



Abraham Lincoln (Presidents of the United States Biographies)

Douglas Martin

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Perhaps other than George Washington, there is no other American president who has achieved the mythical status that has been bestowed upon Abraham Lincoln. That he was assassinated days after the conclusion to the bloody Civil War that defined his presidency no doubt adds to his mythical status, but not his accomplishments. The nation's 16th president assumed office at a time when the nation was literally divided. Before he had even recited the Oath of Office, administered by Justice Roger B. Taney, the United States had fractured with the secession of southern states that were willing to wage war to protect their right to keep African Americans as slaves. There is some irony that Taney was the man to usher in Lincoln's presidency, as it was his ruling in the Dred Scott case that gave legal credence to the notion that citizenship was a right owed on the basis of race.

There are other achievements and issues of note that came from the Lincoln administration. Certainly laying the foundation for the transcontinental railroad ranks high among them as the literal linking of the nation's land accelerated the United States into one of the world's superpowers of the 20th century. However, it should come as no surprise that as the nation looked to westward expansion, Lincoln was not a believer in Manifest Destiny. The term came into the national vocabulary in 1839, the year that Lincoln began his law career with the U.S. Circuit Court. Manifest Destiny states that it is the God-given right of Americans to expand west to the Pacific Ocean, regardless of who – namely Native Americans – or what might be in the path. As noted Lincoln scholar Eric Foner phrased it, “Lincoln saw American democracy as an example to the rest of the world, not something to be imposed by unilateral force.”

Yet, Lincoln will be forever tied to the war that defined his presidency and, in many ways, him. The man that many believe was our greatest president had very little formal education. He learned and developed ideas through his own process of self-education and observation. His views on race and slavery evolved over the course of his presidency, largely due to his ability to listen, learn, and observe what was happening around him. While many would characterize him as a racist for his belief that blacks should be deported back to Africa if it were practical to do so, he remains a hero to many African Americans for his ability to, as abolitionist Frederick Douglass said, translate “antislavery sentiment into antislavery action.” Lincoln's willingness to do just that moved from a strategic military move to one that provided a moral basis for a war that saw two percent of the American population die in battle in its own backyard. With that he acknowledged that the divided Union could not be put back together. When all was said and done, Abraham Lincoln did not save the country, as many have said. He created a new one.

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