

How I Met Lincoln

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In an article entitled, "How I Met Lincoln" in the July/August 1999 issue of American Heritage, some distinguished Americans revealed just how they fell under Abraham Lincoln's spell. Although I will never rise to their level as a Lincoln scholar, my admiration for Abraham Lincoln is no less than theirs. This is, "How I Met Lincoln."

Growing up and attending public school in the fifties, my first acquaintance with Abraham Lincoln was through his portrait and that of George Washington, which hung on the classroom wall. As an impressible boy, I thought how very special these men must have been to have their birthdays celebrated and getting the day off from school on the 12th and 22nd of each February. Thus, began my lifelong journey interest in and the study of Abraham Lincoln's life. In the mid-sixties when I helped my parents study for their tests to become United States citizens, one of the test questions was, "Who was Abraham Lincoln"? Their answer in their broken English was, "Sixteen president...United States...freed the slaves." This simple answer summarizes what anyone needs to know about Lincoln even for those who only know of him as an historical figure or who only have a passing interest in him.

Abraham Lincoln was the sixteenth president of the United States during a Civil War that tore this country apart by those who believed that they could dissolve the ties of Union if it suited the ends they were seeking. Prior to 1861, the term "United States" was used as a plural noun, however, through Lincoln's vision and leadership, he sustained this Union and strengthened it to become truly a single Nation that for better or worse, has become the great "melting pot" for the rest of the world and, in Lincoln's words, *the last best hope of man.* My own parents immigrated to this country because of this promise of a "new birth of freedom."

Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. The presence of slavery corrupted our nation's moral stance before the rest of the world. For a nation founded on the principles of the Declaration of Independence, to have allow slavery to exist, subjected us to ridicule. We were being hypocritical at the very least and cynical at the very worse. While recognizing the prejudices of his day, Lincoln was able to rise above them to have the courage to challenge racism by challenging the institution of slavery and recognizing the Negro's *"right to eat the bread...earned by his own toil and hands."* The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution that forever abolished slavery was passed through his tenacious efforts.

Lincoln was assassinated before he could complete his task of bringing the South back into the Union. The aftermath of the war during the period of Reconstruction and the issue of race relations between blacks and whites would have, in all likelihood, turned out differently if he had lived to carry out his program of reconciliation with the defeated Southern states. Such

vision, leadership and accomplishment from a man with less than a year's formal education, he came to symbolize the "American Dream" to the rest of the world, how one through his or her own efforts can rise above their circumstances to make something of themselves. God did have his hand on Abraham Lincoln's life in making him His instrument to fulfill His just purposes. We as a Nation are what we are today because of Abraham Lincoln's leadership that resulted in the North's victory in the Civil War.