

## **What does the life and legacy of Abraham Lincoln mean to the people of the United States?**

*First Prize (High School Students) – Andrey Gritsay, Secondary School № 6 (Molochnoye, Vologda Oblast)*

When I read the essay theme, the first thing that sprang to my mind was, "What do I personally know about this American folk hero except some short facts that I had learned preparing for the contest "American Holidays" organized by the American Corner?" He was the sixteenth and the tallest president, had a dog named Fido, liked wrestling, had a patent, took Grace Babel's advice to grow his famous beard, "commanded the commanders during the Civil War", freed the slaves and was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth. Not much, I would say. The results of my poll opinion conducted among my classmates were even worse. So I made up my mind that there should be at least one student in our school who will learn more and contribute a little to the theme about this outstanding American.

### **I. The Story of Lincoln's Making**

In our English textbook we read that Lincoln is honored and loved by Americans for his honesty, intelligence and humanity. I think everyone would be proud of having such personality traits. In order to understand the origin of these traits, we should go back to Hodgenville, Kentucky to a poor log cabin where his roots come from. Lincoln never liked to talk much about his early life. As he said "my early life can all be condensed into a simple sentence and that sentence you will find in Gray's Elegy – "the short and simple annals of the poor". I am sure that some very important things of his early life helped him in his making. From my point of view they were love, education, silence and ambition.

**Love.** Lincoln once said, "All that I am or even hope to be I owe to my mother." Lincoln's mother and later his stepmother raised him and his sister in the atmosphere of love and taught them to be good and kind to the kin and to the world. Lincoln would become a good father for his own children and would write, "Love is the chain whereby to bind a child to its parents."

**Education.** Lincoln was fortunate for there were some people in his life who helped him with his "eddcation", as he would have pronounced it. But mostly Lincoln educated himself. He sought to educate himself. He lost himself in the adventures of Arabian Nights, Aesop's Fables.

He was thrilled by a biography of George Washington by Parson Weems. The book called *Lessons in Elocution*, offered advice on public speaking. Weems gave way to Voltaire and Thomas Paine, to Burns and Black Stone, to Shakespeare. All these books affected him deeply and developed his inquiring mind that cut to the narrow of facts and ideas.

**Silence.** Though Lincoln was a good – humored, easy – going young man, but he was largely a loner, alone in the fields and forests and silence found himself for her own. Carl Sandberg writes, "In the making of him, the element of silence was immense."

**Ambition.** Lincoln may have seemed like a common man. But he wasn't. His friends agreed that he was one of the most ambitious people they had ever known. At the age of twenty-one Lincoln worked at all sorts of odd jobs. But in fact the law intrigued him. It would give him a chance to rise in the world, to earn a respected place in the community. We can't but admire his persistence in his struggle to rise above his log-cabin origins and the ambition to improve himself.

## **II. Lincoln's Idea of Democracy**

In Lincoln's times his homeland was a country where slavery was a common place. His position on slavery began at the age of seventeen when in New Orleans he saw black men, women and children in chains and auctioned off like cattle. And he would never forget this sight. In Illinois, Lincoln's home state blacks paid taxes but could not vote, testify in court, or attend schools.

Early in his career, Lincoln made few public statements about slavery. As a twenty-eight-years-old legislator, he recorded his belief that slavery was "founded on both injustice and bad policy." Ten years later, as a congressman, he voted with his party to stop the spread of slavery, and he introduced, his bill to outlaw slavery in the nation's capital.

Lincoln was "thunderstruck and stunned" by the Kansas – Nebraska Act introduced by his old political rival Stephen Douglas who had opened the gates for slavery, to expand and grow and establish itself permanently. Lincoln told his audiences that slavery was a "monstrous injustice." And it was not only wrong, it threatened the rights of everyone.

In the end, slavery would undermine the very foundations of democracy. "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master", Lincoln declared. "This expresses my idea of democracy."

Lincoln had been studying the history of the nation, pondering the words and ideals of the Founding Fathers. He believed that the corner-stone of the American experiment in democracy was the Declaration of Independence, which states that "all men are created equal", and that all are entitled to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." He felt that the Declaration of Independence expressed the highest political truths in history, and that blacks and whites alike were entitled to the rights it spelled out. In 1856 Lincoln joined the Republicans and as a Republican he launched his campaign before twelve hundred delegates at the State Republican Convention in Springfield. Where was the nation headed? Lincoln asked them: "A house divided against itself cannot stand." I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free."

After the debates by 1860 Lincoln was being mentioned as a possible candidate for president. And though he doubted that he could win, but on Election Day – November 6, 1860 – he was greeted by fireworks and torchlight parades. Lincoln won election to the Presidency at a time when the nation's survival was at risk. He refused to allow secession to disrupt the Union, but the South had made its decision and at 4:30 A.M. on April 12, 1861, the confederate States of America fired the first shots in a war that had become an endless nightmare and would kill 618,000 American men, in both gray and blue, many of them scarcely more than boys.

### **III. The Great Emancipator**

Lincoln was a political realist and knew that the slavery question could not be changed by the stroke of a pen or a sword or by the dictates of personal idealism. "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union". He doubted that it could be done without bold and drastic measures. The Emancipation Proclamation signed by his full name became that measure. "If my name ever goes into history," he said, "it will be for this act." Throughout the North, opponents of slavery hailed the measure and black people rejoiced.

On November 19, 1863 at Gettysburg Lincoln spoke the words that would be remembered all over the world as an American classic more than a hundred years later. The war was being fought, Lincoln, had said, to preserve America's bold experiment in democracy. A new kind of government had been created by the Founding Fathers in 1776. It was based on the idea that all men have an equal right to liberty, that they can govern themselves by free elections. The war was a test to determine if such a government could endure. Thousands of men had fought and died at Gettysburg so that the nation and its idea of democracy might survive. Now it

was up to the living to complete their unfinished work, to make sure that "those dead shall not have died in vain – that that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom-and that the government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

#### **IV. He Belongs to the Ages**

These famous words of the Gettysburg Address exalted the Declaration of Independence – not the Constitution – as the founding document, the source of "a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

His indictment of slavery spawned a new, more positive view of liberty, in which government had an obligation to ensure equality under the law. Lincoln's celebration of the declaration was embodied in the Civil War amendments to the Constitution. These not only abolished slavery (the Thirteenth Amendment), but also promised African Americans the right to vote (the Fifteenth Amendment) and guaranteed all Americans the "privileges and immunities of citizenship", and "equal protection of the law" (the Fourteenth Amendment). Lincoln's contribution was to establish the moral obligation of the national government to ensure equal opportunity. The Union's struggle, Lincoln told the special session of Congress in July 1861, was to maintain that "form and substance of government, whose leading object is to elevate the condition of men – to lift artificial weights from all shoulders – to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all-to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance in the race of life".

In 1900 Abraham Lincoln was selected to the National Hall of Fame because he remains a symbol of liberty. His memory nourishes by his great words and deeds and "now he belongs to the ages."

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