

ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND SLAVERY



A Unit of Study for Grades 8-12

by

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TEACHING BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

Abraham Lincoln, “The Great Emancipator” in historical folklore, was a complex individual with political savvy. Historical interpretations of Lincoln and his stand on the issue of slavery vary. Some have argued that Lincoln considered slavery as a moral issue and was committed to its extinction, while others argue that Lincoln was the embodiment of American racism. A student of history can find a wide spectrum of opinions between these two poles.

Through the use of primary sources students will discover Abraham Lincoln’s attitudes and actions regarding slavery, its abolition, and the use of African American troops during the Civil War. Students encounter Lincoln’s words and deeds amid the political realities of the day and in the context of the time in which he lived. Contemporary voices of both support and opposition draw attention to public reaction to Lincoln’s policies. Students are asked to grapple with questions such as: How, when, and why did the war to preserve the Union come to include the abolition of slavery? Was the Emancipation Proclamation the climax of a series of measures designed to end slavery or was it a break from previous policy? What were the factors behind Lincoln’s decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation and to confirm “the promise” with a call for ratification of the 13th amendment? What impact did public opinion have on Lincoln’s decision regarding the abolition of slavery and the use of African American troops in combat?

II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit may be used as a “spotlight” to focus on the evolution of Lincoln’s stance on slavery and his commitment to abolition. Specific lessons may also be used at different times during the chronological study of the events leading to the Civil War and the Lincoln presidency. Lessons I and II may be incorporated in the study of the sectional crisis leading to the war while the remaining lessons are appropriate during a study of the Lincoln presidency. The lessons are intended as an inquiry into the development and implementation of Lincoln’s policy of emancipation.

III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS

Abraham Lincoln and Slavery provides teaching materials that address Eras 4 and 5 in *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (Los Angeles, National Center for History in the Schools, 1996). Lesson One, “A House divided, Lincoln’s Early Views on Slavery” and Lesson Two, “The Lincoln Douglas De-

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bates” provide teaching materials to assist in accomplishing Standard 3B of Era 4: “How the debates over slavery influenced politics and sectionalism” and Standard 1 of Era 5, “ How politics and ideologies led to the Civil War.” Lessons contained in this teaching unit on the Emancipation Proclamation specifically address Standard 2A of Era 5, which expects students to explain reasons for issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, evaluate its provisions, and explain its significance.

Lessons within this unit likewise address a number of specific Historical Thinking standards including: explain historical continuity and change (Standard 1, Chronological Thinking); identify the author or source of a historical document or narrative and assess its credibility (Standard 2, Historical Comprehension); analyze cause-and-effect relationships and distinguish between unsupported expressions of opinion and informed hypotheses ground in historical evidence (Standard 3, Historical Analysis and Interpretation); obtain historical data from a variety of sources (Standard 4, Historical Research); and marshal evidence of antecedent circumstances (Standard 5, Historical Issues Analysis and Decision Making).

IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

1. To interpret documents in their historical context.
2. To understand the significance of the debate over the abolition of slavery and the use of African American troops.
3. To examine the historical context of emancipation.
4. To explore the political motivation surrounding public policy.

V. LESSON PLANS

- Lesson One: The House Divided: Lincoln’s Early Views on Slavery
- Lesson Two: The Lincoln-Douglas Debates
- Lesson Three: The Lincoln Administration and the Evolution of an Anti-slavery Policy
- Lesson Four: Emancipation and African American Troops
- Lesson Five: Contemporary Views of Lincoln and His Position on Slavery
- Lesson Six: Artists’ Views of the Emancipation Proclamation

INTRODUCTION TO ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND SLAVERY

Abraham Lincoln was a complex, self-made man. Born in poverty near Hodgenville, Kentucky in 1809, he moved to Indiana with his family in 1810 and settled in Illinois fourteen years later. He was elected a captain in the Illinois militia during the Black Hawk War of 1832 and served in the state legislature from 1834 to 1841. Temporarily retiring from politics, he became a successful Illinois lawyer. Lincoln was a staunch supporter of Henry Clay and an active member of the Whig Party of Illinois. In 1846 he was elected to the House of Representatives where he voiced his opposition to the war with Mexico. After one term in the House, he abandoned politics and returned to his law practice in Springfield. Lincoln's opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act rekindled his interest in politics and he made an unsuccessful bid for the United States Senate in 1855. He joined the newly formed Republican Party and was recognized as one of its leaders in Illinois.

In 1858 he challenged Democrat Stephen Douglas for the Senate. His lifelong ambition was to serve in the United States Senate, where great men debated the paramount issues of the day. In seven three-hour debates across the state, Lincoln relentlessly confronted Douglas only to have the State assembly appoint his opponent to the Senate. Two years later, in a four-way race for the presidency, Lincoln was elected with slightly under 40% of the popular vote. As president, he faced the greatest constitutional challenge in the nation's history as eleven states seceded from the union. The fortunes of the war weighed on his shoulders as Union forces failed to achieve rapid victory. Lincoln's search for a competent military leader became legendary as he dismissed general after general, finally placing confidence in U. S. Grant. In 1864, as he prepared to run for reelection, he faced dissension within his own party and even the rumored nomination of his Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase. On August 23, 1864, less than three months before the presidential election, Lincoln wrote, "This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected." Yet, decisive turns in the Union military objectives helped ensure his victory in the presidential election of November 1864. By inauguration day, March 4, 1865, the war was virtually over. On April 9, Confederate Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse. On Friday evening, April 14, the Lincolns attended a performance of "Our American Cousin" at Ford's Theater. There, John Wilkes Booth fired the fatal shot, and with the assassin's bullet, the Lincoln legend began.