

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

AND

SLAVERY

A Unit of Study for Grades 8-12

by

Kirk Ankeney and David Vigilante



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Teacher's Guide

Approach and Rationale	1
Content and Organization	2

Teaching Background Materials

Unit Overview	3
Unit Context	3
Correlation to National History Standards	3
Unit Objectives	4
Introduction to Abraham Lincoln and Slavery	5

A Dramatic Moment 6

Lesson One 7

Lesson Two 11

Lesson Three 31

Lesson Four 39

Lesson Five 60

Lesson Six 84

Bibliography 88

TEACHING BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

Abraham Lincoln, “The Great Emancipator” in historical folklore, was a complex individual with political savvy. Historical interpretations of Lincoln and his stand on the issue of slavery vary. Some have argued that Lincoln considered slavery as a moral issue and was committed to its extinction, while others argue that Lincoln was the embodiment of American racism. A student of history can find a wide spectrum of opinions between these two poles.

Through the use of primary sources students will discover Abraham Lincoln’s attitudes and actions regarding slavery, its abolition, and the use of African American troops during the Civil War. Students encounter Lincoln’s words and deeds amid the political realities of the day and in the context of the time in which he lived. Contemporary voices of both support and opposition draw attention to public reaction to Lincoln’s policies. Students are asked to grapple with questions such as: How, when, and why did the war to preserve the Union come to include the abolition of slavery? Was the Emancipation Proclamation the climax of a series of measures designed to end slavery or was it a break from previous policy? What were the factors behind Lincoln’s decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation and to confirm “the promise” with a call for ratification of the 13th amendment? What impact did public opinion have on Lincoln’s decision regarding the abolition of slavery and the use of African American troops in combat?

II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit may be used as a “spotlight” to focus on the evolution of Lincoln’s stance on slavery and his commitment to abolition. Specific lessons may also be used at different times during the chronological study of the events leading to the Civil War and the Lincoln presidency. Lessons I and II may be incorporated in the study of the sectional crisis leading to the war while the remaining lessons are appropriate during a study of the Lincoln presidency. The lessons are intended as an inquiry into the development and implementation of Lincoln’s policy of emancipation.

III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS

Abraham Lincoln and Slavery provides teaching materials that address Eras 4 and 5 in *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (Los Angeles, National Center for History in the Schools, 1996). Lesson One, “A House divided, Lincoln’s Early Views on Slavery” and Lesson Two, “The Lincoln Douglas De-

Teaching Background Materials

bates” provide teaching materials to assist in accomplishing Standard 3B of Era 4: “How the debates over slavery influenced politics and sectionalism” and Standard 1 of Era 5, “ How politics and ideologies led to the Civil War.” Lessons contained in this teaching unit on the Emancipation Proclamation specifically address Standard 2A of Era 5, which expects students to explain reasons for issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, evaluate its provisions, and explain its significance.

Lessons within this unit likewise address a number of specific Historical Thinking standards including: explain historical continuity and change (Standard 1, Chronological Thinking); identify the author or source of a historical document or narrative and assess its credibility (Standard 2, Historical Comprehension); analyze cause-and-effect relationships and distinguish between unsupported expressions of opinion and informed hypotheses ground in historical evidence (Standard 3, Historical Analysis and Interpretation); obtain historical data from a variety of sources (Standard 4, Historical Research); and marshal evidence of antecedent circumstances (Standard 5, Historical Issues Analysis and Decision Making).

IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

1. To interpret documents in their historical context.
2. To understand the significance of the debate over the abolition of slavery and the use of African American troops.
3. To examine the historical context of emancipation.
4. To explore the political motivation surrounding public policy.

V. LESSON PLANS

- Lesson One: The House Divided: Lincoln’s Early Views on Slavery
- Lesson Two: The Lincoln-Douglas Debates
- Lesson Three: The Lincoln Administration and the Evolution of an Anti-slavery Policy
- Lesson Four: Emancipation and African American Troops
- Lesson Five: Contemporary Views of Lincoln and His Position on Slavery
- Lesson Six: Artists’ Views of the Emancipation Proclamation

INTRODUCTION TO ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND SLAVERY

Abraham Lincoln was a complex, self-made man. Born in poverty near Hodgenville, Kentucky in 1809, he moved to Indiana with his family in 1810 and settled in Illinois fourteen years later. He was elected a captain in the Illinois militia during the Black Hawk War of 1832 and served in the state legislature from 1834 to 1841. Temporarily retiring from politics, he became a successful Illinois lawyer. Lincoln was a staunch supporter of Henry Clay and an active member of the Whig Party of Illinois. In 1846 he was elected to the House of Representatives where he voiced his opposition to the war with Mexico. After one term in the House, he abandoned politics and returned to his law practice in Springfield. Lincoln's opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act rekindled his interest in politics and he made an unsuccessful bid for the United States Senate in 1855. He joined the newly formed Republican Party and was recognized as one of its leaders in Illinois.

In 1858 he challenged Democrat Stephen Douglas for the Senate. His lifelong ambition was to serve in the United States Senate, where great men debated the paramount issues of the day. In seven three-hour debates across the state, Lincoln relentlessly confronted Douglas only to have the State assembly appoint his opponent to the Senate. Two years later, in a four-way race for the presidency, Lincoln was elected with slightly under 40% of the popular vote. As president, he faced the greatest constitutional challenge in the nation's history as eleven states seceded from the union. The fortunes of the war weighed on his shoulders as Union forces failed to achieve rapid victory. Lincoln's search for a competent military leader became legendary as he dismissed general after general, finally placing confidence in U. S. Grant. In 1864, as he prepared to run for reelection, he faced dissension within his own party and even the rumored nomination of his Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase. On August 23, 1864, less than three months before the presidential election, Lincoln wrote, "This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected." Yet, decisive turns in the Union military objectives helped ensure his victory in the presidential election of November 1864. By inauguration day, March 4, 1865, the war was virtually over. On April 9, Confederate Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse. On Friday evening, April 14, the Lincolns attended a performance of "Our American Cousin" at Ford's Theater. There, John Wilkes Booth fired the fatal shot, and with the assassin's bullet, the Lincoln legend began.

LESSON ONE:

THE HOUSE DIVIDED—LINCOLN’S EARLY VIEWS ON SLAVERY

A. Objectives

- ◆ To analyze the personal and political positions regarding slavery held by Abraham Lincoln prior to 1860.
- ◆ To assess the depths of Lincoln’s aversion to slavery.

B. Lesson Plan (1 day)

Reading 1: Document A—Letter to Speed, 24 August 1855
Document B—House Divided Speech, 16 June 1858

Reading 2: Document A—On Slavery and Democracy, ca. 1858
Document B—Letter to Brown, 18 October 1858

In groups of two or three, have students read and discuss the collection of primary sources labeled **Readings 1** and **2**. Next, ask each group to select either **Reading 1** or **2** for primary focus, and to sketch and label the metaphor of a “house divided” in **Reading 1** or create a chart comparing the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence (1776) with Lincoln’s assertions in **Reading 2**. Have each group present their work either in small groups or in the large group debriefing. As part of that class discussion, consider such questions as:

- 1 Where did Lincoln’s disdain for slavery originate?
- 2 What specifically about the institution of slavery did he oppose?
- 3 What, in his view, were the constitutional aspects of the issue?

Document A**From a letter to Joshua F. Speed, 24 August 1855**

Excerpts from Lincoln's response to a letter from a long-time friend (and slaveholder) revealed his views about the enslavement of African Americans.

. . . You know I dislike slavery; . . . I confess I hate to see the poor creatures hunted down, and caught, and carried back to their stripes, and unrewarded toils; but I bite my lip and keep quiet. In 1841 you and I had together a tedious low-water trip, on a Team Boat from Louisville to St. Louis. You may remember, as I well do, that from Louisville to the mouth of the Ohio there were, on board, ten or a dozen slaves shackled together with irons. That sight was a continual torment with me; and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio, or any other slave-border. It is hardly fair for you to assume, that I have no interest in a thing which has, and continually exercises, the power of making me miserable. You ought rather to appreciate how much the great body of the Northern people do to crucify their feelings, in order to maintain their loyalty to the constitution and the Union . . .

I do oppose the extension of slavery, because my judgment and feelings so prompt me; and I am under no obligation to the contrary. If for this you and I must differ, differ we must. . . .

—*Library of America*, Vol. 1, 360–63

Document B
“House Divided” Speech at Springfield, Illinois, 16 June 1858

The excerpts which follow are from a speech given by Abraham Lincoln at Springfield, Illinois on the occasion of his selection as the Illinois State Republican Party’s candidate for United States Senate.

A house divided against itself cannot stand.

I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*.

I do not expect the Union to be *dissolved*—I do not expect the house to *fall*—but I *do* expect it will cease to be divided.

It will become *all* one thing, or *all* the other.

Either the *opponents* of slavery, will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in course of ultimate extinction; or its *advocates* will push it forward, till it shall become alike lawful in *all* the States, *old* as well as *new*—*North* as well as *South*.

—*Library of America*, Vol. 1, 426–34.

Document A
“On Slavery and Democracy,” ca. 1858

The undated statement below was found in Lincoln’s papers in the approximate period of his preparation for the Lincoln-Douglas debates; it was not uncommon for him to jot down notes of the sort as a way of clarifying his views.

As I would not be a *slave*, so I would not be a *master*. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy.

—*Library of America*, Vol. 1, 484.

Document B
Letter to James N. Brown, 18 October 1858

Lincoln’s views excerpted below are from a letter he wrote in response to queries from a man who had either witnessed or read reports about the Lincoln-Douglas debate series. The final debate had been concluded a few days previous to the date Lincoln penned his response.

I do not perceive how I can express myself, more plainly, than I have done in the foregoing extracts. In four of them I have expressly disclaimed all intention to bring about social and political equality between the white and black races, and, in all the rest, I have done the same thing by clear implication. . . .

I have made it equally plain that I think the negro is included in the word “men” used in the Declaration of Independence.

I believe the declaration that “all men are created equal” is the great fundamental principle upon which our free institutions rest; that negro slavery is violative of that principle; . . . that by our frame of government, the States which have slavery are to retain it, or surrender it at their own pleasure; and that all others—individuals, free-states and national government—are constitutionally bound to leave them alone about it.

—*Library of America*, Vol. 1, 822–23.