

THE LINCOLN FORUM

REDISCOVERING
ABRAHAM
LINCOLN

Edited by John Y. Simon & Harold Holzer



The Lincoln Forum

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Rediscovering
Abraham Lincoln

JOHN Y. SIMON *and* HAROLD HOLZER,
Editors

DAWN RUARK, *Associate Editor*



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To Charles D. Platt

Co-founder, generous patron, and tireless executive
With the thanks of the entire Lincoln Forum

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INTRODUCTION

John Y. Simon and Harold Holzer

THE FIRST TIME THAT Abraham Lincoln was invited to write an autobiographical sketch in 1859, he was able to produce only four meager paragraphs to describe his fifty years of life. He recalled an ancestry of “undistinguished families,” a childhood focused relentlessly on the “farm work” that he loathed, and modest successes at the ballot box, in the law, and in a long-forgotten Indian War. He wrote modestly of a history of failures alternating with successes in politics, culminating in his return to public life in 1854, “aroused,” as he put it, by the repeal of the Missouri Compromise.

“What I have done since,” he concluded, before offering a brief “personal description,” was, he believed, “pretty well known.” No further details were offered. Sending this slender manuscript on to the supporter who had requested it as a source for journalists who were preparing life stories, Lincoln seemed almost apologetic about the result. “There is not much of it,” he sheepishly confided, “for the reason, I suppose, that there is not much of me.” That was about to change.

By the time he died at the hands of an assassin less than six years later, Lincoln—and the country he was elected to lead—had endured upheavals so momentous that they all but rewrote American history, which Lincoln came to dominate as the preserver of the Union and the emancipator of the slaves. In less than a decade, he had transformed himself from a prairie politician into the principal hero in the pantheon of national memory.

Understandably, biographers have been expanding on Lincoln’s “little sketch” of 1859 ever since, inspired at least in part because Lincoln the writer seldom shed light on Lincoln the man. By now, more books have been written about him than about any other American who ever lived. Every generation since his death has inspired at

least one redefining biography, along with a seemingly endless flood of titles on specific aspects of Lincoln's public and private lives. And still the books pour off the presses.

Then why this latest volume?

The Lincoln Forum—a national assembly of Lincoln and Civil War enthusiasts—has for six years attracted the nation's leading historians to annual symposia at which they present papers on his life and times. These presentations have been rich in original scholarship, and precisely directed at areas of the Lincoln story that remain unexplored, underanalyzed, or subject to unresolved debate. What they have in common is the ability to analyze, articulate, and intrigue. They contribute to our unending hunger for answers to the questions that continue to excite interest in the Lincoln theme—that inspire scholars to look afresh at the seminal issues that characterized him, and in turn become part of the national character as well.

Bringing together papers selected from those delivered at five annual meetings of the Lincoln Forum, these essays represent the diversity of scholarship focused upon an ever-fascinating figure. In an initial article, James M. McPherson approaches Lincoln as commander in chief by marveling that in the vast Lincoln literature so little attention has been given the central element of his presidency. Tracing the evolution of Lincoln's strategic thought through four stages—from limited war through destruction of Southern resources—McPherson illuminates Lincoln's achievements as military leader. John Y. Simon follows with a piece that separates the role of president and commander in chief, illustrated by Lincoln's relationship with Ulysses S. Grant.

Several essays develop the theme of military leadership. Gary Gallagher analyzes Lincoln's reaction to Stonewall Jackson's celebrated Shenandoah Valley campaign in the spring of 1862. Rather than reacting in panic, Lincoln showed great skill in organizing and coordinating strategy to meet the threat. Craig Symonds shows that although Lincoln had no experience with the ocean-going navy before the Civil War, he brought to the task of administering the fleet the same qualities of versatility, flexibility, and inventiveness he displayed in military affairs. Especially through his receptivity to new vessels and weapons, he made his mark in creating a strong and successful navy.

Had General William Tecumseh Sherman not been in the heart of

Georgia marching toward Savannah on election day in 1864, would he have voted for Lincoln's reelection? John Marszalek explores the tangled relationship between the two men that began awkwardly and explains the process through which Sherman's initial contempt advanced to admiration. In 1863 Lincoln's joyous satisfaction when General George G. Meade repulsed General Robert E. Lee's army at Gettysburg turned into bitter anger when Meade allowed the enemy to retreat to safety. "I could have whipped them myself," Lincoln exclaimed. Gerald Prokopowicz examines this statement and similar expressions to determine whether Lincoln ever contemplated assuming personal command of his army.

J. Tracy Power turns his attention to the effect of the presidential election of 1864 on Confederate morale. Did the potential defeat of Lincoln represent the last hope of the Confederacy? Morale fell in the Army of Northern Virginia in the final months of 1864 following the presidential election, but Power adds to this a number of other factors.

In an intriguing essay on "Lincoln and Women," Frank J. Williams explores the distinction between masculine and feminine traits of behavior and argues that Lincoln developed the capacity to employ both. In a defense of Mary Todd Lincoln, Jean H. Baker answers critics who have made Mary one of the "most detested" First Ladies who ever occupied the White House. Baker argues spiritedly that Mary's display of characteristics that later became fashionable damaged her contemporary reputation, despite her success over adversity as wife, mother, and widow.

Iver Bernstein draws upon Lincoln's comparison of slavery and cancer for an innovative look at the nineteenth-century interpretation of the body politic. In Lincoln's metaphor Bernstein discerns the emergence of organicism applied to political behavior. Simultaneously, the metaphor reflects changing views of medicine. Barry Schwartz takes a fresh look at changing interpretations of the Gettysburg Address, discussing how these have varied and metamorphosed across time to reflect current needs and preoccupations. Even in such apparently simple and direct language lies the raw material for transformation in collective memory.

Nearly sixty years ago, J. G. Randall, the most respected Lincoln authority of his day, published an essay on "The Unpopular Mr. Lincoln," discussing copious abuse heaped upon the president. In re-

sponse, Hans Trefousse explores the other side of the equation with an essay cataloging comments made by Lincoln's admirers. The chorus of praise gradually increased; near the end of his life many of his countrymen compared him to George Washington, anticipating the apotheosis after Lincoln's assassination. He had become a secular saint and inspired acquisition of relics. In a concluding essay, Harold Holzer discusses Lincoln collectors past and present. By amassing books and manuscripts, they both satisfied their acquisitive instincts and contributed to Lincoln scholarship. By adding yet another Lincoln book to groaning shelves, the editors aspire to gratify modern Lincoln collectors, admirers, and scholars.

February 12, 2002

Lincoln as Commander in Chief

James M. McPherson

WHEN WE THINK about the positive legacy of our greatest presidents, what comes most readily to mind are their constructive political and legislative achievements: setting the republic on a firm foundation during George Washington's administrations; the broadening of democracy under Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson; the Square Deal of Theodore Roosevelt and the New Deal of Franklin D. Roosevelt; the Civil Rights Act pushed through Congress by Lyndon Johnson. When we think about Abraham Lincoln, what comes most readily to mind is preservation of the Union and the abolition of slavery. We remember him for the Emancipation Proclamation, the Gettysburg Address, and the closing lines of his Second Inaugural Address about binding up the nation's wounds with malice toward none and charity for all. Our most vivid image of Lincoln's presidency is the tragedy at Ford's Theatre on that fateful evening of April 14, 1865.

What does *not* occur so readily to us, perhaps, is that all of these impressions of Lincoln are connected directly with his role as commander in chief of the army and navy. Every one of these memorable achievements or events—preservation of the Union, the abolition of slavery, the Gettysburg Address, the Second Inaugural, the assassination—were consequences of the Civil War. Without the war, and without Union victory in the war under Lincoln's hands-on leadership as commander in chief, none of these things would have happened. Without the war, we would probably remember Lincoln—if we remembered him at all—as one of the obscure nineteenth-century presidents, in the same category, say, with Franklin Pierce or Benjamin Harrison.

War is not a pleasant topic. Lincoln himself referred to it this way back in 1848, when he was a member of Congress during the Mexi-

can War: “Military glory [is an] attractive rainbow that rises in showers of blood—that serpent’s eye that charms to destroy.” Lincoln also mocked his own military record as a militia captain during the Black Hawk War in 1832. “Did you know I am a military hero?” he said on the floor of the House. “I fought, bled, and came away” after “charges upon the wild onions” and “a good many bloody struggles with the mesquitoses [*sic*].”

One of Lincoln’s more endearing qualities was his self-mocking sense of humor. But his actions as commander in chief from 1861 to 1865 were deadly serious. We must not forget that he was a war president. His election set in train the events that led to war. His entire tenure in office was bounded by the parameters of war—the only president in our history of whom that is true. Military matters required more of Lincoln’s time and energy than did anything else during his presidency. As he said, also in his Second Inaugural Address: on “the progress of our arms . . . all else chiefly depends.” That is why Lincoln spent more time in the War Department telegraph office than anywhere else except the White House. He rarely left Washington except to visit the Army of the Potomac at the front, which he did eleven times during his presidency, for a total of forty-two days with the army. During crucial military operations, Lincoln often stayed all night at the telegraph office in the War Department, reading and sending dispatches and snatching a few hours of sleep on a cot. He probably wrote the first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation in that office while awaiting news from the front. That was quite appropriate, because the legal justification of the proclamation was Lincoln’s war powers as commander in chief to seize enemy property—slaves—being used to wage war against the United States.

Some historians in earlier generations recognized and appreciated the centrality to Lincoln’s presidency and to his historical reputation of his achievements as commander in chief. Back in the 1920s the British historian Colin Ballard entitled his book on the strategy of the American Civil War *The Military Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. In 1952 the American historian T. Harry Williams wrote, in his book *Lincoln and His Generals*, that Lincoln was “a better [strategist] than any of his generals. He was in actuality as well as in title the commander in chief who, by his larger strategy, did more than Grant or any other general to win the war for the Union.”

I am inclined to agree, though I might not put it quite so strongly.

But judging from the thrust and emphasis of more recent books, historians and biographers of Lincoln now consider Lincoln's role as commander in chief less salient than other aspects of his career. The best reference work on Lincoln, Mark E. Neely's *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia*, published in 1982, devotes less than 5 percent of its space to military matters. Of the seventeen collected essays on Lincoln published in 1987 by the late Don E. Fehrenbacher, one of the foremost Lincoln scholars of our time, not one deals with the president as a military leader. On the 175th anniversary of Lincoln's birth, Gettysburg College hosted a conference on recent Lincoln scholarship. There were three sessions on psychobiography, two on the assassination, two on Lincoln's image in photographs and popular prints, one each on his economic ideas, religion, humor, Indian policy, and slavery. But there were no sessions on Lincoln as commander in chief—a remarkable irony, given the site of the conference. In 1994 the historian Merrill Peterson published his splendid study *Lincoln in American Memory*, highlighting 130 years of the sixteenth president's image in American historiography and popular culture. There are chapters on Lincoln and the South, religion, politics, Reconstruction, civil rights, and several other themes, but no chapter on Lincoln and the army. The most recent study of Lincoln's presidency, by Phillip Shaw Paludan, and the most recent biography, by David Herbert Donald (published in 1994 and 1995, respectively), give less attention to Lincoln as commander in chief than to politics, slavery, and emancipation.

This relative neglect of Lincoln's hands-on connection with the actual war reflects broader trends in mainstream academic historical scholarship, in which military history is held in rather low regard. But we need to take seriously Lincoln's own insistence that on "the progress of our arms . . . all else chiefly depends." Most of the things that historians do consider important in nineteenth-century American history—the fate of slavery, the structure of society in both North and South, the direction of the American economy, the destiny of competing nationalisms in North and South, the definition of freedom, the very survival of the United States—rested on the shoulders of those men who wore the blue and of their commander in chief in the Civil War. If the North had lost the war, Lincoln might well have gone down in history as one of our weakest presidents instead of one of our greatest.

Lincoln himself was painfully aware in 1861 that his Confederate adversary in Richmond was much better qualified as a military leader. Jefferson Davis had graduated from West Point, commanded a regiment in the Mexican War, and served four years during the 1850s as an outstanding secretary of war, whereas Lincoln's only military experience was his combat with mosquitoes in the Black Hawk War. To remedy his deficiencies, Lincoln borrowed books on military strategy from the Library of Congress and burned the midnight oil reading them. His experience as a largely self-taught lawyer and his analytical mind (for mental exercise he had mastered Euclidean geometry on his own) stood him in good stead. By 1862 his orders and dispatches demonstrated a sound grasp of strategic principles.

One book Lincoln did not read was the classic treatise *On War* by the Prussian military theorist Karl von Clausewitz, because that book was not yet translated into English in Lincoln's time. But Lincoln had an intuitive understanding of one of Clausewitz's central ideas: that war is the continuation of politics by other means. Lincoln would also have recognized the distinction that modern military theorists make between two kinds of strategy: *national* strategy, or the shaping and defining of a nation's political goals in time of war; and *military* (or operational) strategy, the use of armed forces to achieve those goals. As president, Lincoln shared the power to determine national strategy with Congress and his cabinet. As commander in chief he shared power with his top generals to shape military strategy.

In both capacities, however, Lincoln believed himself ultimately responsible. Like Harry Truman eighty years later, he knew that the buck stopped on the president's desk. Lincoln thus made sure to hold the final decision on important matters in his own hands, especially on questions of national strategy. Secretary of State William H. Seward initially aspired to be the so-called "premier" of Lincoln's administration. In Seward's notorious memorandum of April 1, 1861, he proposed to abandon Fort Sumter and pick a quarrel with European nations as a way to defuse passions in the South and reunite the country against a foreign foe. "Whatever policy we adopt," wrote Seward, "it must be somebody's business to pursue and direct it." He left little doubt whom he had in mind. Lincoln ignored Seward's advice about provoking a foreign incident, stated that he intended to resupply Fort Sumter, and concluded firmly that whatever was done, "I must do it."

Later that year, when General John C. Frémont issued a military order emancipating the slaves of Confederate supporters in Missouri, Lincoln rescinded it. He did so because his national strategy of keeping the border slave states—Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri—in the Union was then balanced delicately on a knife edge. He feared that these states would join the Confederacy if Frémont's order stood. He might well have been right; in any case he could not take the risk at this stage of the war. As Lincoln put it in September 1861, "I think to lose Kentucky is nearly the same as to lose the whole game. Kentucky gone, we can not hold Missouri, nor, as I think, Maryland. These all against us, and the job on our hands is too large for us. We would as well consent to separation at once, including the surrender of this capitol." Eight months later, in May 1862, General David Hunter issued a similar emancipation edict in his military district embracing Union-occupied regions along the south Atlantic coast. Stating angrily that "no commanding general shall do such a thing, upon my responsibility, without consulting me," Lincoln rescinded Hunter's order. But he also warned that, as a matter of national strategy, he might soon find it necessary to exercise his war powers to declare the slaves in Confederate states free. Several months later, of course, he did just that.

These examples concern matters of national strategy—of the nation's war *aims*, the political goals to be achieved by military means decided upon by the president as commander in chief. On the narrower but perhaps equally important questions of military strategy, Lincoln at first deferred to the professionals. The consummate professional at the beginning of the war was General in Chief Winfield Scott, the conqueror of Mexico fourteen years earlier. Scott formulated what the press labeled the "Anaconda Plan." A Virginian, Scott wanted to defeat the Confederacy at the lowest possible cost in lives and property. He proposed to "envelop" the South with a blockade by sea and a fleet of gunboats supported by soldiers moving down the Mississippi River to seal off the Confederacy from the outside world and thus "bring them to terms with less bloodshed than by any other plan."

Lincoln initially supported this military strategy. It was consistent with his national strategy in 1861 of a limited war to *restore* the Union as it had existed before the secession of eleven states. That national strategy in turn was grounded on a belief, widespread in the North

at this stage of the war, that a silent majority of the Southern people were Unionists at heart, but had been swept into the Confederacy by the passions of the moment. In his first message to Congress, on July 4, 1861, Lincoln questioned “whether there is to-day, a majority of the legally qualified voters of any state, except perhaps South Carolina, in favor of disunion.” Once the federal government demonstrated its firmness and determination by sealing off the Confederacy with the Anaconda Plan, those presumed legions of Unionists would regain control of their states and resume their old place in the Union. That is why, in Lincoln’s initial call for militia on April 15, 1861, he defined the conflict not as a war but as a domestic insurrection—“combinations too powerful to be suppressed by the ordinary course of judicial proceedings” were the words Lincoln used—and declared that in suppressing this insurrection the federalized militia would avoid “any devastation, any destruction of, or interference with, property, or any disturbance of peaceful citizens.”

The Anaconda Plan would eventually be carried out. The blockade slowly tightened around the Confederacy, and the Mississippi was sealed off from Confederate use by 1863. In the meantime, however, Lincoln’s national and military strategies had both evolved a long way from the limited war of 1861.

The first step in that evolution occurred along the banks of the sluggish stream of Bull Run in July 1861. This was a battle that Scott, distrustful of his ninety-day militia, had not wanted to fight. But Northern opinion clamored for a push “Forward to Richmond!” Lincoln concurred with Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs that “we would never end the war without beating the rebels” in a battle. Such a battle was consistent with the limited-war national strategy, for a Union victory would embolden that presumed silent majority of Southern Unionists. When the field commander of Union forces, Irvin McDowell, protested that he needed more time to train his raw troops, Lincoln reportedly told him, “You are green, it is true; but they are green, also; you are all green alike.”

The defeat at Bull Run sobered Lincoln. But it did not change his purpose or lessen his determination. The next day he signed a bill for the enlistment of 500,000 three-year volunteers in the Union army. Three days later he signed a second bill authorizing another 500,000. He called George B. McClellan, who had won minor victories in western Virginia, to become commander of the Army of the Potomac.

(Lincoln sat down and wrote a memorandum outlining a proposal for simultaneous advances in Virginia against the railroad junctions of Manassas and Strasburg, an advance into eastern Tennessee, and a campaign against Memphis on the Mississippi River once the new three-year men were trained.) And Lincoln, having seen what could happen to green troops, initially granted McClellan's pleas for plenty of time to train them. Even after McClellan replaced the aged and infirm Scott as general in chief on November 1, 1861, and began treating with disdain Lincoln's desire to be kept informed about military plans, Lincoln had only this to say: "I will hold McClellan's horse if he will only bring us success."

Lincoln's faith in a silent majority of Southern Unionists began to wear thin after Bull Run. He now realized that the Confederates would have to be beaten into submission, probably in several battles and campaigns. But his military strategy in early 1862 focused mainly on seizing crucial Confederate transport hubs and territory as a way of weakening the enemy. He urged McClellan to move forward and relayed similar wishes to Brigadier General Don Carlos Buell and Major General Henry W. Halleck in the West during the winter of 1861–62. For one reason or another, each of them replied that he was not ready yet. Lincoln's frustration level with his top commanders, which would last until Grant came east in the spring of 1864, began at this time its rise in temperature. On the back of a letter he received from Halleck explaining why he could not move against the Confederate defenses at Columbus, Kentucky, Lincoln wrote in January 1862, "It is exceedingly discouraging. As everywhere else, nothing can be done."

Halleck's explanation is a revealing one: "To operate on *exterior* lines against an enemy occupying a central position, will fail, as it always has failed, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred. It is condemned by every military authority I have ever read." By this time Lincoln had read some of those same authorities in his own cram course on strategy. But not being bound by the same tunnel vision as the pedantic Halleck, Lincoln drew a different conclusion from his analytical skills and common sense. He recognized that by the very geography of the situation, Union forces *had* to operate on exterior lines from points around the perimeter of the Confederacy. Lincoln grasped, sooner than many of his generals, the strategic concept that modern military theorists define as "concentration in time." Because

their overall strategy was one of defending the territory that lay behind their front, the Confederates had the advantage of “interior lines.” That advantage enabled them to shift reinforcements from inactive to active fronts—concentration in *space*—unless the Union used its superior numbers to attack on several fronts at once—concentration in *time*. On January 13, three days after reading Halleck’s warning against operating on exterior lines, Lincoln wrote to General Buell (who had made a similar point):

I state my general idea of this war to be that we have *greater* numbers, and the enemy has *greater* facility of concentrating forces upon points of collision; that we must fail, unless we can find some way of making our advantage an overmatch for *his*; and that this can only be done by menacing with superior forces at *different* points, at the same time; so that we can safely attack, one, or both, if he makes no change; and if he weakens one to strengthen the other, forbear to attack the strengthened one, but seize, and hold the weakened one, gaining so much.

Napoleon himself could scarcely have expressed it better. But not for more than two long years would Lincoln have a general in chief who understood this idea. That person, Ulysses S. Grant, began his rise in Lincoln’s estimation with his campaign in February 1862 that resulted in the capture of Forts Henry and Donelson on the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers, opening those avenues of invasion into the Confederate heartland. These successes started a string of remarkable Union victories at several locations in the winter and spring of 1862: along the south Atlantic coast from North Carolina to Florida; the battles of Pea Ridge, Arkansas, and Shiloh, Tennessee; occupation of Nashville, Corinth, Mississippi, New Orleans, Memphis, and indeed the whole Mississippi River Valley except the two hundred miles between Vicksburg and Port Hudson. Even McClellan got off the mark and moved the Army of the Potomac up the Virginia Peninsula to within hearing distance of Richmond’s church bells by May. The Confederate capital seemed doomed, and the Union military strategy of capturing important *places* and controlling vast stretches of Confederate *territory*—at least fifty thousand square miles of it by June 1862—seemed to be a spectacular success.

But then the Union war machine went into reverse. By September 1862 Confederate counteroffensives in Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky took Southern armies from the verge of defeat all the way

across the Potomac River into Maryland and north almost to the Ohio River. Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Nathan Bedford Forrest emerged during this period as the most effective and brilliant Confederate commanders and architects of some of these successes. The reversal of the fortunes of war during the summer of 1862 stunned Northerners. But Lincoln did not falter. He issued a new call for volunteers and declared that “I expect to maintain this contest until successful, or till I die, or am conquered, or my term expires, or Congress or the country forsakes me.”

Lincoln also took the next step in the evolution of his concept of military strategy, from the conquest of territory to the destruction of enemy armies. Union forces *had* conquered railroad junctions, enemy ports and cities, and those fifty thousand square miles of territory in the winter and spring of 1862, yet by September of that year the North was no closer to winning the war—indeed, perhaps farther from winning—than a year earlier. From August 1862 to June 1863 Confederate armies reconquered much of the territory they had lost, inflicted punishing defeats on Union forces, and twice invaded the North. Clearly, the conquest and occupation of Southern territory would not win the war so long as enemy armies remained capable of reconquering it. Lincoln grasped this truth sooner than most of his commanders did. As early as April 1862, after reluctantly acceding to McClellan’s plan to flank the Confederate defenses in northern Virginia by going all the way down the Chesapeake Bay to make his thrust toward Richmond via the peninsula between the York and James rivers, Lincoln told McClellan that no matter which invasion route he took, he was going to have to fight the enemy army instead of merely laying siege to *places*. “Let me tell you,” Lincoln wrote to McClellan on April 9, 1862,

It is indispensable to *you* that you strike a blow. . . . You will do me the justice to remember I always insisted, that going down the Bay in search of a field, instead of fighting at or near Manassas, was only shifting, and not surmounting, a difficulty—that we would find the same enemy, and the same, or equal, entrenchments, at either place. The country will not fail to note—is now noting—that the present hesitation to move upon an intrenched enemy, is but the story of Manassas repeated. . . . I have never written you, or spoken to you, in greater kindness of feeling than now, nor with a fuller purpose to sustain you. . . . *But you must act.*

McClellan, however, seemed constitutionally unable to act, only to react. He yielded the initiative in the Peninsula campaign to Lee. From the Seven Days' battles at the end of June 1862 until the invasion of Maryland in September, it was the Confederates who sought to destroy the Union armies. But Lincoln saw a great opportunity in Lee's invasion of Maryland, to cut the Confederate army off from its base of supplies and strike a crippling blow. "Destroy the rebel army," Lincoln wired McClellan on September 15. But McClellan fumbled away the opportunity at Antietam. For a month after that battle, Lincoln repeatedly urged McClellan to follow up the ambiguous victory there with a real one that would cripple Lee's army, not merely drive it back toward Richmond. "Cross the Potomac and give battle," read one telegram to McClellan. On another occasion Lincoln wrote to him, "We should not operate as to merely drive him away. If we can not beat the enemy where he now is [near Harpers Ferry], we never can. . . . If we never try, we shall never succeed."

But McClellan didn't try, and Lincoln finally grew tired of trying "to bore with an augur too dull to take hold," as he told one of McClellan's supporters, and removed him from command in November 1862. There followed seven months of frustration for Lincoln in the Virginia theater, as Generals Ambrose Burnside and Joseph Hooker led the Army of the Potomac to disastrous defeats at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. When Lee used his victory at Chancellorsville as a springboard for another invasion of the North, Lincoln saw this as an opportunity rather than a threat. He told Hooker that this invasion "gives you back the chance that I thought McClellan lost last fall" to cripple the enemy far from his base. As Lee headed north, however, Hooker proposed to cut in behind him to take Richmond. Lincoln threw up his hands in frustration: "Lee's *Army*, not *Richmond*, is your true objective point," he wired Hooker. But that general seemed reluctant to fight Lee again, so on June 28, which turned out to be the eve of the Battle of Gettysburg, Lincoln accepted Hooker's resignation and appointed General George Meade as commander of the Army of the Potomac. Meade skillfully directed a defensive victory at Gettysburg. When word arrived almost simultaneously in Washington of this victory and of General Ulysses S. Grant's capture of Vicksburg on July 4, 1863, Lincoln was elated. "Now," he declared, "if General Meade can complete his work, so

gloriously prosecuted thus far, by the literal or substantial destruction of Lee's army, the rebellion will be over."

But there was the rub. Meade seemed satisfied with his repulse of Confederate assaults at Gettysburg. In Lincoln's eyes, he threw away a great opportunity by failing to follow up this success with a vigorous pursuit to trap and destroy the crippled Army of Northern Virginia before it could escape back across the Potomac. On July 4 Meade had issued a congratulatory order to his troops, adding that "our task is not yet accomplished, and the commanding general looks to the army for greater efforts to drive from our soil every vestige of the presence of the invader." "Great God!" exclaimed Lincoln when he read these words. "This is a dreadful reminiscence of McClellan," who had proclaimed a great victory after Antietam because the enemy retreated across the river. "Will our Generals never get that idea out of their heads? The whole country is our soil." That was, after all, the point of the war! To his private secretary John Hay, the president lamented, a week after Lee had gotten his army over the swollen Potomac, "Our Army held the war in the hollow of their hand & they would not close it." So frustrated was Lincoln that when he sat down to write Meade a letter of congratulation for his victory at Gettysburg, the letter soon took on a tone the opposite of congratulation. "My dear general," Lincoln wrote, "I do not believe you appreciate the magnitude of the misfortune involved in Lee's escape. He was within your easy grasp, and to have closed upon him would, in connection with our other late successes, have ended the war. As it is, the war will be prolonged indefinitely. . . . Your golden opportunity is gone, and I am distressed immeasurable because of it."

As he blotted the ink dry and reread this letter, Lincoln decided not to send it, for to do so would surely have provoked Meade's resignation. Lincoln couldn't afford yet another change in the command of the Army of the Potomac, especially when it was basking in public acclaim for Gettysburg. So Lincoln filed the letter away in his papers. But he didn't change his mind about the magnitude of Meade's missed opportunity. Two months later, as the opposing armies in Virginia were maneuvering and skirmishing again over the devastated land between Washington and Richmond, Lincoln declared in exasperation that "to attempt to fight the enemy slowly back to his entrenchments in Richmond . . . is an idea I have been trying to repudiate for quite a year. . . . If our army can not fall upon the

enemy and hurt him where he is, is plain to me that it can gain nothing by attempting to follow him over a succession of intrenched lines into a fortified city.”

It was this kind of strategic thinking that caused the historian T. Harry Williams to conclude that Lincoln was “a better strategist than any of his generals.” But by 1863 there *was* one Union general who measured up to Lincoln’s expectations. At the same time that Lincoln wrote his unsent letter to Meade after Gettysburg, he also wrote to General Grant congratulating him on “the almost inestimable service you have done the country” by capturing a whole Confederate army at Vicksburg. To an associate in Washington, Lincoln declared: “Grant is my man and I am his the rest of the war.” On other occasions, Lincoln made it clear that the main reason for his support of Grant through the thick and thin of criticism and opposition to that general from many quarters during 1862 and early 1863 was that he and Grant agreed on how to win the war: fight the enemy and capture or cripple his armies—something that Grant did with much greater frequency and success than any other general in the Civil War. “I can’t spare this man; he fights,” said Lincoln of Grant on one occasion; in response to another demand that he get rid of Grant as a drunk and a failure, Lincoln said that “what I want is generals who will fight battles and win victories. Grant has done this, and I propose to stand by him.” One of Lincoln’s greatest contributions to victory as commander in chief was to stand by Grant when few others did so, until the whole North came to share Lincoln’s opinion of Grant by the time Lincoln brought him to Washington as general in chief in March 1864.

Lincoln finally had a commander who saw eye to eye with him on military strategy. Grant said that in the past, Union armies on various fronts had “acted independently and without concert, like a balky team, no two ever pulling together.” This had enabled the Confederates to use their interior lines to shift troops from one point to another to meet the most pressing danger of the moment—as they had done by sending General James Longstreet with two divisions from Virginia to Chickamauga in September 1863. Grant planned a campaign in 1864 for five Union armies stretched over a front of a thousand miles to undertake coordinated offensives. The two principal armies were those commanded by Meade in Virginia and William T. Sherman in Georgia. “Lee’s army will be your objective point,” Grant

told Meade. “Wherever Lee goes, there you will go also.” (He made no mention of capturing Richmond.) To Sherman, Grant sent orders “to move against Johnston’s army, to break it up and to get into the interior of the enemy’s country as far as you can, inflicting all the damage you can against their war resources.”

Lincoln was impressed. He told his private secretary Hay that Grant was carrying out his “old suggestion so constantly made and as constantly neglected, to Buell & Halleck, *et al*, to move at once upon the enemy’s whole line so as to bring into action to our advantage our great superiority of numbers”—in other words, concentration in *time* to counteract the Confederacy’s use of interior lines to concentrate in *space*. The smaller Union armies, even if they did not beat the Confederate units in their front, could at least pin them down and prevent reinforcements from being sent to Lee and to General Joseph Johnston in Georgia. As Lincoln put it, “Those not skinning can hold a leg.” Grant liked this phrase so much that he used it in official orders. As matters turned out, the leg holders (Nathaniel P. Banks, Benjamin F. Butler, and Franz Sigel) did not do their job, enabling the Confederacy to hold out for another year. But in the end the skinners—Grant, Meade, Sherman, Sheridan, and George H. Thomas—took off the South’s hide.

This did not happen until Lincoln’s conception of both military and national strategy had evolved to a fourth stage. To review, the first stage had been restoration of the old Union, the Union as it was before 1861, by a limited war to encourage Southern Unionists to bring their states back in. The second stage was to conquer enough Southern territory to force the Confederates to give up. The third stage was to cripple or destroy Confederate armies. But even this did not prove sufficient, for after one Confederate army was captured at Vicksburg and another crippled at Gettysburg, the South kept fighting, and for a time in the summer of 1864 the Northern people almost seemed ready to throw in the towel and quit paying the terrible price of victory. Even before 1864 Lincoln, like Sherman, had become convinced that this civil war was not just a war between whole societies, between peoples, in which the economy and resources of the home front and the will of the civilian population to sustain the war were as important as the fighting power of the armies. Thus it was necessary to destroy Confederate resources used to wage war.

This was the conviction that underlay the Emancipation Proclama-

tion, for the slaves were one of the most important Southern resources. “We must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued,” Lincoln told his cabinet in July 1862. “The slaves are undeniably an element of strength to those who have their service, and we must decide whether that element should be with us or against us. . . . Decisive and extensive measures must be adopted. . . . We wanted the army to strike more vigorous blows. The Administration must set an example, and strike at the heart of the rebellion”—slavery. This was the principle on which the administration also decided to enlist former slaves in the Union army on a large scale, thus converting their labor power for the Confederacy into military manpower for the Union. By August 1863, Grant could tell Lincoln that “by arming the negro we have added a powerful ally. . . . This, with the emancipation of the negro, is the heaviest blow yet given the Confederacy.”

Emancipation therefore became part of the Union’s military strategy. But it was more than that; it also became central to Lincoln’s national strategy, the political goals for which the war was fought, to cleanse the nation of an institution that Lincoln had more than once branded as an evil and a “monstrous injustice.” Thus Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation not only as an act of “military necessity,” but also as “an act of justice.” And at Gettysburg, Lincoln said that the Union soldiers who gave the last full measure of devotion there did so not only to preserve the nation but also to give it “a new birth of freedom.”

The Civil War converted slave property into free human beings. It also converted much other Southern property into ashes. Lincoln’s conception of the strategy necessary to win the war had come a long way since his statement in April 1861 that the national armies he then called into being would avoid “any devastation, any destruction of, or interference with, property, or any disturbance of peaceful citizens.” Now devastation of property and disturbance of civilians who supported the Confederate war effort were the order of the day. As Sherman wrote in reply to Confederate civilians who called him a barbarian, a commander “may take your house, your fields, your everything, and turn you all out, helpless, to starve. It may be wrong, but that don’t alter the case. . . . Our duty is not to build up; it is rather to destroy both the rebel army and whatever of wealth and property it has founded its boasted strength upon.” On other occasions, Sherman said that war is cruelty; you cannot refine it. And

fifteen years after the end of the Civil War, he warned the younger generation against glorifying war: War is hell, he told them. Lincoln made the same point, most notably in a speech at Philadelphia in June 1864: "War, at the best, is terrible, and this war of ours, in its magnitude and in its duration, is one of the most terrible." But Lincoln did not shrink from the consequences, and in his Second Inaugural Address on March 4, 1865, he even suggested that this terrible war might be God's punishment of his almost chosen people for the sin of slavery: "Fondly do we hope—ferverently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.'"

In the same address, Lincoln placed responsibility for the war where most Americans believed it belonged, and stated that disunion would have been worse than even the enormous cost of the war. Back in 1861, he said, one side "would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish." And Lincoln would not accept peace, either, except on the terms of unconditional surrender of both independence and slavery by the Confederacy. By 1864 this had become the core of his national strategy. Through the flurry of peace feelers during that terrible summer, when the war seemed to be going badly for the North, unconditional union and emancipation remained Lincoln's terms for ending the war. Just as adamantly, Davis insisted on Confederate independence. As Lincoln put it in December 1864, Davis "does not attempt to deceive us. He affords us no excuse to deceive ourselves. He cannot voluntarily reaccept the Union; we cannot voluntarily yield it. Between him and us the issue is distinct, simple, and inflexible. It is an issue which can only be tried by war, and decided by victory."

Four months later it *was* decided by victory, and no one deserved more credit for that achievement, and thus for the survival of the United States as one nation, indivisible and free, than Abraham Lincoln, commander in chief.