

## A Southerner's View of Abraham Lincoln

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Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks Lincoln, the parents of Abraham Lincoln, came of the poorest of the poor and the obscurest of the obscure. Both were entirely illiterate. There is no proof that either could read or write, though Thomas Lincoln could laboriously scrawl his name. The latter, though not entirely without energy, was shiftless and improvident; a vagrant at heart, whose roving spirit held him to the wilderness and to abject poverty all his life. Of Nancy Hanks Lincoln little is known. The few scraps of authentic information left of her support the tradition that she was a woman of fine mind and heart, a Christian, whose simple faith and gentle mysticism invested her harsh, frontier life with un-failing fortitude and devotion.

On February 12, 1809, in Hardin (now Larue) County, Kentucky, in a log cabin, literally thrown together, Abraham Lincoln was born. 'Abe's childhood and youth were attended, throughout, by the pitiless poverty and hardships, from which his shiftless father refused to be released.

In 1816, stirred by the gossip of better land, the vagrant, Thomas, moved his family to the abysmal wilderness of the Pigeon Creek district, in what is now Spencer County, Indiana. They arrived at their gloomy abode in December with nothing but the sky for shelter. They threw up a three-sided pole camp, covered with brush, leaves, and dirt, which they occupied for a year, sleeping on the ground, covered by blankets, or skins. The next year, Thomas Lincoln built a cabin, without door or window. Food was scarce. Most of it fell to Thomas Lincoln's rifle. Sometimes, potatoes were their sole diet.<sup>1</sup>

Nancy Hanks Lincoln died in October, 1818. The next year Thomas married Sallie Bush Johnson, a splendid woman.

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\* The author is the son of a Confederate veteran who fought under General James Longstreet and was crippled for life at the Battle of Gettysburg. This paper was prepared for the 1946 Lincoln anniversary program of the Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Rotary Club. Many readers will understand differently some of the points of Lincoln's career, but all will respect the thought and broad-mindedness of the author which every page reveals.—Editor.

<sup>1</sup> Albert J. Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858* (2 vols., Boston, 1928), I, 41-43.

She took Abe to her heart and made substantial contributions to his rigorous existence.

Abe went to the log house, A B C schools less than a total of twelve months. He learned to read, write and "cipher to the rule of three." He became a voracious reader, searching the surrounding country for books. Neither titles nor contents made any difference. Books were sought more for the printed word, than otherwise. He would say, "The things I want to know are in books; my best friend is the man who'll git me a book I ain't read."<sup>2</sup>

In a holograph statement, written in the third person, he said of his life at Pigeon Creek: "He settled in an unbroken forest, and the clearing away of surplus wood was the great task ahead. Abraham, though very young, was large of his age, and had an ax put into his hands at once; and from that till within his twenty-third year, he was almost constantly handling that most useful instrument."<sup>3</sup>

At seventeen, he had attained the height of almost six feet and four inches. His physical powers were prodigious. He was said to possess the strength of three men. A neighbor said, "He can sink an ax deeper into wood than any man I ever saw." Another said, "If you heard him fellin' trees in a clearin', you would say there was three men at work by the way the trees fell."<sup>4</sup> He excelled at most of the local sports and acquired an inexhaustible repertory of funny stories. He was champion with the hand stick at the log rollings and leading lifter at the house raisings. He was sometimes hired out to supplement the hard life at home. He would husk corn, clear new ground, split rails, kill hogs, and do any odd jobs that came to hand. For a short time, he tended a ferry boat on the nearby Ohio River. The memorable experience of his life at Pigeon Creek was a trip on a flatboat to New Orleans when he was nineteen. This was his first glimpse of life, outside the dark forest.

Abe came by degrees to envisage a new world far different from dismal Pigeon Creek. His imagination could produce for it no more than a vague outline. It was a nebulous

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<sup>2</sup> Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln, The Prairie Years*, (2 vols., New York, 1926), I, 73.

<sup>3</sup> Louis A. Warren, *Lincoln Autobiographies* (Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1942), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln, The Prairie Years*, I, 44.

world, compounded of his forest dreams, and his varying moods; of books and of the tales of passing people, who came from beyond the wilderness, which had held him in its tight embrace since he was born. Life at Pigeon Creek spent itself. Thomas Lincoln, the unstable, was again on the move. This time he was allured by the mirage of better land in Macon County, Illinois. Abe, though now twenty-one years old and free to go forth for himself, assisted the family to move to their new home and settle there. He helped split rails to fence a ten acre field.

Finally, in July, 1831, he bade farewell to the specter of poverty, which had followed his childhood and youth, and turned up at New Salem, Sangamon (now Menard) County, Illinois, as the entrance to the world of his dreams. New Salem was a shabby village of less than twenty cabins, occupied by a motley assembly of frontier folk, who could have lodged in no place of less promise. Abe's sobriety, honesty, and kindly spirit, stressed by his ability to read and write established him quickly among New Salem's most respectable. He worked for a year as clerk in a village store, after which he volunteered for the Black Hawk war in which he became captain of his company.<sup>5</sup>

Politics, always as much of Lincoln as his blood and bone, brought him out in his twenty-fourth year as a candidate for the legislature. He was defeated but received nearly all of the votes cast at New Salem.<sup>6</sup> In 1834, he ran again for the office, was elected and served four terms in the state body.

With a partner, he next bought, entirely on credit, an old stock of goods and engaged in the mercantile business. This venture quickly "winked out," as Lincoln put it. His partner died, leaving all the debts to Lincoln, which he struggled for fifteen years to pay. Now, without employment and deeply in debt, for his support he had to fall again to his old time jobs of splitting rails, husking corn, and to such public work as came to hand.<sup>7</sup>

On May 7, 1833, he was appointed postmaster of the vil-

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<sup>5</sup> Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858*, I, 108-109, 120-122.

<sup>6</sup> John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln, A History* (10 vols., New York, 1890), I, 109. Lincoln received 277 out of 280 votes according to this work. Warren, *Lincoln Autobiographies*, 17, gives 277 out of 284.

<sup>7</sup> Warren, *Lincoln Autobiographies*, 17; Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858*, I, 127-132.

lage and soon thereafter, assistant county surveyor. He was entirely unqualified for this last appointment, but with the help of a friendly school teacher, Mentor Graham, of peculiar ability, he mastered in six weeks a volume on surveying and went successfully to work.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout his stay at New Salem, he indulged to the limit of opportunity his enormous capacity for reading. So unsparingly did he yield himself to work and books, that his friends often feared for his health.

After a time, he seriously considered learning the blacksmith trade but encouraged by a friendly Springfield attorney, John T. Stuart, to study law, he bought at auction a copy of Blackstone's Commentaries, borrowed a few law-books, and under painful self-tutelage became a student for the bar. At this time, the sympathetic schoolteacher reminded him that he could hope for little progress in law or any other profession, until he acquired a good-working knowledge of grammar. Abe searched the countryside for such a book and finally discovered, at a home six miles distant, a very difficult treatise on English. He obtained the volume and mastered it in an incredibly short time.<sup>9</sup>

Lincoln's years at New Salem were profitable years. As drab and crude as life was there, it was infinitely superior to that he had known. New Salem, to him, was a sort of half-way point between gloomy Pigeon Creek and the world he so dimly sought. The improved fellowship and the stimulating experiences he found in that rough semblance of organized society went far to moderate the excessive boorishness and to cure the appalling aimlessness inflicted on him by the iron wilderness. In fact, it was a school which took sufficient rawness out of him, and wrought sufficient development in him to prepare his way to Springfield where destiny awaited him.

During four sessions of the legislature, he acquired the elements of constitutional and parliamentary procedure and met many outstanding men, among whom he made lasting friends. He learned to debate, and to write bills, and he virtually became the leader of his party in the House. There

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<sup>8</sup> Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858*, I, 131; Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln, The Prairie Years*, I, 169-170.

<sup>9</sup> Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858*, I, 133, 140; Warren, *Lincoln Autobiographies*, 17.

he really laid the foundation of his great career. It was at New Salem in 1837, after heartbreaking toil over his borrowed lawbooks, that he received the license to practice law.<sup>10</sup>

In the spring of 1837, he packed into two pairs of saddlebags all his earthly possessions, including his lawbooks, and, with only a few dollars in his pocket, left New Salem on a borrowed horse for Springfield. Thus came Lincoln to the capital of Illinois with its fifteen hundred inhabitants, where his half-lazy and half-dynamic life would complete its long apprenticeship to greatness. He already had a few friends in his new home, which he had acquired in the legislature. Moreover, he had achieved large popularity there by his able legislative service in helping to move the capital of the state from Vandalia to Springfield. In due course, he began to move forward in his profession. First, he formed a fortunate association with the able, well-established attorney, John T. Stuart, who induced him to study law, which continued for four years; next, a partnership with another leading member of the bar, for three and one-half years, and, lastly, his association with his protege, William Herndon, all of which advanced him steadily in the Illinois bar. One of these partners, A. G. Henry, left a great testimony to Lincoln's integrity. He related that Lincoln had left the New Salem post-office without a settlement with the postoffice department. Sometime after Lincoln's arrival at Springfield, a postal inspector called on him there for a settlement. The partner expected Lincoln to ask him to advance the money. Instead, Lincoln excused himself for a few minutes and presently returned with an old sock, the contents of which he emptied on the table. There in miscellaneous coins was counted the exact amount of the government's account, the original money, which Lincoln had preserved against many weeks of need.<sup>11</sup>

Both extrovert and introvert, as he was, he drew the community to him, but puzzled it with his impenetrable self-containment. Everybody knew him and liked him, but no one was acquainted with him. All found his personal life above reproach. He neither drank nor swore. He had almost a passion for integrity in all its manifestations. Gentleness,

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<sup>10</sup> Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858*, I, 206.

<sup>11</sup> Emanuel Hertz (ed.), *Lincoln Talks, A Biography in Anecdote* (New York, 1939), 17; Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858*, I, 207, 209; Nathaniel W. Stephenson, *Lincoln* (Indianapolis, Indiana, 1922), 35.

modesty, and magnanimity stood out in him. He was never skilled in manners and social matters. He continued to the end to bring forward into his environment the rude habits and mannerisms of his wilderness life. Despite his crudeness, he had a rich culture all his own. The fundamentals, so amply stored by Nature in him, as they responded to the pressures of life gave forth in their own way his many distinguishing attributes. His mental development, inspired by his abundant spirit, was pressed without limit by his singularly versatile mind. Both the extent and profundity of his reading were extraordinary. Almost any subject engaged his cavernous mind and memory. The multitudinous sources from which he drew his information are almost beyond belief.

In his old ramshackled buggy, twice a year, he would drive from court to court to try his cases. To complete the circuit often required three months. Strangely, the lawyers carried few lawbooks with them in that day. But studies of many other subjects including algebra, geometry, astronomy, treatises on the sciences, and even a copy of Shakespeare from time to time found a place in Lincoln's saddlebags. Often, when sleeping in the same room with eight or ten lawyers, two in a bed, he would place his candle at the head of his bed and study or read until after midnight. Herndon, his partner, said that Lincoln in this manner through a period of many months mastered the six books of Euclid.<sup>12</sup>

Lincoln was improvident, cared nothing for money, and often said he had "no money sense." He was notorious for his small fees, for compromising his cases, and for discouraging litigation. A circuit judge once protested against his fees and told him impatiently that he was impoverishing his bar, with his insignificant charges. His conduct as a lawyer was characterized by the quintessence of honor and ethics. The sanctity of the law and the courts was almost an obsession with him. He invariably declined and did not hesitate to throw up in open court cases that savored of fraud and injustice.

On November 4, 1842, he married aristocratic Mary Todd, a belle of the Kentucky blue grass country. Any student of Lincoln may well wonder with all of Springfield and thereabout of that day how matrimony ever brought together in

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<sup>12</sup> Stephenson, *Lincoln*, 61-62; Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln*, 1809-1858, I, 515-519.

its inexorable bonds shy Abraham Lincoln, late backwoodsman, "with hayseed still in his hair," and blue-blooded Mary Todd, with her imperious pride and petulance. To this union four children were born. There has always been much gossip and discussion concerning this alliance. The contracting parties were both good people, but the evidence in the large does not point to the unalloyed bliss understood to be vouchsafed by the holy bonds of wedlock.

In 1846, he was elected by the Whigs to Congress. His two years in the national body may be counted as disappointing. His service there so offended his district that he did not offer for re-election. Deeply humiliated by this serious repudiation, he determined to quit politics and surrender himself to the pursuit of the law. This he did most assiduously for five years during which he reached the head of the bar of his state, and achieved large reputation far beyond its borders. In 1856, the sources of dissension between the North and South, unwittingly left in the constitution and so long subdued by compromise and concession, were fast reaching a crisis. Lincoln was then approaching his full stature. "His novitiate was finished." He was a man of letters and an orator of the first rank. Moreover, though unannounced and even unknown as such, he was a profound publicist, whose sentiments and opinions from platform and press would shortly shake the nation. Here was a man from nowhere, "unancestored, unprivileged, and unknown," a wilderness child of poverty, now country lawyer, who was soon to captain the armies of his country in a titanic struggle for its existence.<sup>13</sup>

It is difficult for us of the South to arrive at an unbiased appraisal of Abraham Lincoln. It is through the mists of the sad memory of a lost cause and along oblique paths of judgment that we must look back to the tragic years when Lincoln occupied the national stage. Nevertheless, whatever be our prejudices and preconceptions, when we fail or refuse honestly to inform ourselves concerning any of our great national figures, we cheat our Americanism and lower our capacity for citizenship.

Any study of Lincoln's life, pursued with the dispassion and patience of inquiring open-mindedness, will discover there all the greatness which history has accorded him. In such

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<sup>13</sup> Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858*, I, 354-355, 374, 487.

a study, intolerances and unfavorable prepossessions will fade in the presence of the great moral dignity and the granite-like convictions of the man. Before his simple logic and unflinching candor, repugnance will yield to respect and skepticism to undisturbed faith.

It will be found that Lincoln was never a demagogue; that he constantly declined to appeal to the ignorance and the passions of men, but invariably addressed their intelligence and conscience, always preferring common sense to logic. It will be found that with impersonal devotion he fought all he opposed and defended all he stood for. Though he never embraced any formal religion, to the fair student he will appear to have been governed, in all the relations in life, by that inward rectitude, which proceeds from the highest and finest emotions of a devout heart. Any thorough examination of this man's life will discover his integrity inflexible, his love of truth almost passionate; that he knew no malice and refused to cherish personal resentments. Justice and tolerance will be found in him crowning virtues. His spirit of self-sacrifice knew no bounds. His great compassion will be observed, on occasion, so to subdue his powerful nature as to approach weakness.

Again, careful research will probably reveal nowhere in all history a more passionate champion of the rights of man. With his infinite reverence for human personality, he believed, from the depth of his soul, that God's plan for all humanity was the greatest liberty, compatible with the happiness of mankind; that the genius of all government was to assure to the individual the largest freedom and opportunity accordant with the exigencies of democratic society and that such should be the goal of civilization.

When we put Lincoln on trial, we must first accord him full freedom of opinion. Then, we must critically and fairly examine the sources and the sincerity of his conduct, and the spirit which animated him. If we be satisfied with these considerations, then we shall find him face to face with the determinations of high conscience, which, we shall agree, called forth from him the best that was in him, when he conceived the destiny of his country to be involved. Lincoln's abhorrence of slavery followed as an immediate corollary from his fidelity to the essence of his being. To him human bondage was a moral, social, and political evil, strangely



brought forward from barbarism, which had not the capacity to conceive the attribute of mercy or pity.

Again, any examination of the indubitable record will show Lincoln's views on slavery were consistent throughout with the provisions of the constitution, as he and a multitude of others interpreted the Magna Carta. The record will show that until he abolished the institution as the inexorable exigency of war, he resolutely declined to attack or disturb the rights vouchsafed to slavery by the organic law as he honestly understood it.

He stood for slavery, as it existed, not only out of his reverence for the constitution, but because he well understood that it was the cornerstone of the South's economy. He knew that violent and sudden termination of the institution would destroy the whole fabric of Southern life. This was revolting to him. In view of it, he stated that such an eventuation might do more harm to liberty than even the presence of slavery.

His broad and sympathetic understanding of the South was often evidenced in his public utterances. In his reply to Douglas at Peoria on October 16, 1854, he said,

I have no prejudice against the Southern people. They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not exist among them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist among us, we should not instantly give it up. This I believe of the masses, North and South. . . .

When Southern people tell us that they are no more responsible for the origin of slavery than we are, I acknowledge the fact. When it is said that the institution exists, and that it is very difficult to get rid of it in any satisfactory way, I can understand and appreciate the saying. I surely will not blame them for not doing what I should not know how to do myself.

If all earthly power were given me, I should not know what to do, as to the existing institution.<sup>14</sup>

Time and again did he express, with formal exactitude, these judgments and sentiments. It was not slavery as it existed in the slave states under the constitution that offended Lincoln, but it was the extension of the institution to other territory that finally aroused him. As a matter of fact, until the enactment of the Kansas-Nebraska bill in 1854, which repealed the Missouri Compromise and left slavery in all the

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<sup>14</sup> John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln* (2 vols., New York, 1894), I, 180-209, see 186-187.

territories to popular sovereignty, Lincoln had been little more than silent concerning that subject. It is even possible, had it not been for this legislation, that Lincoln would never have appeared as a great historical character. He felt that the Missouri Compromise of 1820 conceived by the leaders of Congress to still the stormy threats of disunion was a fair means of satisfying both slavery and antislavery sentiment since the act limited the bounds of the institution to the satisfaction of all important views on the embattled subject. The Great Compromise, through its thirty-five years of operation, had very well accomplished its purpose. The disturbance of the status quo now by the Kansas-Nebraska Act incensed Lincoln because he considered it a breach of national faith. Consequently, he again became active in politics. He hoped, in due course, to arouse the country to the re-enactment of the Missouri Compromise, or to the enactment of some similar law. But in 1856, the Supreme Court, in a manner almost gratuitous, startled the nation by holding unconstitutional the Missouri Compromise, notwithstanding it had previously been repealed by the Kansas-Nebraska bill. This decision outraged Lincoln's view of the constitution respecting the control of slavery by Congress in the territories—a view supported by a large body of Northern and Western opinion. The action of the great court thoroughly awakened the giant that had so long reposed in the easy-going Lincoln. The Kansas-Nebraska bill was to bring epoch-making repercussions, and the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and the subsequent declaration of its unconstitutionality were in for all out attack.

You will recall that Senator Stephen A. Douglas, of Illinois, then the real head of the Democratic party, and the most powerful politician and political orator in the country, authored the Kansas-Nebraska bill and steered it to enactment. The legislation pleased the South. The Senator would try for the presidency in 1860 and probably was seeking Southern support for his nomination. When Douglas hurried home to defend this act before an irate constituency, Lincoln fiercely attacked both measure and author. Thus began the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates, which had their merciless culmination four years later, when these two intellectual giants opposed each other for the United States Senate.

There is scarcely anything in the annals of politics comparable to these debates. Their influence on American his-

tory is incalculable. They had the effect of bringing to focus the red-hot issues of the time. They virtually revolutionized the political life of the country, and prepared the stage for a new America. In that great battle of wits, Douglas was badly beaten, even though he was elected to the Senate. In his efforts to recover the ground he lost to Lincoln, Douglas caused the disruption of the Democratic party, which, in turn, resulted in his own defeat and in Lincoln's election in the presidential campaign of 1860.

Long agitated by highly controversial debate and legislation in Congress on slavery, and by constant fulminations on that deadly subject from press and platform, the public mind both North and South, in the middle 1850's, was approaching the explosive point. The sources of cool judgment and patriotic restraint were well nigh everywhere overwhelmed by the crazed excitement of the day.

By 1852 the sectional allegiance was so pronounced that the Whig party began to disintegrate. The remaining antislavery organizations were too radical and too feeble to attract a coalition of the larger and more conservative antislavery bodies of opinion, which now had only to be organized to obtain control of the federal government. As you know, this situation led, in 1854, to the formation of the Republican party. This party, you will remember, was brought into being to consolidate all antislavery sentiment, regardless of party affiliations, and to amalgamate, under broad leadership, the variant antislavery organizations in the North and West.

The new party held its first national convention in 1856. Its platform in 1860 was with a few minor additions a reaffirmation of its first pronouncement in 1856—adherence to the principles of Washington and Jefferson; denial of the constitutional right of Congress or any territory to establish slavery with a ringing declaration that it was both the right and duty of Congress to prohibit slavery in the territories. Lincoln, over several national figures, was the party's nominee for the presidency. Meantime, Douglas' quarrel with the administration and the South, over the Kansas-Nebraska bill, had split the Democratic party wide open. The result was, in the contest of 1860, Lincoln was easily elected to the presidency, even though as a minority president.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858*, I, 487; *ibid.*, II, 695-713.

Thus Lincoln became chief executive of the nation on the platform of a new party, that set out, in forthright terms, the irreconcilable issues, which, since the adoption of the constitution, had been slowly, but surely evolving from the fundamental differences between the North and South. His election wrought immediate pandemonium in the South, and, before his inauguration, on the fourth of the following March, as you know, seven of the Southern states had formed a confederacy of their own, and withdrawn their representatives from the National Congress.

Secession, first threatened by Federalists, during John Marshall's early days, often again to cast its shadow over the Union, had now come to pass, and was soon to be referred by the logic of passion to the arbitrament of arms. There was no word in the constitution which, however tortured, could be interpreted to permit or prohibit the withdrawal of any state from the compact of Union. Therefore, that matter was left entirely to individual conclusion. Lincoln held that, under the organic law, there could be no such thing as secession. To him, the Union was more than life. He never had a passion that did not enter into his devotion for it. His convictions concerning the inviolability of the organic law were cast in the fires of his soul. He not only loved the Union for its own sake, but he felt and said that American democracy, under its constitution, was an experiment in government, upon which he thought depended the success of the Liberal party all over the world, and, therefore, the hope of attaining the ultimate goal of individual freedom for mankind which was to him as a religion.

It cannot be fairly denied that the spirit of Lincoln's first inaugural address was that of a great, earnest soul behind a cause for which he was willing to wage war, if necessary, but sought with all his powers still to avert it. In that address, he quoted himself from a former speech. "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so."<sup>16</sup> Next, he affirmed the validity of the Fugitive Slave

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<sup>16</sup> James D. Richardson (comp.), *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1897* (10 vols., Washington, 1897), VI, 5.

Act and pressed for its execution. Then he vigorously asserted that,

In the contemplation of universal law and of the Constitution, the union of these States is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments. It is safe to assert that no government proper ever had a provision in its organic law for its own termination. . . . Again if the United States be not a government proper, but an association of States in the nature of a contract merely, can it, as a contract, be peaceably unmade by less than all the parties who made it? One party to a contract may violate it—break it, so to speak; but does it not require all to lawfully rescind it? . . . If a minority in such case will secede rather than acquiesce, they make a precedent, which, in turn will divide and ruin them; for a minority of their own will secede from them whenever a majority refuses to be controlled by such minority. For instance, why may not any portion of a new confederacy a year or two hence arbitrarily secede again . . . ?

Next, he endorsed a resolution proposing an amendment to the constitution just passed by Congress, that the federal government should never interfere with the domestic institution of the states, "Including that of persons held to service." The closing paragraph of this inaugural address is one of great pathos and beauty appealing, as it did, to the seceding states to reconsider their action.

I am loathe to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break, our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.<sup>17</sup>

When Lincoln assumed the presidency, the national capital was wild with excitement, and the utmost confusion prevailed throughout the country. Of course, he had chosen his cabinet and promptly constituted it, appointing to the two highest posts his chief opponents at the convention which nominated him. He sought more ample acquaintance with the heads of his party, while he awaited public reaction, both North and South, to the impending conflict. He felt keenly his lack of training for his difficult position. Worse still, he was beset by dark expressions of fear, emanating from critical politicians, doctrinaires and inflated disciples of cul-

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 9, 11-12.

ture, impugning his ability and equipment for the great office. Moreover, he was a minority candidate. He had yet to learn how his people would regard war and was aware that there was substantial sentiment against it. He vacillated painfully over the immediate steps to be taken towards the South. He determined not to initiate hostilities, and to leave the South to fire the first shot. He even continued to withhold badly needed supplies from Fort Sumter, for which South Carolina was already clamoring.

During this period of irresolution, he observed that the South itself was far from solidarity. Virginia, North Carolina, and the border slave states were refusing to follow the deeper Southern states out of the Union on the issue of slavery. This encouraged in him the hope of a last minute compromise. Knowing Virginia's importance to both sections and realizing the discouragement her refusal to secede would impose on the disaffected states, he made vigorous effort to preserve that state to the Union. While he scanned both North and South for the signals, he watched Virginia. He even went so far as to agree to evacuate Fort Sumter if Virginia would repudiate secession. Although the Mother of Presidents announced in due course that while she was prepared to meet Lincoln's views on slavery, she was adamant in maintaining that she was a sovereign state and was subject to no coercion from the Union, of which she was a member of her own free will. Lincoln was finally informed it was Virginia's view that the coercion of any state would call in question the full sovereignty of all the states and would compel her to abandon the federation. Soon other Southern states raised this issue.

To the Union-loving Lincoln this doctrine was not a matter to negotiate. It was one to fight about. He ordered an expedition for the relief of Fort Sumter. On April 12, began the bombardment of that fort. On the thirteenth its flag was lowered. The supporting squadron had arrived but too light to pass Charleston's batteries and assist the fort. On April 15, Lincoln called for troops. The long four years of dreary, bloody civil war were on. Now challenged on the irreconcilable issue of state sovereignty, Virginia, North Carolina, Arkansas, and Tennessee declared for secession.

The year 1861 was a difficult period for Lincoln. He continued to grope his way, as he served his soul-trying apprenticeship to statecraft and war. There was the same con-

fusion of thought in his cabinet, which was none too able and none too loyal. He had to contend with a troublesome body of opposition to the war, found himself plagued by a dissident Congress and an impatient public, both clamoring for premature military movement. Nevertheless, his first message to Congress on July 4 was the deliverance of a changed Lincoln. There was no reference to slavery. There was no hint of compromise. It was the message of a stern president demanding unreserved defense of the sovereign power of the national government and appealing to the Northern people to dedicate their all to the inviolability of the constitution. He said in this message,

This is essentially a people's contest. On the side of the Union it is struggle for maintaining in the world that form and substance of government whose leading object is to elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial weights from all shoulders; to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all; to afford all an unfettered start, and a fair chance in the race of life.<sup>18</sup>

It was not until his success at Gettysburg, that Lincoln was assuredly bidden to expect victory for Northern arms. In the sufferings of these intervening years he passed from embryonic statesman to past master of profound statecraft, which completely captured the public mind at home and stirred mingled wonder and approbation abroad.

In 1864, he was re-elected to the presidency by a majority, which proclaimed the great faith and affection in which he was held by his people. He now saw the beginning of the end of the conflict. With his characteristic wisdom and magnanimity, he began to prepare the way for the unobstructed return of the seceded states to the Union. This from the beginning, he had proposed in his heart to accomplish, apart from terms of reprisal or humiliation. Asked once what would be done with these states when defeated, he replied, substantially, that he would take them back, clean them up, and not ask them where they had been.

He had, with deep resentment, watched grow, as the war proceeded, the strongly led vindictive group of powerful politicians and fanatics who determined to wreak savage vengeance on a defeated South. From time to time, he intervened to thwart these vicious forces. In December, 1863,

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-31, see 30.

to control these vindictives he consoled them with a statement of forgiveness to Southerners, except those above certain ranks and classes and except any who had deserted the United States Congress, judiciary, army and navy, and all civil and diplomatic officials of the rebellion, implying condign punishment for these leading groups. This sounded well to the South-baiters and reasonably quieted them for the time. On March 3, 1865, Ulysses S. Grant telegraphed Lincoln that Robert E. Lee was probing for terms of surrender. The White House was full of politicians present for the morrow's inauguration. Knowing that the flaming radicals would not get fully on the warpath, he directed the Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, to telegraph Grant:

The President directs me to say that he wishes you to have no conference with General Lee unless it be for capitulation of General Lee's army, or on some minor or purely military matter. He instructs me to say that you are not to decide, discuss, or confer upon any political questions. Such questions the President holds in his own hands, and will submit them to no military conferences or conventions. Meanwhile you are to press to the utmost your military advantages.<sup>19</sup>

This tough message to Grant, with a few well-directed sentences in his second inaugural address,<sup>20</sup> the next day, assured the vindictives that the president was now seeing eye to eye with them on the question of dire punishment for the South. Moreover, they gloated over the thought that Congress might now have an opportunity for its full expression on the terms of surrender. His conduct, during the succeeding weeks, more than suggests that Lincoln deliberately fooled the avengers that day. He prescribed poison for the Confederacy, with no thought of administering it, hoping such action would keep the bitter enders quiet, until he could accomplish his own cause.

Rejoicing that Congress was not in session, three weeks later, accompanied only by his wife and child, Lincoln made for Grant's headquarters in the field. He ordered William T. Sherman to come up from North Carolina. Twice the president and his two chiefs long conferred in his private office. What was said there has never been disclosed. Despite his drastic order in December, 1863, and regardless of his severe

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<sup>19</sup> Nicolay and Hay, *Abraham Lincoln*, II, 656.

<sup>20</sup> Richardson (comp.), *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1897*, VI, 276-277.



telegram to Grant, three weeks previously concerning terms of surrender, it is a historical fact that Grant paroled Lee's entire army and guaranteed all officers, as well as privates, freedom from prosecution, as long as they obeyed the parole and their local laws. Sherman went Grant one better and guaranteed amnesty, not only to all officers, as well as soldiers, but extended the terms to the entire Southern people. The vindictives howled loudly at these easy terms of peace. Lincoln was powerless. Grant and Sherman had given their word. The archenemies of the beaten South had been cheated of their prey.

On the night of April 11, 1865, two days after Lee's surrender, in a speech to a crowd assembled before the White House, Lincoln said,

We all agree that the seceded States, so called, are out of their proper practical relation with the Union, and that the sole object of the government, civil and military, in regard to those States, is to again get them into that proper practical relation. I believe that it is not only possible, but in fact easier, to do this without deciding or even considering whether these States have ever been out of the Union, than with it. Finding themselves safely at home, it would be utterly immaterial whether they had ever been abroad.<sup>21</sup>

Just three days after his deliberately conciliatory statement, delivered at such a hazardous time, Lincoln fell to the bullet of a crazed assassin. The South, in the midnight hour of her agony, lost her most powerful friend. He crushed the fallen states in a struggle over a principle, but when victory fell to him, he turned to them to bind their wounds and restore their hope. Had Lincoln survived, the South would have been spared the tortures of the so-called period of reconstruction, diabolically conceived to abase her. There would have been no martial law at bayonet points to brutalize and despoil her. Neither would there have been the swarms of carpetbaggers and scalawags to prey upon her. No black and tan legislature would have humiliated her. No fourteenth amendment would have plagued her. Lincoln's conduct, throughout the war, and after the peace, is full of testimony that, had he lived, he would have preserved to the prostrate South her full pride and dignity; that, with the full warmth of his heart, he would have rejoiced at her return to the

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<sup>21</sup> Nicolay and Hay, *Abraham Lincoln*, II, 672-675, see 674.

Union and, with his great courage and strength, would have mended her broken life.

We reverence our every thought of the Old South. We love her traditions. We rejoice in the greatness of her manhood and in the gentleness of her womanhood. We shall keep always our altars brightly burning to the memory of our noble fathers, and their valor incomparable, and to the memory of our glorious mothers, whose heroism numbered them among the saints. But, as we examine our judgments in the perspective of time, and turn our thoughts to a foreboding future, who does not rejoice in a united country?

Thrice, already, since Lincoln died, have Southern and Northern blood mingled to defend this land. Twice, with our united strength, have we barely rolled back the mighty tides of evil that sought to enslave mankind. Who now, without inexpressible sadness, can envisage this country of ours divided by streams and mountains and lines of latitude, with all on either side alien to all on the other side? Who does not say now, with Webster, "Union and Liberty, Now and Forever, One and Inseparable?"