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Abraham Lincoln's Assassination and Its Consequences

When one thinks of Abraham Lincoln, one reflects on humble beginnings, a self-taught country lawyer, an Illinois congressional representative, a strong president during a tumultuous time in United States history, and an assassination. Lincoln was elected the 16th President of the United States in 1860 and served until his death in 1865. The United States Civil War erupted in 1861 over issues that included as a major focus whether the Southern states would be allowed to continue slavery (Goodwin 11).

Lincoln stated from the start that his major goal, though, was to preserve the Union at all costs. The Southern states had seceded from the Union and the Northern states fought the secession. Lincoln realized that the question of slavery in the United States would finally have to be addressed once and for all. In response to that burning question, Lincoln enacted the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 (Goodwin 11). This was not legislation passed by Congress. Rather, Lincoln used his presidential authority during war time to free the slaves in the remaining 10 states still in rebellion at that time. US law, however, kept the Proclamation from applying to states no longer fighting. Still, 3 million of the 4 million slaves in existence were immediately freed. Furthermore, the Proclamation made it possible to enlist the newly freed slaves into the Union Army and to pay them soldier wages. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation then laid the ground work for the Thirteenth Amendment which abolished slavery. Lincoln was assassinated some days after the Confederate forces admitted defeat and surrendered. Lincoln's untimely death adversely affected the Reconstruction era and intensified

the negative attitudes of the North towards the South as they struggled to rebuild their economy and to restore their place within the Union.

Lincoln's planned visit to the Ford Theater where the assassination eventually took place was well known publically. The newspapers dated April 14, 1865, announced that Lincoln, his wife, as well as General Grant, would be attending the play *Our American Cousin* at Ford's Theater (Library of Congress 1). However, Grant decided not to attend. Lincoln, also, was reluctant to go, but his wife persuaded him to accompany her anyway (Guelzo 26). The Lincolns arrived at the theater late and were escorted by several government officials. They proceeded upstairs to the presidential booth which was guarded at the entrance way by John Parker. Parker had been assigned as security for the president despite his reputation for being a drunkard. Parker left his post sometime during the play to get beer down the street from the theater. The assassination took place during his absence.

Lincoln and his wife were reportedly enjoying the play when an actor named John Wilkes Booth entered their box, pointed a gun at the back of Lincoln's head, and fired. Booth then dropped the gun and pulled out a dagger. Rathbone, one of the government officials, lunged at Booth. Although he sustained an injury to his arm, he was able to force Booth to the railing where Booth then jumped off the balcony (Hanchett 8). Booth was able to somewhat break his fall. However, he suffered a broken leg. Still, he managed to escape the theater. Lincoln passed away from his injuries soon after the incident occurred.

Lincoln died at a crucial time in the United States history. The Civil War had just been brought to an end, and Lincoln already had plans on how to bring the Southern states back into the Union while preserving their dignity as much as possible. The plan was to readmit the Southern states contingent on at least 10% of the electorates swearing their allegiance to the United States of America (Kaufmann 122). With the exception of Confederate officials, full pardon would be granted to citizens and private property returned to them, with the exception of

the former slaves. The plan was one focused on both clemency and compassion for the defeated South. Moderate Republicans in favor of bringing the war to a satisfactory ending were in agreement with Lincoln's plans. Unfortunately, Lincoln's assassination interfered with the timeline for the Reconstruction period.

Lincoln's death not only affected the plans for Reconstruction of the South, but it also intensified feelings of anger and bitterness towards the South. The Radical Republicans were less charitable in their view of the South and how to bring them back into the Union. They had advocated for the passing of the Wade-Davis Bill of 1864 that required the majority of the Southern electorates to swear that they had never supported the Confederate. The Radical Republicans looked for other ways to penalize the South, as well (Jensia 2). Lincoln vetoed the bill, causing expressions of anger and outrage from the Radical Republicans. However, his assassination disquieted this group which again sought to enact revenge on the South through harsh terms for Reconstruction.

Many individuals from the South perceived Lincoln to be a fair-minded and compassionate president. They depended on that to help rebuild the South following the ending of the Civil War. No doubt they suffered needlessly as a result of his assassination. Regardless, popular opinion in modern times is that President Abraham Lincoln cared about his country and did his best to preserve the Union. The Civil War with its deaths and destruction is a tragic time in American history. However, Lincoln is popularly considered to have been a great president, one with wisdom and true compassion for all.

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