the bedrock is Lincoln's humility. He included himself as one who 'looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding.' As Lincoln told Thurlow Weed on March 15, 'Whatever of humiliation there is in it, falls most directly on myself.'"

Ronald C. White, Jr., *Lincoln's Greatest Speech : The Second Inaugural*.
C. A. Tripp, *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln.*
Noah Brooks, *Washington, D.C. in Lincoln's Time: A Memoir of the Civil War Era by the Newspaperman Who Knew Lincoln Best*.

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, 1863

In the aftermath of the three-day carnage that took place at its doorstep in early July, the hamlet of Gettysburg found itself surrounded by thousands of bloating corpses. Soon after the battle, torrential rain exposed the bodies lying in their hastily-prepared shallow graves. The arrival of summer's humid heat brought with it the nauseating stench of decaying flesh that attracted swarms of flies and marauding pigs to the former battlefield. Something had to be done. The bodies of the fallen had to be given a proper internment.

Pennsylvania Governor Andrew Curtin appointed David Wills, a prominent Gettysburg lawyer, to oversee the project. An interstate commission was formed, money was raised, and seventeen acres of land at the battle site purchased. The federal government provided the coffins. By November the cemetery was ready for dedication.

The procession leaves Gettysburg for the cemetery Nov. 19, 1863

Lincoln was not the featured speaker of the day. This honor fell to Edward Everett, a noted orator from Massachusetts. The President had been invited to attend the ceremony at the last moment (November 2) with the expectation that his busy schedule would not allow him to attend. The organizers of the event were therefore surprised when Lincoln not only accepted their invitation but also indicated that he would like to say a few words at the ceremony.

Lincoln wanted desperately to speak at Gettysburg. It was an opportunity to boost the Union's war effort and to solidify political support in the state of Pennsylvania. However, his attendance at the ceremony was threatened at the last minute by the sudden illness of his son Tad. This was a serious matter. Lincoln had already lost two of his four children to disease. However, despite his concerns and the near-hysterical entreaties from his wife Mary not to leave, he was determined to travel to Gettysburg.

Lincoln arrived by train in Gettysburg the night before the dedication and stayed at the home of David Wills. At around 10 o'clock the next morning (November 19) the President joined the procession that ended at the cemetery just outside of town.

A crowd of fifteen to twenty thousand crowded around the speakers' platform. Everett spoke first, holding the audience spell-bound for almost two hours. Lincoln then rose and delivered his address in less than two minutes. The audience's response was muted, probably due to surprise at the brevity of the speech. Seeing his audience's reaction, Lincoln remarked to a companion: "It is a flat failure and the people are disappointed." However, the following day, Everett wrote the President praising his speech and pronouncing it one of the best he had heard. As the words Lincoln spoke that day were spread by the newspapers, public reaction concurred and Lincoln's few sentences have come to be regarded as one the best speeches in American history.

"A "half dozen words of consecration."

The night before the ceremony, crowds of boisterous celebrants filled Gettysburg's torch-lit streets and shouted for impromptu speeches from the dignitaries staying the night. Alcohol flowed freely while the music of several strolling bands of musicians filled the air.

The next morning a lively procession marched the short distance to the cemetery. John Hay, one of President Lincoln's private secretaries, described the scene as the presidential party arrives in Gettysburg:

"At Gettysburg, the President went to Mr. Wills who expected him, and our party broke like a drop of quicksilver spilled. MacVeagh [Chairman of the Pennsylvania Republican Party], young Stanton [Son of Lincoln's Secretary of War], and I foraged around for awhile - walked out to the college, got a chafing dish of oysters then some supper, and finally loafing around to the Court House where Lamon [Chief Marshall of the event and a close friend of Lincoln's]was holding a meeting of marshals, we found Forney [a reporter]and went around to his place, Mr. Fahnestock's, and drank a little whisky with him. He had been drinking a good deal during the day and was getting to feel a little ugly and dangerous. He was particularly bitter on Montgomery Blair [Lincoln's Postmaster General]. MacVeagh was telling him that he pitched into the Tycoon [Hay's nickname for Lincoln]coming up, and told him some truths. He said the President got a good deal of that from time to time and needed it...

We went out after a while following the music to hear the serenades. The President appeared at the door and said half a dozen words meaning nothing and went in. Seward [Lincoln's Secretary of State] , who was staying around the corner at Harper's, was called out, and spoke so indistinctly that I did not hear a word of what he was saying

We went back to Forney's room, having picked up Nicolay [another of Lincoln's private secretaries], and drank more whisky. Nicolay sang his little song of the 'Three Thieves,' and we then sang 'John Brown.' At last we proposed that Forney should make a speech and two or three started out, Shannon and Behan and Nicolay, to get a band to serenade him. I stayed with him. So did Stanton and MacVeagh...I walked downstairs with him.

A rare photo of the ceremonies.
A group of boys stand at the fringe of a crowd.
In the distance, several men wearing sashes can be seen standing on the speakers' platform.
Analysis of an enlargement of this photo reveals the image of Lincoln sitting to the left of these men.

See Close-up of Lincoln

The crowd was large and clamorous. The fuglers [military guards]stood by the door in an agony. The reporters squatted at a little stand in the entry. Forney stood on the threshold, John Young [a reporter] and I by him.

The crowd shouted as the door opened. Forney said, 'My friends, these are the first hearty cheers I have heard tonight. You gave no such cheers to your President down the street. Do you know what you owe to that great man? You owe your country - you owe your name as American citizens.'

In the morning I got a beast and rode out with the President's suite to the Cemetery in the procession. The procession formed itself in an orphanly sort of way and moved out with very little help from anybody, and after a little delay, Mr. Everett took his place on the stand - and Mr. Stockton made a prayer which thought it was an oration; and Mr. Everett spoke as he always does, perfectly - and the President, in a fine, free way, with more grace than is his wont, said his half dozen words of consecration, and the music wailed and we went home through crowded and cheering streets."

References:
John Hay's account is found in: Hay, John, Lincoln and the Civil War in the diaries and letters of John Hay (1939); Kunhardt, Phillip, B. Lincoln at Gettysburg (1983); Sandburg, Carl, Abraham Lincoln: the War Years (1939).

Lincoln's **Gettysburg Address**

given November 19, 1863 on the battlefield near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, USA

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.