

The Assassination of Lincoln

HS311

Activity Introduction

Hi, I'm (name.) Today, you'll learn all about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. It's not a real happy topic but this event had a pretty big impact on our country.

Lincoln was President during our country's most conflict-ridden period in history and managed to keep the United States together.

So, at the closing of the Civil War you'd think Abraham Lincoln would finally be able to relax and watch a play. Not so much.

Video 1 - Introduction

You might think winning a war would be the end of things, but for Lincoln it was the start of yet another battle.

Reconstruction was the next big undertaking and it meant taking the divided states and making them the United States

How he planned to do this is for you to find out in this video.

Video 1

Politicians in the North, including President Lincoln, began planning as early as 1862 for the readmission of Southern states to the Union. The main problem regarding readmission revolved around the nature of succession. Was succession an illegal act, in which case the Southern states had never really left the Union, only rebelled against it, or was it a legal act, which would mean that the now former states should be considered territories?

Lincoln pushed for the idea that succession was illegal. This theory of indestructible states in an indissoluble Union guided his actions throughout the war, and if succession were illegal, then he could set the conditions for states' readmission by using his constitutional authority to suppress insurrections and grant pardons. Congress would set the terms if the Confederate states were considered to have lost their statehood and reverted to being territories. Lincoln wanted to readmit Southern states one by one as they were conquered by the North, and if they had met certain requirements. This would add them to the Union strength and reduce the power of the remaining Southern states.

In December 1863, he issued a proclamation, an executive order, outlining a plan. Southerners could regain their U.S. citizenship by taking a simple loyalty oath. This leniency did not apply to high-ranking political and military officials. Once the number of oath takers equalled 10% of those who voted in the 1860 election, a state government could be set up. Lincoln's program became known as the Ten-Percent Plan. The new state government had to be Republican in form, as required by the Constitution, recognize the abolition of slavery, and provide for the education of African Americans. It is important to note that under Lincoln's plan, state governments were not required to give African Americans the right to vote. In fact, at this time African Americans could vote in only six Northern states. The power structure of the old South would likely have remained intact. Lincoln's plan was tried with mixed results in Louisiana, Arkansas and Tennessee before the war ended.

Part of the reason for the generosity of Lincoln's plan involved his attitude toward the South. Some things to note are that Lincoln was born in Kentucky, a border and slave state. Lincoln's views on slavery were moderate. His views on emancipation evolved

during his Presidency. He became a committed abolitionist only late in the war. Lincoln had begun his political life as a Whig, and he kept up friendly relations with Southern Whigs and Unionists until war broke out. Lincoln was not a vindictive man, and it showed in his leniency toward the South.

As Commander in Chief, he could have ordered his generals to lay waste, to all conquer territory in the South, but didn't. Sherman's march through Georgia and South Carolina was the main exception. He could have had all Confederate, military and political leaders, including Jefferson Davis, executed as traitors to the United States, but didn't. The only official executed was Henry Wirz, Commandant of the military prison at Andersonville. He could have permanently denied citizenship to large classes of Southerners, but didn't. Before, during and after the war, Lincoln considered the South part of the United States. He felt that secessionists had overpowered the majority of Southerners, who were reasonable Unionists.

After his reelection in 1864, Lincoln had every reason to crow about the impending Union victory in the war, and the superiority of Northern ways. Instead, in his second inaugural address he promised malice toward none and charity for all. This benevolence clearly applied to former Confederates. He went on to urge Americans to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan. He meant those words to apply to both Northerners and Southerners.

Video 1 – Recap

That is what I call a plan. Sometimes it's best to find a way to work issues out instead of taking a more aggressive approach. Lincoln knew that in order to get what was best for the country, fighting wasn't the answer.

Reading Passage Introduction



There were obviously a lot of differing views as to how the post-war country should look.

Some were very angry about the changes Lincoln was making and would stop at nothing to make sure Lincoln was no longer in the picture.

This next story is filled with drama, deceit, and intrigue. What's most remarkable is that it's all true.

Reading Passage Introduction

After Lincoln's assassination, his Vice President, Andrew Johnson, had to pick up where he had left off.

Like Lincoln, Andrew Johnson had a very difficult job.

Video 2 - Introduction

People often wonder what could have been, let's watch this video to see how history remembers Lincoln and get some insight as to where he may have taken the country in reconstruction.

Video 2

Abraham Lincoln is consistently ranked among the greatest U.S. Presidents in polls of scholars and historians, along with George Washington and Franklin Roosevelt. Many ordinary Americans revere Lincoln as a saint-like figure. What accounts for this high standing?

Well, many of Lincoln's traits and achievements contributed to his reputation as a great leader. Above all, he preserved the Union. It is easy to imagine a President who would have judged the loss of lives and resources from a Civil War not to be a price worth paying to keep the country together. Such a leader might have arranged for a

negotiated peace with the Confederacy, instead of pursuing a complete military victory. That move would have left slavery in place and split the U.S. into two countries, and it would almost certainly have ensured further bloodshed, since the two countries would have struggled for control of the western territories.

Lincoln, by insisting on the unconditional surrender of the South, not only prevented those catastrophes, but also kept the United States intact. He also led the way on emancipation. Lincoln began his Presidency with only mild anti-slavery views, but he came to see the necessity of freeing the slaves if the South were to be defeated. He began the process with the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863. He pushed hard for passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery throughout the country and cheered its adoption. He embodied several distinctly American qualities.

Lincoln came from such humble origins that he made people believe that any American child really could grow up to be President. He was largely self-educated, giving substance to the American belief in advancement through education, hard work and self-discipline. He also had an earthy sense of humor that was always at hand, even when times were dark. His charity toward the defeated South set an example for later Presidents, as when Harry Truman oversaw the rebuilding of Japan and Germany after World War II. The manner of his death also contributed to Lincoln's almost religious status. He was the first U.S. President to be assassinated. He was killed on Good Friday, and he was killed at the high point of his career, less than a week after Lee's surrender.

Lincoln died before he could oversee the progress of reconstructing the defeated South, and although it is impossible to know how reconstruction might have gone if Lincoln had lived, we can make some reasonable guesses based on what we know of Lincoln and

the times. We know that Lincoln took a moderate view of reconstruction. States were to be brought back into the Union gradually after they met a few conditions, so he probably would have opposed at least initially the more punitive measures proposed by the radical Republicans.

We know that he was glad to see slavery end and that by the time of his death he was warming to the idea of extending the vote to African Americans. We also know that he allowed his opinions to change, and that he rarely felt as if he had the definitive answer to any problem, so it seems likely that despite his earlier views to the contrary, he would have supported ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which made citizens of former slaves and gave African American males the right to vote. Likewise, although Lincoln had supported payments to slave holders for the loss of their slaves, he probably would have given up on this idea once he saw that Congress would never provide the money for it. We know that he was a skilled negotiator who found ways to work with the Congress that he rarely saw eye-to-eye with. We know that he had no illusions about the South, Southern attitudes toward African Americans, or Southern feelings toward the North.

Lincoln knew that change takes time, so his overall approach to reconstruction would have probably have blunted the harsh excesses of the radical Republican Congress and would have avoided the quick, superficial measures that President Johnson proposed.

Video 2 - Recap

Even though Lincoln's presidency was cut short, he was able to see the nation through a very difficult time while laying a foundation for our country to flourish going forward.

Historians are so fond of Lincoln's legacy that we put him on the penny and the five dollar bill.

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