

Abraham Lincoln (February 12, 1809 – April 15, 1865) served as the 16th President of the United States from March 1861 until his assassination in April 1865. He successfully led his country through its greatest internal crisis, the American Civil War, preserving the Union and ending slavery. Before his election in 1860, Lincoln, reared in a family of modest means and mostly self-educated, had been a country lawyer, an Illinois state legislator, a member of the United States House of Representatives, and twice an unsuccessful candidate for election to the U.S. Senate. Abraham was a dedicated, though often necessarily absent, husband, and father of four children. As an outspoken opponent of the expansion of slavery in the United States, Lincoln won the Republican Party nomination in 1860 and was elected president later that year. His tenure in office was occupied primarily with the defeat of the secessionist Confederate States of America in the American Civil War. He introduced measures that resulted in the abolition of slavery, issuing his Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and promoting the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution. Six days after the large-scale surrender of Confederate forces under General Robert E. Lee, Lincoln became the first American president to be assassinated.

O Captain! My Captain!

O Captain my Captain! our fearful trip is done;
The ship has weathered every rack, the prize we sought is won;
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring:

 But O heart! heart! heart!
 O the bleeding drops of red,
 Where on the deck my Captain lies,
 Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills;
For you bouquets and ribboned wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding;
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
 Here Captain! dear father!
 This arm beneath your head;
 It is some dream that on the deck,
 You've fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still;
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will;
The ship is anchored safe and sound, its voyage closed and done;
From fearful trip, the victor ship, comes in with object won;
 Exult, O shores, and ring, O bells!
 But I, with mournful tread,
 Walk the deck my Captain lies,
 Fallen cold and dead.

--Walt Whitman

Three Anecdotes

Failure?

At the age of seven, he was forced to work to support his family. At nine, his mother died. At twenty-two, he lost his job as a store clerk. At twenty-three, he went into debt, ran for the state legislature, and was promptly defeated. At twenty-six, his partner died leaving him with a large debt. The next year he had a nervous breakdown.... At twenty-nine he was defeated in his bid to become house speaker. Two years later he lost a bid for elector. By thirty-five, he had been defeated twice while running for Congress. At thirty-nine (after a brief term in Congress), he lost his reelection bid. At forty-two, he was rejected as a prospective land officer. At forty-five, he ran for the Senate and lost. At forty-seven, he lost the vice presidential nomination. At forty-nine, he ran for Senate again -- and lost again. The man in question? Abraham Lincoln.

Deliberate Lincoln

At noon on January 1, 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation was laid before President Lincoln for his historic signature. He twice took up his pen - and twice set it down - before turning to his secretary of state. "I have been shaking hands since nine o'clock this morning, and my right arm is almost paralyzed," he said. "If my name ever goes into history, it will be for this act, and my whole soul is in it. If my hand trembles when I sign the Proclamation, all who examine the document hereafter will say, 'He hesitated.'" Lincoln then calmly collected his pen and affixed his signature with particular care and deliberation.

Tough Act to Follow

On November 19, 1863, at the dedication of the national cemetery at Gettysburg, Edward Everett (the former American minister to the Court of St. James's and a former president of Harvard College), delivered one of his finest wartime orations. After speaking for about two hours, Everett sat down and Abraham Lincoln rose to take his turn. He spoke for two minutes. While Everett's speech is largely forgotten, Lincoln's is read by every school child, and is widely considered to be one of the greatest speeches in American history. It is known, of course, as the Gettysburg Address.

The Gettysburg Address

Four score 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 battle-field 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 can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not 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.