

UNIVERSITY OF PARDUBICE

FACULTY OF ARTS AND PHILOSOPHY

MASTER'S THESIS

2025

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Faculty of Arts and Philosophy

**Abraham Lincoln: Exploring the Character of “Honest Abe”
and “The Great Emancipator”**

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Master's Thesis

2025

Podklad pro zadání DIPLOMOVÉ práce studenta

Jméno a příjmení: **Bc. Martin Felkel**
Osobní číslo: **H23299**

Téma práce: **Abraham Lincoln: Exploring the Character of "Honest Abe" and "The Great Emancipator",**
Téma práce anglicky: **Abraham Lincoln: Exploring the Character of "Honest Abe" and "The Great Emancipator",**
Jazyk práce: **Angličtina**

Vedoucí práce: **Mgr. Olga Roebuck, Ph.D.**
Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Zásady pro vypracování:

Tato diplomová práce zkoumá osobnost Abrahama Lincolna prostřednictvím jeho politických názorů. Analýza jeho vybraných politických projevů a esejí bude kontrastována s protichůdnými postoji jeho politických protivníků a také zasazena do jeho obecného historického obrazu. V analýze budou zkoumány především Lincolnovy názory na otroctví a jeho role v abolicionistickém hnutí a poté i v období občanské války, zejména s přihlédnutím k Emancipation Proclamation a Gettysburg Address. V neposlední řadě se diplomant zaměří i na Lincolnův odkaz.

Seznam doporučené literatury:

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Podpis studenta:

Datum:

Podpis vedoucího práce:

Datum:

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V Pardubicích dne 19. 1. 2025

Martin Felkel

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Mgr. Olga Roebuck, Ph.D., for her valuable advice. I would also like to thank my family and friends for their support and encouragement.

ANNOTATION

The presented thesis explores the character of Abraham Lincoln through his political views. The analysis of his selected political speeches and essays is contrasted with the opposing stances of his political opponents and is also placed within his general historical depiction. The analysis primarily examines Lincoln's views on slavery and his role in the abolitionist movement and later during the American Civil War, particularly considering *the Emancipation Proclamation* and *the Gettysburg Address*. Lastly, the thesis also focuses on Lincoln's legacy.

KEY WORDS

Abraham Lincoln, Historical Depiction, President, Slavery, American Civil War, Legacy

NÁZEV

Abraham Lincoln: Exploring the Character of "Honest Abe" and "The Great Emancipator"

ANOTACE

Předložená práce zkoumá osobnost Abrahama Lincolna prostřednictvím jeho politických názorů. Analýza vybraných politických projevů a esejí je kontrastována s protichůdnými postoji jeho politických protivníků a také zasazena do jeho obecného historického obrazu. V analýze jsou zkoumány především Lincolnovy názory na otroctví a jeho role v abolicionistickém hnutí a poté i v období občanské války, zejména s přihlédnutím k Proklamací emancipace a Gettysburskému projevu. V neposlední řadě se práce zaměřuje také na Lincolnův odkaz.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Abraham Lincoln, Historické vyobrazení, Prezident, Otroctví, Americká občanská válka, Odkaz

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INTRODUCTION

Abraham Lincoln was, and continues to be, one of the most significant figures in American history. Lincoln, without a doubt, possessed the qualities to be a great leader. The foundation for his leadership lay in his unorthodox vision and remarkable determination. He was clearly a unique and profoundly influential statesman. Therefore, it is logical that Lincoln's life and legacy have inspired a wide range of works, from historical analyses to political essays, speeches, and cultural narratives. However, the perception of Lincoln as a leader and, perhaps more importantly, as a person has evolved over time. The way Lincoln is viewed today differs significantly from how he was perceived during his lifetime and in the years immediately following his death.

Lincoln's reputation as a gifted speaker and leader was set by pivotal events and texts like *the Emancipation Proclamation* and *the Gettysburg Address*. Despite this prestige, a contemporary historian, Joseph Fornieri, notes that Lincoln's leadership was not universally celebrated during his [Lincoln's] lifetime.¹ The American Civil War and its catastrophic effects also played an important part in providing a challenging setting for Lincoln's presidency, as his stance on abolitionism was often criticized from both sides of the political spectrum. Consequently, this polarized perception is one of the main reasons why Lincoln's legacy has undergone a variety of reinterpretations over the last few centuries.

The evolution of Lincoln's public image is a frequently discussed topic by many scholars. In particular, his most famous sobriquets, "Honest Abe" and "The Great Emancipator", are often reflected in relation to broader changes in societal values and historical inquiry. Initially, Lincoln's pragmatic approach to the presidency, together with his carefully calculated moves toward emancipation, led some abolitionists believe he was not radical enough. However, others celebrated him as a moral visionary who navigated politics with unparalleled wisdom and integrity. Over time, the image of Lincoln as a unifying figure and a martyr for freedom has gained prominence cementing his place as a symbol of moral leadership.

This transformation of Lincoln's legacy uncovers shifts in the cultural and historical understanding of his era. Thus, his leadership during the Civil War is nowadays analysed not only for its immediate effects on the Union but also for its enduring impact on concepts of national identity and equality. As with Jane Austen's rise to literary prominence, Lincoln's posthumous acclaim has offered deeper analyses of his life and personality. Also, the historical

¹ Joseph R. Fornieri, and Sara Vaugh Gabbard, *Lincoln's America: 1809-1865* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 30.

and cultural context that shaped his decisions is now explored from different points of view. The analysed themes range from his rhetoric and political strategies to the personal convictions that underpinned his actions. The phenomenon of Lincoln's enduring legacy has allowed his presidency and moral philosophy to be studied with greater nuance. His life and work have become focal points for exploring themes of leadership, morality, and the complex interplay between personal beliefs and political pragmatism. Moreover, Lincoln's speeches and writings inspire analysts that delve into the cultural and ideological landscapes of 19th-century America. Ultimately, the evolving interpretations of Lincoln's life and leadership demonstrate the dynamic nature of historical memory. His story, shaped by the challenges of his time, continues to resonate and offers valuable lessons on resilience, justice, and the pursuit of unity in the face of profound division.

The thesis is evenly divided into theoretical and analytical parts. The theoretical part includes the first chapter, which provides an outline of a methodological framework used throughout the thesis. This chapter discusses general historical depictions and perspectives on Lincoln from various angles. The methodological framework consisting of four chosen approaches – Jörn Rüsen's theory of historical depiction; cultural studies criticism; New Historicism; and political discourse analysis – is introduced. To enable the thesis to conduct an adequate analysis, the context and specific applications of these approaches are further elaborated. The second theoretical chapter explores the historical and cultural context of Abraham Lincoln. In particular, it introduces Lincoln's background, political career, and rhetoric. Furthermore, the second chapter presents Lincoln as an antislavery moralist and discusses his notions. Finally, it introduces the most challenging time period of Lincoln's political career – the American Civil War.

The analytical part consists of three chapters. It begins with the third chapter, which addresses divergent interpretations of Abraham Lincoln's persona. After Lincoln's most famous nicknames, "Honest Abe" and "The Great Emancipator," are discussed, the abolitionists' attitude towards Lincoln and Lincoln's own perception of himself is defined. The fourth chapter analyses Lincoln's celebrated sobriquet, "The Savior," strongly associated with two pivotal texts – *the Emancipation Proclamation* and *the Gettysburg Address*. To conclude, the fifth and final chapter explores Lincoln's reputation as a martyr.

Ultimately, the presented thesis aims to analyse Lincoln's character by exploring various interpretations and attitudes towards his personality and political persona. The thesis confronts Lincoln's general historical depiction and its perception through analyses of both Lincoln's and opposing political speeches, essays, and pamphlets. It seeks to explore Lincoln's

scope of ideas, beliefs, and statements regarding slavery and abolitionism and to examine his role under the impact of the Civil War and how *the Emancipation Proclamation* and *the Gettysburg Address* show Lincoln's evolving views. Finally, the thesis analyses the reputation of Lincoln as a martyr together with the legacy that surrounds him.

1. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The methodological framework used in this thesis plays a central role in examining the versatile character and enduring legacy of Abraham Lincoln. Through an interdisciplinary approach, which integrates the theory of historical depiction by Jörn Rüsen², cultural studies criticism, New Historicism, and political discourse analysis, the thesis delves into the complexities of Lincoln's character and the broader ideological narratives of his time. These methodologies collectively offer the tools necessary to explore Lincoln's historical depiction and era. They consult the constructions, debates, and memories of Lincoln's legacy, which enables a deeper understanding of the enduring significance of his contributions to American history.

In order to conduct a sufficient analysis throughout the whole thesis, it is essential to introduce all the methodological approaches implemented in this thesis. The first utilised approach is Jörn Rüsen's theory of historical depiction, which emphasizes that historical narratives are not mere factual accounts but rather cultural artifacts full of meaning and purpose.³ In his work *Evidence and Meaning*, Rüsen highlights that historical representations serve as a medium for constructing collective memory, guiding societal values, and shaping cultural identities.⁴ Thus, this approach urges to explore the relationship between historical experience and societal context, resulting in a deeper and more nuanced view of the past. Historical consciousness is a frequently mentioned term in relation with Rüsen's theory. He defines historical consciousness as "a person's ability to orient themselves in time, which is crucial for interpreting events meaningfully."⁵ This concept highlights how both individual and collective memory play a vital role in shaping historical narratives. The framework [Rüsen's] identifies several types of historical narratives, which reflect numerous ways of interpreting the past. These narratives examine the chosen problematic from different angles, such as how people experience time, the influence of historical figures, and moral reasoning. One of the narratives is a genetic narrative, which refers to "a form of historical tracing of an idea, concept, or phenomenon over time."⁶ In addition, Rüsen informs that in a specific context such type of a narrative seeks to establish a cause-and-effect relationship by connecting several historical events, cultural conditions, or intellectual movements to explain how something came into being.⁷ This definition is the main reason the thesis employs Rüsen's theory of historical

² Jörn Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning: A Theory of Historical Studies* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017).

³ Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning*, 28.

⁴ Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning*, 28.

⁵ Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning*, 28.

⁶ Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning*, 29.

⁷ Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning*, 29.

depiction. It seeks to trace Lincoln's evolution as a leader, exploring how his public persona, decisions, and political rhetoric were shaped by the cultural and ideological landscape of his time. By situating Lincoln within this framework, the thesis examines how Lincoln's assassination and posthumous legacy were interpreted and mythologized. This methodology allows the thesis to analyse how Lincoln's death elevated his status to that of a national hero and symbol of unity. The Jörn Rüsen's theory of historical depiction is also utilized to explore how Lincoln's memory has been reconstructed across different historical periods. Overall, Rüsen's theory is a solid way to understand historical consciousness, but it is important to recognize its limitations and consider the bigger picture. Some critics, including Andrew Linchenko, contend that Rüsen's focus on the narrative could result in oversimplified or subjective portrayals of intricate historical events, which might compromise the level of objectivity typically required in historical research.⁸ History is always changing and people interpret events in diverse ways. Therefore, another methodological approach, which is also flexible, is necessary to allow the thesis to analyse certain aspects from multiple perspectives.

The thesis incorporates such a flexible approach into its methodology by including the cultural studies criticism, which in fact complements Rüsen's theory. This approach broadens the thesis' focus to include the societal and political implications of historical narratives. As Stuart Hall, one of the main figures in the field of cultural studies, states: "This perspective views history not merely as a record of events but as a dynamic process that shapes cultures and social identities [...]."⁹ These words, therefore, suggest that the cultural studies approach looks at how historical narratives are constructed and also discusses their possible political implications. It [cultural studies approach] explores how depictions of history serve not only to record the past but also to shape collective memory, and national ideology.¹⁰ Subsequently, the cultural studies criticism allows for the exploration of political events, social structures, economic conditions, and cultural movements in a more profound manner. However, there exists one significant concern regarding cultural studies criticism, which involves the fragmentation of our history. In his article Peter Burke argues: "As historians engage more with other disciplines, they risk losing touch with the broader field of history itself [...] scholars become overly focused on specific dialogues and neglect the larger historical context."¹¹

⁸ Andrew Linchenko, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness in the Jörn Rüsen's Philosophy and Theory of History," *Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation Lipetsk* (2015): 2, <https://www.doi.org/10.1590/S2175-62362012000300015>

⁹ Stuart Hall, *Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies* (London: Routledge, 2006), 272.

¹⁰ Hall, *Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies*, 272.

¹¹ Peter Burke, "Cultural History: An Interdisciplinary Approach," *Cambridge University Press* (2024): 88, <https://www.doi.org/10.1017/s0392192123000275>.

Therefore, while interdisciplinary approaches enrich historical analysis, they also pose the risk of isolating certain aspects of history rather than presenting a cohesive and comprehensive narrative. Nevertheless, all the information provided so far underscores the necessity of including cultural studies criticism in the methodological framework of this thesis. Cultural studies criticism of Abraham Lincoln offers a deeper look at the relationship between his character and the societal norms of his time. It suggests that Lincoln's legacy is influenced not just by his actions, but also by the cultural environment in which he lived. This viewpoint emphasizes the complexity of Lincoln as both a national icon and a figure shaped by his era. By discussing notions of various authors of cultural studies criticism, the thesis examines how Lincoln's legacy has been framed and appropriated in different contexts, while exploring the symbolic power of his image in fostering collective memory. The contested nature of Lincoln's portrayal as both a champion of freedom and a pragmatist navigating complex political realities is discussed to provide a nuanced understanding of his role in American history. Furthermore, this methodological approach is used to examine the public reception of *the Emancipation Proclamation* and *the Gettysburg Address* in the 19th-century America and their later mythologization, assessing Lincoln's evolving cultural symbolism and his role in shaping national memory as "The Savior." Finally, the approach also underlines the moral imperative of equality, demonstrating how historical depictions serve cultural and political needs.

Another methodological approach used in the thesis is New Historicism. New Historicism arose in the late 20th century as a reaction against formalist approaches, particularly New Criticism, which viewed texts in isolation. Therefore, the perspective of New Historicism, pioneered by scholars like Stephen Greenblatt, emphasizes the cultural and social contexts that shape historical depictions and historical figures.¹² It also asserts that historical accounts and cultural products are inseparable from the specific historical circumstances, power structures, and ideologies of their time.¹³ In addition, as David S. Reynolds, a renowned professor of American studies, states: "Traditional biographical approaches seem insufficient to New Historicism and thus it advocates for a more complex understanding of historical figures like Abraham Lincoln."¹⁴ Consequently, New Historicism argues that its analysis considers uncovering power relations and hidden biases in representations and understandings of historical results.¹⁵ However, while New Historicism offers a colourful palette for analysing

¹² Stephen Greenblatt, *Modern Intellectual History: New Historicism, and Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 249.

¹³ Greenblatt, *Modern Intellectual History*, 249.

¹⁴ David S. Reynolds, *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 19.

¹⁵ Greenblatt, *Modern Intellectual History*, 250.

Lincoln's complex and complicated character, it also encounters some criticism. David S. Reynolds informs that this approach faces critiques for potentially oversimplifying the complexities of historical events and figures.¹⁶ Reynolds further explains: "[...] it [New Historicism] can obscure the individual agency of historical actors by overly emphasizing cultural determinism."¹⁷ Nevertheless, taking all of this information into consideration, this thesis utilises New Historicism as an essential tool for situating Lincoln within the context of vital texts such as *the Emancipation Proclamation* and *Gettysburg Address*, as well as within the ideological and political currents of 19th-century America. New Historicism and its framework help reveal how these texts function not only as responses to an immediate crisis but also as strategic efforts to redefine national identity. By uncovering the interplay between text, context, and power, this approach provides a critical lens through which it is possible to understand the lasting impact of Lincoln's leadership.

Political discourse analysis is the final methodological approach the thesis utilises. Political discourse analysis serves as a crucial approach for this thesis, providing tools to analyse the complex interplay of language, ideology, and power that defined Lincoln's political era. By examining political discourse as both a reflection and a constituent of political actions, it offers insights into how Lincoln navigated, shaped, and contributed to the prevailing narratives of his time. As T. A. van Dijk notes:

It [political discourse analysis] goes beyond merely identifying political discourse as the language of politicians [...]. It critically examines the reproduction of power, ideologies, and inequalities through political language, as well as the forms of resistance and counter-narratives that challenge dominant structures. Political discourse analysis can consider how the events are portrayed and what commentary they offer on the historical moment.¹⁸

This dual focus on various dimensions makes the political discourse analysis an invaluable tool for exploring Lincoln's speeches, writings, and political strategies. Additionally, in this context Van Dijk refers to discourse as "the dominant debates and ideological currents shaping political action and public opinion."¹⁹ Therefore, it allows the thesis to examine the broader political climate, rather than solely Lincoln's language and rhetoric. It examines how Lincoln's views on issues such as abolitionism, emancipation, and national unity evolved over time, reflecting the shifting political and social dynamics of his era. All of this fundamentally aligns with the

¹⁶ Reynolds, *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times*, 22.

¹⁷ Reynolds, *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times*, 22.

¹⁸ Teun A. van Dijk, "What is a Political Discourse Analysis?" *Universiteit van Amsterdam* 11 (1997): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1075/bjl.11.03dij>.

¹⁹ Van Dijk, "What is a Political Discourse Analysis?" 13.

cultural studies criticism approach. Furthermore, Lincoln's ability to adapt his political rhetoric to resonate with diverse audiences, from abolitionists to moderates, is examined. Additionally, Lincoln's rhetorical strategies, particularly his use of framing, repetition, metaphor, and persuasive language, all of which he used to craft messages that were both unifying and divisive, are explored. Subsequently, this framework explores how Lincoln navigated and contributed to the prevailing narratives, framing the Civil War as both a struggle to preserve the Union and a moral imperative to end slavery. To conclude, political discourse analysis allows the thesis to explore how Lincoln positioned himself within debates. By examining shifts in the political discourse and comparing Lincoln's narratives with those of his contemporaries, the approach highlights his ability to redefine the ideological trajectory of the United States during one of its most transformative periods.

In conclusion, when comparing all the methodological approaches, it becomes evident that they emphasize the constructed nature of historical depictions, though each addresses it from slightly different perspectives. All these views demonstrate that historical depictions are not merely passive reflections of the past but rather active participants in shaping cultural and political narratives. Ultimately, the methodological framework provides a comprehensive foundation for the analytical part of the thesis and ensures a coherent structure while justifying the analytical choices in the subsequent analytical chapters.

2. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

This theoretical chapter aims to outline the historical and cultural context of Abraham Lincoln's life and era. Hence, the chapter concerns the most substantial facts that are generally known about Lincoln's background and early life. Subsequently, it concentrates on revealing the context and evolution of how these facts influenced and formed Lincoln's personality and his future career in politics. Furthermore, the time period from the outset of Lincoln's political career to its climax of Lincoln becoming the 16th American president is covered. It also includes the political rhetoric of Lincoln and introduces his relations to both the Republican and Democratic parties. Moreover, this chapter depicts Lincoln as an antislavery moralist and intimates the contemporary ambiguous perception of Lincoln's political stands and statements concerning slavery and abolitionism. To conclude, the most challenging time period of Lincoln's political career, the Civil War, is introduced. The basics of the conflict are described, and Lincoln is placed within its context.

Outlining the historical and cultural context of Abraham Lincoln's life and era is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of his character, political decisions, and legacy. Lincoln's persona, which was shaped by his background and a demanding political environment of 19th-century America, cannot be fully appreciated without considering the broader social, cultural, and historical challenges that influenced him. His rise from humble beginnings to become the 16th American president was deeply intertwined with the ideological and political battles of his time. As Joseph Fornieri, a prominent critic of Lincoln, suggests:

The context of Lincoln's era, which was marked by the institution of slavery, moral and political divide between the North and South, and the start of the War, provided the framework within which Lincoln's decisions, such as the Emancipation Proclamation and the Gettysburg Address, were shaped.²⁰

Without this context, it becomes difficult to appreciate the significance of Lincoln's political stances, the evolution of his views on slavery, and the challenges he faced as a leader in times of unprecedented national crisis. Fornieri adds: "Understanding the cultural and political environment of Lincoln's era helps interpret his political rhetoric and complex opinions."²¹ Thus, Lincoln's speeches and famous addresses, were not only responses to immediate events but also strategic efforts to shape national identity and morality. Lincoln's words were aimed at a divided nation and influenced by competing political ideologies. The racially prejudiced

²⁰ Joseph R. Fornieri, and Sara Vaugh Gabbard, *Lincoln's America: 1809-1865* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 30.

²¹ Fornieri, and Gabbard, *Lincoln's America: 1809-1865*, 30.

society of the time with opposing views on human rights created an unstable environment Lincoln had to navigate delicately through political alliances. Moreover, the rise of the Republican Party and Lincoln's own relationship with both, the Republicans and Democrats, shaped his political strategies, which makes it necessary to understand these parties' contrasting positions on slavery and unity. By situating Lincoln within this historical context, the thesis gains insight into his political pragmatism, moral convictions, and the interplay between his personal beliefs and political actions.

The exploration of the historical context helps clarify Lincoln's role in the abolitionist movement and allows for various perceptions of his struggle for freedom. Many scholars discuss Lincoln and his stances regarding slavery. Some see Lincoln only as "The Great Emancipator" but some contradict this perception with notable irritation. Such irritation is apparent in Lerone Bennett's assertion that Lincoln's reputation as "The Great Emancipator" is undeserved and he was, in fact, a white supremacist.²² Bennett's critique has been met with responses from Eric Foner, a historian, who acknowledges that while Lincoln was not a complete abolitionist and held views typical of his time, he displayed a remarkable capacity for moral and political growth.²³ Nevertheless, these inconsistent views make it necessary to consider how Lincoln's actions were perceived in their own time and how the perceptions have shifted. In addition, Fornieri illuminates:

Lincoln's own views on slavery evolved over time [...] influenced by both personal reflections and the changing political landscape. Understanding of these shifts requires a nuanced grasp of the political, economic, and social forces that shaped his decisions.²⁴

By exploring these factors, this thesis aims to offer an insight into how Lincoln's leadership during the war was not just about preserving the Union but also about reimagining the nation's ideals in the face of moral dilemmas.

In conclusion, a thorough exploration of the historical and cultural context of Lincoln's life and era is essential for fully grasping the significance of his leadership and decisions. Understanding the broader social, political, and economic forces that shaped Lincoln's time allows the thesis to create a more comprehensive interpretation of the challenges he faced, the motivations that drove him, and the actions he ultimately took. By delving into the complexities of his era, including the divisive national debate over slavery, the sectional tensions that led to

²² Lerone Bennett Jr., *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 2000), 72.

²³ Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 116.

²⁴ Fornieri, and Gabbard, *Lincoln's America: 1809-1865*, 30.

the Civil War, and the ideological conflicts that defined 19th-century America, this thesis gains a more nuanced perspective on Lincoln's legacy. Examining historical and cultural environment in which Lincoln operated enables a greater appreciation of the moral weight of his contributions to the fight for freedom, equality, and the preservation of the Union. This contextual framework is not only vital for understanding Lincoln's immediate impact on American history but also for recognizing the lasting influence of his leadership on subsequent generations, shaping discussions on democracy, civil rights, and national unity into the modern era.

BACKGROUND OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809 on a farm in Kentucky. His family belonged to the class of self-sufficient frontier farmers. Thus, Lincoln's life was marked by hard labour, limited opportunities, and minimal formal education. As Michael Burlingame, an American historian noted for his works on Lincoln, explains: "These early hardships played a fundamental role in shaping Lincoln's character, fostering both a deep sense of resilience and an insatiable drive for self-improvement."²⁵ Lincoln's upbringing was defined not only by economic hardships but a personal loss as well. His father, Thomas Lincoln, was a farmer and carpenter with little interest in intellectual pursuit, while his mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, was more nurturing and reportedly admired her son's curiosity.²⁶ However, when Nancy died in 1818, nine-year-old Lincoln was left with no one to consider his educational aspirations. Fortunately, his father's quick remarriage brought back stability to the household. Burlingame illuminates: "Lincoln developed a close relationship with his stepmother, who also recognized his potential and encouraged his education."²⁷ Despite receiving less than a year of formal schooling, Lincoln developed a remarkable intellect through self-education. "He read every book he could find, borrowing from neighbours and reading by candlelight after long days of physical labour,"²⁸ Burlingame adds. Among Lincoln's favourite works were "Aesop's Fables, the Bible, Shakespeare, and law books,"²⁹ which reflects his ability to analyse complex arguments. Therefore, desire for education, despite Lincoln's humble origins, later shaped his rhetorical style and enhanced his ability to articulate ideas with clarity.

²⁵ Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Volume 2)* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 264.

²⁶ Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Volume 2)*, 264.

²⁷ Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Volume 2)*, 264.

²⁸ Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Volume 2)*, 264.

²⁹ Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Volume 2)*, 265.

From an early age, besides a sharp intellect, Lincoln also displayed a deep sense of humour, and an unusual capacity for self-reflection. These personality traits are acknowledged by Burlingame, who adds: “Lincoln’s storytelling abilities became one of his defining traits, allowing him to engage and persuade those around him [...] yet beneath this light-hearted persona lay an unusual individual of great ambition and strategic thinking.”³⁰ Lincoln often presented himself as a humble and unassuming figure, but his ambition was “likely fuelled by a profound sense of social and intellectual inferiority,”³¹ which drove him to rise above. Growing up in rural poverty, Lincoln was acutely aware of his limited social standing and worked tirelessly to overcome the constraints of his background. He had no desire to follow in his father’s footsteps as a farmer or carpenter, nor did he wish to remain confined to the rural world of his youth. “He viewed his father as lacking ambition, complacent, and uninterested in intellectual growth,”³² traits that Lincoln actively sought to reject in himself. His dissatisfaction with his origins became the driving force behind his lifelong pursuit of education and self-improvement. Lincoln saw knowledge as “the key to advancement, and he developed an unshakable belief in hard work and meritocracy.”³³ These values later became central to his political ideology, as he consistently advocated for education, equal opportunities, and that individuals are not confined by the circumstances of their birth.

While Lincoln’s humble beginnings seemed like a disadvantage, he later transformed them into a powerful element of his public identity. As Burlingame explains: “Lincoln carefully constructed the image of the self-made man, who rises from poverty through determination and perseverance.”³⁴ Burlingame also includes Lincoln’s self-deprecating humour visible in his remark: “My political manoeuvres are as short and simple as an old woman’s dance,”³⁵ which allowed him to appear relatable and unpretentious. However, beneath this carefully crafted image lay a brilliant strategist whose ability to navigate political challenges was anything but simple. Lincoln’s difficult childhood shaped the qualities that defined his leadership, and a deep understanding of ordinary Americans. Earl Schenck Miers, a highly praised historian, claims: “Lincoln developed an ability to connect with people across social classes,”³⁶ which made him an effective and compelling leader. Miers adds: “His early struggles did not foster resentment

³⁰ Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Volume 2)*, 255.

³¹ Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Volume 2)*, 266.

³² Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Volume 2)*, 266.

³³ Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Volume 2)*, 266.

³⁴ Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Volume 2)*, 267.

³⁵ Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Volume 2)*, 268.

³⁶ Earl Schenck Miers, *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809-1865* (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1960), 35.

or defeatism; rather, they solidified his belief in democracy, individual effort, and the right of all people to pursue a better life.”³⁷ Thus, from the isolation of the frontier to the highest office in the nation, Lincoln’s personal journey was as extraordinary as his later political achievements.

To conclude, gaining a deeper understanding of Abraham Lincoln’s early years of his life is essential to fully grasp the forces that shaped his character, values, and political ideology. Lincoln’s formative lessons, ranging from his humble upbringing to his self-education and early struggles, played a crucial role in shaping the man he later became. These early influences not only moulded Lincoln’s outlook on morality and justice, but also had a lasting impact on his political strategies, leadership, and rhetorical style. His firsthand experiences with hardship and limited opportunities instilled in him a deep belief in equality of opportunity and the importance of democracy, themes that later defined his presidency. By examining the episodes and challenges of his youth, one can better appreciate how Lincoln’s struggles forged the resilience and determination that allowed him to navigate the turbulent political landscape of his time and ultimately guide the nation through its most defining crisis – the American Civil War.

LINCOLN’S POLITICAL CAREER AND RHETORIC

Abraham Lincoln and his rise to the presidency was propelled by his ambitious and determined character. Historians, such as Earl Schenck Miers, suggest that Lincoln’s poor background and growing up with a father, who was content with his simple life, made Lincoln’s own ambition even more pronounced.³⁸ From a young age, Lincoln desired more than his father, which encouraged him to dream of achieving much greater things. David H. Donald, a historian known for his biography of Lincoln, argues that this ambition was often hidden behind Lincoln’s public persona of humility, as he sought to distance himself from his rural beginnings through his self-education.³⁹ Nevertheless, Lincoln’s early political career was undoubtedly affected by his intellectual curiosity. As a self-taught student, Lincoln overcame his modest upbringing and emerged as a promising politician. By the time he was twenty-five-years-old, Lincoln had already been elected to the Illinois State Legislature in 1834, while also building a successful law practice. In his community, Lincoln was known as “a thoughtful, persuasive speaker, whether in courtrooms, stores, or at public meetings,”⁴⁰ thus people were drawn to his

³⁷ Miers, *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809-1865*, 35.

³⁸ Miers, *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809-1865*, 35.

³⁹ David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 344.

⁴⁰ Donald, *Lincoln*, 345.

charismatic presence. Donald highlights: “This intellectual transformation, combined with a deep commitment to public service, marked the start of his political journey.”⁴¹ However, Lincoln’s entrance into politics was not entirely altruistic. As Burlingame notes:

Lincoln’s personal motivations for entering public life were more about self-promotion and the need for recognition than a purely ideological commitment [...] his early political aspirations were partly shaped by a wish for popularity and improvement of his self-esteem.⁴²

For many politicians, including Lincoln, the victory in elections and the applause of public speeches served as an affirmation of their worth. These early experiences boosted Lincoln’s confidence and laid the foundation for his later political influence.

In his early political years, Lincoln was known for his sharp wit, sarcasm, and often biting humour. As a young man in the competitive world of frontier politics, he used these qualities to “undermine and ridicule his opponents.”⁴³ Especially in the 1830s and 1840s, Lincoln wrote several satirical newspaper articles mocking his political adversaries. He used humour that ranged from clever to rather cruel. Though these tactics helped him gain attention and many allies, they also revealed a more arrogant side of Lincoln. In 1842, a pivotal event forced Lincoln to reflect on his behaviour and approach to politics. After series of mocking articles, James Shields, Lincoln’s political opponent, decided to challenge him to a sword duel. The two men met outside Illinois, but the duel was cancelled at the last moment when Lincoln sincerely apologized for his behaviour. Michael Burlingame notes that this incident signified Lincoln’s recognition of the need to evolve from a sarcastic young politician into a more self-aware and empathetic leader.⁴⁴ Therefore, despite appearing insignificant at first, this moment proved to be turning point in Lincoln’s personal growth. Also, during his retreat from politics in the 1840s, Lincoln spent considerable time in reflection, which ultimately led to a significant shift in his character. Donald states: “His personal development during this time was crucial in transforming him from a local politician into a national figure.”⁴⁵

Lincoln’s return to politics came in 1854, in response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which allowed the possibility of slavery in territories previously free. This controversial decision reignited Lincoln’s moral opposition to slavery and led him to deliver a series of public speeches on the Kansas-Nebraska Act. As Donald explains:

⁴¹ Donald, *Lincoln*, 345.

⁴² Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Volume 2)*, 288.

⁴³ Donald, *Lincoln*, 345.

⁴⁴ Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Volume 2)*, 288.

⁴⁵ Donald, *Lincoln*, 346.

These speeches, particularly his Peoria Speech of 1854, demonstrated the significant evolution of Lincoln's political thought [...] Lincoln argued that the expansion of slavery was morally wrong and incompatible with the nation's founding principles of liberty and equality.⁴⁶

Therefore, Lincoln's rhetoric during this period reflected a deepening moral commitment to ending spread of slavery, as he believed slavery was a threat to the future of the whole nation.

Another important moment for Lincoln and his political career was the collapse of the Whig Party. Miers verifies Lincoln's political stance by stating: "Lincoln identified as a Whig throughout the whole 1840s and early 1850s, as he supported their economic policies of internal improvements [...]."⁴⁷ However, the Whig Party was divided on the issue of slavery. Northern Whigs were increasingly opposed to slavery's expansion, while Southern Whigs were more willing to accommodate pro-slavery policies. Ultimately, the Kansas-Nebraska Act with its notions effectively destroyed the Whig Party, as its members could not reconcile their differences any longer. Although a deeply unfortunate event for some, it provided Lincoln with an opportunity to align himself with a new political force – the Republican Party. This party, founded on a platform opposing the expansion of slavery, became the new home for Lincoln's growing anti-slavery stance. By 1856, Lincoln publicly declared his support for the Republican Party and his efforts to build a coalition against slavery were aligned with the party's goals.

In 1858, Lincoln delivered his famous speech about a divided house. He declared: "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free [...] I do expect it will cease to be divided."⁴⁸ This speech not only marked a clear break with the ideology of popular sovereignty, promoted by Lincoln's democratic political opponent and the man behind the infamous Kansas-Nebraska Act, Stephen A. Douglas, but also resonated with many people in Illinois and all over the nation. Hence, the speech portrayed Lincoln as a moral leader and helped establish him as a leading voice in the anti-slavery movement, widely known as abolitionism.

In that same year, 1858, Lincoln decided to challenge Stephen A. Douglas for his seat in the U. S. Senate. Although Lincoln lost the election, the Lincoln versus Douglas debates gained national attention and sparked numerous discussions not only about abolitionism but also about the nation's future. "Lincoln persuasively articulated arguments against the expansion of slavery, combining it with his moral clarity [...]."⁴⁹ Miers asserts. This ability of

⁴⁶ Donald, *Lincoln*, 348.

⁴⁷ Miers, *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809-1865*, 87.

⁴⁸ Miers, *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809-1865*, 89.

⁴⁹ Miers, *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809-1865*, 89.

renowned public speaking helped Lincoln earn the respect of national Republican leaders, which ultimately led to his nomination for president in 1860.

The presidential elections of 1860, which once again put Lincoln against Stephen A. Douglas, highlighted Lincoln's opposition to slavery. Donald reports: "Douglas argued that democracy could coexist with slavery, while Lincoln emphasized that slavery was morally indefensible and must be contained."⁵⁰ Lincoln's victory marked a decisive moment in the history of the United States, as his election was viewed as a direct threat to the Southern way of life, leading to the secession of seven Southern states from the Union. This moment marked the beginning of the American Civil War – the largest and most destructive conflict in the Western world between the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the onset of World War I in 1914.

When Lincoln was inaugurated as president in 1861, his views on slavery were still evolving. As Eric Foner points out: "Lincoln did not initially advocate for the immediate abolition of slavery in the states where it already existed, but instead sought to prevent its expansion into another territories."⁵¹ However, the course of the war and Lincoln's interactions with African-American leaders, such as Frederick Douglass, deeply influenced Lincoln's views on slavery and racial equality. As Eric Foner considers: "Lincoln's transformation became especially evident in his decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, which declared the freedom of all slaves in territories held by the Confederacy."⁵² This act signalled a major shift in the overall approach to slavery. It moved beyond containment to outright abolition in the Southern states. James M. McPherson, a professor of history, argues: "This moment [the Emancipation Proclamation] was a crucial turning point in the presidency of Abraham Lincoln and it marked the moment he fully embraced the moral imperative to end slavery."⁵³ The relationship between Lincoln and Frederick Douglass played a key role in this transformation. The two men met several times during the war, and Lincoln came to value advice of Douglass on emancipation issues as well as on rights of African-Americans. In 1865, Lincoln invited Douglass to the White House after his address and asked him for feedback on his speech. As McPherson reports: "Douglass, what did you think of my speech? There is no one whose opinion I value more than yours."⁵⁴ This was truly a powerful moment, given that the audience mostly consisted of white Americans, who may not have previously been

⁵⁰ Donald, *Lincoln*, 349.

⁵¹ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 281.

⁵² Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 281.

⁵³ James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 63.

⁵⁴ McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln*, 65.

confronted with such a perspective. Eric Foner further elucidates: “[...] reflects a profound shift in Lincoln’s personal growth, showing his evolving belief in racial equality, which would later be reflected in *the Thirteenth Amendment* and his legacy as the Great Emancipator.”⁵⁵

Ultimately, Abraham Lincoln’s political career, spanning from his early ambitions in Illinois to his pivotal leadership during the Civil War, was defined by a remarkable and deeply personal transformation. Initially, his motivations were influenced by a desire for political recognition, personal advancement, and the approval of his peers. However, over time, these ambitions evolved into a moral commitment to preserving the Union and eradicating the institution of slavery. His political evolution was not instantaneous but rather the result of years of self-education, introspection, and an increasing awareness of the moral and constitutional crisis the nation faced. Lincoln’s ability to redefine his views, adapt to changing political landscapes, and ultimately fight for the cause of abolition underscores his intellectual and ethical growth. Through tireless personal development, dedication to rhetorical mastery, and an unwavering belief in the principles of democracy, Lincoln emerged as one of the most significant and influential figures in American history. His journey, from a young politician eager for public recognition to a statesman who placed national unity and human dignity above personal ambitions, stands as one of the most admirable examples of growth and transformation in political leadership.

LINCOLN AS AN ANTISLAVERY MORALIST

Abraham Lincoln’s role as an antislavery moralist is a subject of considerable complexity, which reflects a gradual and often cautious evolution of his views on slavery and racial issues. Lincoln’s approach was initially marked by a strong emphasis on preserving the Union, often at the expense of immediate abolitionist aims. However, as the Civil War progressed, Lincoln’s moral convictions increasingly aligned with the broader antislavery movement. McPherson states: “Lincoln’s transformation, from a pragmatic politician focused on maintaining national unity to a leader dedicated to the legal and moral eradication of slavery [...] underscores the multifaceted nature of his antislavery stance,”⁵⁶ which explains Lincoln’s complicated views.

Lincoln’s first inaugural address clearly illustrates his initial priorities. In this address, he affirmed his commitment to preserving the Union. As Reynolds observes: “Lincoln explicitly stated that he had no intention of interfering with slavery where it already existed.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 282.

⁵⁶ McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln*, 65.

⁵⁷ Reynolds, *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times*, 374.

This stance was not merely rhetorical but was accompanied by political decisions that reflected a pragmatic approach to governance. Notably, Lincoln supported the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act. Reynolds refers to this law as “a controversial law that required the return of escaped enslaved individuals to their enslavers, in an attempt to appease the Southern states and prevent secession.”⁵⁸ Although Lincoln personally found the institution of slavery morally reprehensible, he initially deemed the survival of the Union as paramount. He believed that slavery, as the American democratic experiment, could not endure within a divided nation. Burlingame’s extensive research provides valuable insight into the formative influences that shaped Lincoln’s antislavery convictions. Unlike radical abolitionists, who often grounded their arguments in religious or universal moral principles, Lincoln’s opposition to slavery was rooted in his personal experiences with labour exploitation. Burlingame mentions one particular event of Lincoln’s life that supports this claim: “As a youth, Lincoln was sent by his father to work for neighbouring farmers, performing physically demanding labour for a meagre wage of twenty-five cents per day.”⁵⁹ Under existing laws, these wages legally belonged to Thomas Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln’s father. Burlingame posits that this fact irritated Lincoln deeply and fostered a sense of injustice within Lincoln, creating a personal association between his own labour exploitation and the systemic subjugation endured by enslaved individuals.⁶⁰ Though Lincoln and his situation were incomparable to the brutality of slavery, it instilled in him a lasting aversion to systems that denied people the right to the reward of their labour. This formative experience became a foundational element of Lincoln’s moral outlook. In his public rhetoric, Lincoln frequently emphasized the fundamental injustice of labour exploitation, framing slavery not only as a racial issue but also as an economic and moral failing. “He highlighted the hypocrisy of a society that celebrated individual enterprise while simultaneously denying millions of people the right to their own profit,”⁶¹ Burlingame explains. This economic side of the issue allowed Lincoln to appeal to a broader audience, including those who were not necessarily abolitionists but who viewed the integrity of free labour as essential to American identity.

As the national conflict over slavery intensified, views of Abraham Lincoln evolved from cautious pragmatism toward a more explicit antislavery stance. This shift was catalysed by key legislative and political developments, most notably the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska

⁵⁸ Reynolds, *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times*, 374.

⁵⁹ Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Volume 2)*, 688.

⁶⁰ Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Volume 2)*, 688.

⁶¹ Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Volume 2)*, 688.

Act in 1854. The Kansas-Nebraska Act allowed new territories to determine for themselves whether to permit slavery, which reignited national debates on the institution's expansion. Burlingame illuminates: "Abraham Lincoln's opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act marked a turning point in his political career and his abolitionist beliefs."⁶² Lincoln started to articulate a forceful critique of the act. Donald adds: "Lincoln condemned the expansion of slavery as both morally indefensible and a direct violation of the nation's founding principles of liberty and equality."⁶³ Lincoln used a strategy of constitutionalism which further defined his evolving antislavery position. In his work *Lincoln and the Abolitionists*, Fred Kaplan, a prominent American author and journalist, explains this strategy: "[...] antislavery constitutionalism, which emphasized using the legal framework of the Constitution to contain and ultimately dismantle slavery."⁶⁴ Strategy of using the Constitution as an advantage, allowed Lincoln to position himself as both a moral leader and a supporter of the law, enabling him to advocate for abolition within the bounds of American legal traditions. It was this balance between moral conviction and legal pragmatism that made Lincoln's antislavery rhetoric both palatable to moderates and effective in advancing the cause.

The Emancipation Proclamation, issued in 1863, represents the culmination of Lincoln's moral and political evolution. Though often criticized for its limited scope, as it freed enslaved individuals only in Confederate held territories, the proclamation was a decisive step in reframing the Civil War as a struggle against slavery. As Kaplan argues: "The Emancipation Proclamation was not merely a wartime measure but a moral declaration that fundamentally altered the character of the conflict."⁶⁵ It signalled Lincoln's full commitment to the cause of abolition and laid the groundwork for the eventual passage of *the Thirteenth Amendment*. James McPherson further underscores the ideological shift evident in Lincoln's later rhetoric by saying:

Lincoln frequently invoked the American ideal of upward mobility, arguing that slavery was an egregious violation of the principle that hard work should lead to personal advancement [...] in his speeches, Abraham Lincoln depicted the institution of slavery as a grotesque distortion of American values, one that condemned millions to permanent servitude and stifled human potential.⁶⁶

⁶² Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Volume 2)*, 689.

⁶³ Donald, *Lincoln*, 349.

⁶⁴ Fred Kaplan, *Lincoln and the Abolitionists: John Quincy Adams, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Harper, 2017), 220.

⁶⁵ Kaplan, *Lincoln and the Abolitionists*, 220.

⁶⁶ McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln*, 66.

This framing resonated deeply with many Northerners, who increasingly came to view slavery as incompatible with the democratic ideals of the nation. Nevertheless, despite Lincoln's growing antislavery commitments, his relationship with radical abolitionists remained fraught with tension. Many abolitionists viewed Lincoln's cautious approach with scepticism, criticizing his initial reluctance to prioritize abolition as a central war aim. Kaplan notes that figures such as Frederick Douglass were initially critical of Lincoln's gradualist tactics, arguing that moral imperatives should outweigh political considerations.⁶⁷ Kaplan also explores the complex dynamics between Lincoln and the broader abolitionist movement. Kaplan argues:

While abolitionists often lambasted Lincoln for his perceived moderation, his strategic caution was essential in navigating the volatile political landscape. Lincoln understood that a more aggressive approach to abolition might alienate key constituencies, particularly in the Border states.⁶⁸

This delicate balancing is exemplified by Lincoln's debates with Stephen A. Douglas during the 1858 Illinois senate race. Kaplan adds: "Lincoln carefully opposed the expansion of slavery, while avoiding its immediate abolition in already existing slave states."⁶⁹ This approach allowed Lincoln to appeal to both moderate and antislavery voters, strengthening his political base without alienating potential allies.

Harry V. Jaffa, in his work *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War*, delves into the philosophical foundations of Lincoln's antislavery stance. Jaffa argues that Lincoln's political philosophy was deeply rooted in the principles articulated in *the Declaration of Independence*, particularly the assertion that "all men are created equal."⁷⁰ Jaffa elaborates: "He believed that the Founding Fathers had envisioned a gradual end to slavery and that any attempt to expand the institution was a fundamental betrayal of American democratic values."⁷¹ Thus, Lincoln saw the Declaration not as a historical artifact but as a living moral compass that should guide the nation's evolution. In another perspective, Gerald J. Prokopowicz, an American historian, addresses common misconceptions about Lincoln's position within the abolitionist movement. Prokopowicz emphasizes:

Lincoln was not an abolitionist in the strictest sense, as he did not initially advocate for immediate nationwide abolition, but his commitment to ending slavery was steadfast

⁶⁷ Kaplan, *Lincoln and the Abolitionists*, 221.

⁶⁸ Kaplan, *Lincoln and the Abolitionists*, 221.

⁶⁹ Kaplan, *Lincoln and the Abolitionists*, 221.

⁷⁰ Harry V. Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield publishers, inc., 2000), 412.

⁷¹ Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom*, 412.

[...] Lincoln's preference for legal and constitutional methods reflected a broader belief in incremental but irreversible progress toward justice.⁷²

Therefore, Lincoln's pragmatic approach ultimately proved more effective in securing lasting changes than the more radical strategies advocated by some abolitionists.

Lincoln's election as the 16th President of the United States in 1860 was a critical moment in American history. His victory, achieved without the support of a single Southern state, highlighted the growing sectional divide within the country. Many Southern states viewed Lincoln's election as an existential threat to the institution of slavery and responded by seceding from the Union. Prokopowicz informs: "In several Southern states, Lincoln's name did not even appear on the ballot, reflecting the depth of the region's opposition to his candidacy."⁷³ Consequently, the secession crisis that followed Lincoln's election set the stage for the Civil War. While Lincoln initially sought to preserve the Union without directly confronting slavery, the realities of war and the moral urgency of abolition gradually shifted his position. By the time of *the Emancipation Proclamation*, Lincoln had fully embraced the role of a moral leader committed to ending slavery, even at great political and personal cost.

In conclusion, Abraham Lincoln's role as an antislavery moralist is characterized by complexity and a gradual yet profound evolution. His transformation, from a cautious politician primarily concerned with preserving the Union to a visionary fully committed to the eradication of slavery, exemplifies the intricate relationship between moral conviction and political strategy. Rather than taking an immediate and radical stance, Lincoln carefully navigated the turbulent political landscape of his time. He balanced his personal beliefs with the practical constraints of governance. Throughout his presidency, Lincoln faced criticism from multiple factions, abolitionists who demanded swifter action and pro-slavery advocates who saw his policies as a direct threat to their way of life. Despite these pressures, Lincoln's ability to strategically manoeuvre through such ideological divide was crucial in shaping the course of American history. His leadership during the war not only secured the preservation of the Union but also laid the foundation for the ultimate abolition of slavery, a cause that became increasingly central to his presidency. His legacy as an antislavery moralist does not endure simply because he was the most radical voice of his time, but rather because he skilfully integrated moral purpose with political pragmatism. Lincoln understood that lasting change required bold leadership and careful statecraft. This ability to multitask ensured that

⁷² Gerald J. Prokopowicz, *Did Lincoln Own Slaves?: And Other Frequently Asked Questions about Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008), 246.

⁷³ Prokopowicz, *Did Lincoln Own Slaves?*, 247.

emancipation was not just an aspirational ideal but an irreversible reality. By guiding the nation through its most profound moral and constitutional crisis, Lincoln solidified his place in history as a leader who, despite political constraints, ultimately stood on the right side of justice and human dignity.

AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

Abraham Lincoln's role during the American Civil War, which took place from 1861 to 1865, is central for understanding his character and enduring legacy as one of the most significant presidents of the United States. During this challenging period, Lincoln's leadership not only preserved the Union but through the abolition of slavery also fundamentally redefined the American values. Therefore, the war had a profound impact on Lincoln's political career and personal life. Because of this conflict, Lincoln faced numerous challenges and thus gained the resilience that defined his presidency. The Civil War stands as the central event in the historical consciousness of the United States. Although the outbreak of the conflict resulted in tragedy and pain, the war shaped the ultimate identity of the United States as a nation. Importantly, the war raised two fundamental questions left unanswered by the American Revolution. Fred Kaplan mentions:

First, whether the United States would remain an indivisible nation under a sovereign national government [...]. Second, whether a country founded on the principle that all men are created equal could continue to exist as the world's largest slaveholding society.⁷⁴

These complex inquiries strengthen Lincoln's position in the history of the United States, as he was the only one who managed to successfully answer both of them.

To understand Lincoln's role of a leader during the Civil War, it is necessary to include confirmed events and situations that provide enough evidence to truly discuss his strategic output. The Fort Sumter crisis undoubtedly meets these requirements. As Kaplan informs: "No sooner had Lincoln taken office than he faced the immediate crisis of Fort Sumter."⁷⁵ Fort Sumter was a sea fort in South Carolina whose attack by the Confederate forces marked the official beginning of the Civil War. This event is highly rated by Kaplan, who adds:

The garrison was on the verge of starvation, and Lincoln was confronted with conflicting advice. While some, including General Winfield Scott and Secretary of State

⁷⁴ Kaplan, *Lincoln and the Abolitionists*, 236.

⁷⁵ Kaplan, *Lincoln and the Abolitionists*, 237.

William H. Seward, advised abandoning the fort, many Republicans warned that any sign of weakness would endanger both the Union and the fledgling Republican Party.⁷⁶

Lincoln delayed action for nearly a month, ultimately deciding to send a relief expedition. He informed the South Carolina governor that the mission aimed only to supply provisions, not to reinforce the garrison militarily, unless it was attacked. Despite Lincoln's careful diplomatic approach, the Confederate forces pre-emptively bombarded Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, and the Civil War began. Lincoln's message to the Congress framed the conflict as one initiated by the Confederacy: "Then, and thereby, the assailants of the Government began the conflict of arms."⁷⁷ However, Confederate leaders accused Lincoln of orchestrating the confrontation to place the burden of initiating the war upon them. While some historians have echoed this view, most regard it as "a distortion of Lincoln's primary goal, to preserve the Union, even at the cost of war."⁷⁸ As an answer, Lincoln called upon state governors for seventy-five thousand troops. Such action instantly led four additional slave states to join the Confederacy. He also proclaimed a blockade of Southern ports, setting the stage for a prolonged and destructive conflict. Susan-Mary Grant, a professor of American history, states: "Although General Scott proposed a passive plan to suffocate the South through blockades and control of the Mississippi River, Lincoln believed a more aggressive approach was necessary."⁷⁹ However, Lincoln with his direct advance on Confederate positions in Virginia, resulted in a disastrous defeat. Thus, Lincoln's military strategy evolved rapidly after this defeat. Grant reminds:

Lincoln recognized the necessity of a multi-front offence to strain Confederate resources and leverage the Union's numerical superiority. He insisted on maintaining pressure across several fronts, understanding that the Confederacy's strength lay in its ability to concentrate forces at critical points.⁸⁰

This approach prevented Confederate forces from achieving local superiority and exploiting vulnerabilities of the Union. Ultimately, the Fort Sumter incident and its following denouement showcase Lincoln's evolving leadership and determination.

While navigating the complexities of wartime leadership, Lincoln endured profound personal loss. Grant informs:

In February 1862, his twelve-year-old son, William Wallace Lincoln, affectionately known as Willie, succumbed to typhoid fever. The death of Willie, considered by many

⁷⁶ Kaplan, *Lincoln and the Abolitionists*, 237.

⁷⁷ Kaplan, *Lincoln and the Abolitionists*, 238.

⁷⁸ Kaplan, *Lincoln and the Abolitionists*, 238.

⁷⁹ Susan-Mary Grant, *The War for a Nation: The American Civil War* (London: Routledge, 2006), 84.

⁸⁰ Grant, *The War for a Nation*, 84.

as Lincoln's favourite child due to their close bond, inflicted deep emotional pain on both Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln [wife of Abraham Lincoln].⁸¹

For Lincoln, the loss compounded an already immense emotional burden, intensifying his lasting struggles with melancholy. "Willie's death had a palpable impact on Lincoln's demeanour, deepening his introspective tendencies and contributing to periods of profound sorrow [...] often seen wandering the White House in silent grief,"⁸² Grant explains. Despite this personal devastation, Lincoln continued to lead the nation with remarkable fortitude, which demonstrates a capacity for emotional resilience that was critical to his effectiveness as a wartime president. To cope with his pain, Lincoln sought solace in his work, often immersing himself in the demands of leadership as a way to manage his grief. The tragedy also deeply affected Mary Todd Lincoln, whose overwhelming grief further strained the family's relationships, adding to the emotional burden on the President. Grant elaborates: "Mary's mourning was deep and prolonged, leading her to withdraw from public life for extended periods."⁸³ Lincoln, despite his own sorrow, provided comfort and support to his wife, showcasing his capacity for empathy even amid national turmoil. In the end, Lincoln's ability to compartmentalize his grief and remain focused on the war effort underscores his extraordinary emotional strength and dedication to his presidential duties.

Another documented aspect of Lincoln's personal life during the era of the Civil War was his battle with depression. This medical diagnosis was further complicating his ability to stand as the nation's leader. To suppress the symptoms, Lincoln used a 19th-century medication known as "blue mass." Prescribed for various ailments, including melancholia, this compound contained mercury, a toxic element that modern medicine now recognizes as hazardous. Contemporary research, notably the work of Norbert Hirschhorn, suggests that "the mercury content in blue mass could have induced side effects such as irritability, mood swings, and cognitive disruptions."⁸⁴ Hirschhorn also posits: "Lincoln's increasing awareness of these adverse effects ultimately led him to cease using the medication."⁸⁵ This decision is significant and reflects Lincoln's capacity for self-regulation and his determination to maintain psychological stability during an era of extreme personal and national chaos. Furthermore, Lincoln's openness about his struggles with melancholy, even in private correspondence, has since been interpreted as a testament to his self-awareness and emotional intelligence. Thus,

⁸¹ Grant, *The War for a Nation*, 85.

⁸² Grant, *The War for a Nation*, 85.

⁸³ Grant, *The War for a Nation*, 86.

⁸⁴ Grant, *The War for a Nation*, 87.

⁸⁵ Grant, *The War for a Nation*, 87.

these qualities undoubtedly shaped his leadership style during the nation's most challenging period – the American Civil War.

Although Lincoln initially centred the war effort on preserving the Union, the evolving nature of the conflict and the escalating moral imperative against slavery prompted a pivotal shift in his administration's objectives. The issuance of *the Emancipation Proclamation* on January 1, 1863, was a pivotal moment in American history. This executive order declared all enslaved people in Confederate territories to be free, which effectively transformed the Civil War into a battle for human liberation in addition to national unity. Lincoln's journey toward *the Emancipation Proclamation* was gradual and fraught with political considerations. Initially reluctant to adopt an outright abolitionist stance, Lincoln revoked premature emancipation proclamations issued by his generals. As Grant claims: "Abraham Lincoln feared alienating border states and doubted the constitutionality of such actions outside the scope of war powers."⁸⁶ However, increasing public pressure and the Union's military needs eventually led him to embrace emancipation as both a moral necessity and a strategic tool. *The Emancipation Proclamation* had profound domestic and international consequences. "It redefined the Union's war aims, solidifying the abolition of slavery as a central objective, and dissuaded European powers, particularly Britain and France, from recognizing or supporting the Confederacy,"⁸⁷ explains Grant. Although *the Emancipation Proclamation* was limited in its immediate legal effect, since it applied only to areas outside Union control, it still laid the groundwork for the eventual abolition of slavery nationwide, which culminated in the ratification of *the Thirteenth Amendment* in 1865.

The Civil War became one of the most destructive conflicts in the Western world. Susan-Mary Grant reports:

By the end of 1861, nearly a million armed men faced each other along a one thousand two hundred mile front stretching from Virginia to Missouri. Major battles [...] foreshadowed the immense scale of the conflict, resulting in critical Union victory at Gettysburg in 1863.⁸⁸

Lincoln's role as a commander required him to make critical decisions regarding military strategy and leadership, which was quite often under intense public scrutiny. One of his most persistent challenges was the selection of effective military commanders. Grant verifies this by naming a few: "Early in the war, Lincoln cycled through several generals, Irvin McDowell,

⁸⁶ Grant, *The War for a Nation*, 89.

⁸⁷ Grant, *The War for a Nation*, 89.

⁸⁸ Grant, *The War for a Nation*, 193.

George B. McClellan, Ambrose Burnside, and Joseph Hooker, each failing to deliver decisive victories.”⁸⁹ Lincoln’s frustrations with McClellan, in particular, are documented. “Despite McClellan’s organizational skills, his reluctance to engage aggressively with Confederate forces strained his relationship with the President, ultimately leading to his dismissal,”⁹⁰ Grant informs. Nevertheless, Lincoln’s strategic vision extended beyond individual battles to encompass a broader understanding of the war. Grant explains Lincoln’s strategy: “Lincoln recognized that the Union’s success depended on its ability to leverage its industrial capacity, larger population, and superior resources.”⁹¹ This realization guided his decisions to implement widespread blockades, target key Confederate infrastructure, and promote coordinated offensives across multiple fronts. However, the turning point in Union military strategy came with the appointment of Ulysses S. Grant⁹² as general in 1864. Susan-Mary Grant observes that Ulysses S. Grant’s aggressive tactics and strategic vision aligned with Lincoln’s determination to bring the war to a conclusive end.⁹³ Susan-Mary Grant elaborates: “Their strategy of simultaneous offensives across multiple fronts crippled the Confederacy’s capacity to wage war.”⁹⁴ These coordinated efforts, driven by Lincoln’s broader strategic vision, ensured that the Union maintained relentless pressure on Confederate forces, which ultimately led them to surrender. Lincoln’s ability to adapt his military strategies in response to evolving circumstances highlights his pragmatic approach to leadership, a quality that proved essential in navigating the complexities of the war. Susan-Mary Grant highlights: “Lincoln’s involvement in military decisions extended to his direct communication with field commanders and he frequently bypassed traditional chains of command to issue orders and offer strategic advice, ensuring that his broader vision was consistently executed.”⁹⁵ This approach, though sometimes criticized, allowed Lincoln to maintain a cohesive and unified war strategy, ultimately contributing to the Union’s success. Through all of the expanded challenges and personal struggles, Lincoln demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and an unwavering commitment to preserving the Union. Thus, despite widespread war fatigue and significant political opposition, Lincoln secured re-election in 1864, when he defeated a Democratic candidate George B. McClellan, who had previously served as his general. Phillip Shaw

⁸⁹ Grant, *The War for a Nation*, 195.

⁹⁰ Grant, *The War for a Nation*, 195.

⁹¹ Grant, *The War for a Nation*, 197.

⁹² Susan-Mary Grant, the author, and Ulysses S. Grant, the general, share the same surname. Therefore, the full names, “Susan-Mary Grant” and “Ulysses S. Grant,” are used to avoid confusion.

⁹³ Grant, *The War for a Nation*, 197.

⁹⁴ Grant, *The War for a Nation*, 197.

⁹⁵ Grant, *The War for a Nation*, 197.

Paludan, a professor of Lincoln Studies, states: “This victory underscored the electorate’s confidence in Lincoln’s leadership and commitment to seeing the war through to its conclusion.”⁹⁶ Following the re-election, Union troops intensified their offensives and put insurmountable pressure on Confederate forces. On April 9, 1865, Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House, which effectively ended the war.⁹⁷ In the following weeks, remaining Confederate armies surrendered, culminating in the capture of Confederate President Jefferson Davis on May 10, 1865, and the final dissolution of the Confederacy.

The Civil War had a profound impact on Lincoln and his evolving perspective on African-Americans, particularly on how he viewed their role in American society. A crucial factor in this transformation was the significant contribution of African-American soldiers to the Union’s victory. Paludan uses Lincoln’s own words: “These men fought bravely for a country that had long denied them basic rights, and through their service, they earned their claim to citizenship.”⁹⁸ Thus, it is visible that Lincoln recognized the moral contradiction of asking African-Americans to risk their lives for the Union while simultaneously denying them fundamental civil rights. By 1865, as the war neared its end, Lincoln sought to address this inconsistency. In his final public address on April 11, 1865, just three days before his assassination, Lincoln publicly advocated for granting certain political rights to freed slaves, which was an exceptionally bold and highly dangerous stance. This speech, promoting limited suffrage for African-Americans, is widely regarded as a key factor that triggered his assassination. John Wilkes Booth, who was in the crowd that evening, viewed Lincoln’s advocacy as a betrayal and decided that the President must be stopped. On April 14, 1865, Booth assassinated Lincoln at Ford’s Theatre in Washington, D.C.. Lincoln was carried across the street to a boarding house, where he succumbed to his wounds nine hours later. The nation mourned the loss of a leader at a time when his guidance was most needed, especially during the fragile period of Reconstruction. Many historians, including Paludan, argue that had Lincoln lived, the course of Reconstruction could have been vastly different.⁹⁹ Paludan also mentions that some historians even speculate that Lincoln’s leadership might have prevented the need for a Civil Rights Movement and the activism of figures like Martin Luther King Jr.¹⁰⁰ The tragic

⁹⁶ Phillip Shaw Paludan, *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 381.

⁹⁷ Paludan, *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln*, 382.

⁹⁸ Paludan, *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln*, 383.

⁹⁹ Paludan, *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln*, 386.

¹⁰⁰ Paludan, *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln*, 386.

assassination not only cut short Lincoln's vision for national healing but also altered the course of American history forever.

Overall, the Civil War represented a defining chapter in Abraham Lincoln's presidency, pushing his political foresight, moral resolve, and personal endurance to their absolute limits. As the leader of a nation engulfed in its most severe internal conflict, Lincoln was required to make difficult and often controversial decisions that tested both his ability to govern and his commitment to the principles of democracy and human rights. His leadership during this era of unprecedented national crisis not only preserved the Union but also set into motion the dismantling of slavery, a transformation that redefined the American society forever. *The Emancipation Proclamation* and the passage of *the Thirteenth Amendment* were direct outcomes of his steadfast dedication to ensuring that the United States remained a nation committed to freedom and equality. However, Lincoln's presidency was not solely shaped by political and military challenges. He also faced immense personal hardships, including the devastating loss of his son Willie during the war, which deepened his melancholic tendencies yet strengthened his resilience. The simultaneous burdens of guiding a fractured country and enduring personal grief revealed a leader of extraordinary fortitude, patience, and unwavering conviction. By the time of his assassination in April 1865, Lincoln had not only preserved the Union but had also fundamentally altered the trajectory of the United States, ensuring that the ideals of liberty and democracy would endure. His leadership during this critical period solidified his legacy as one of the most consequential and revered figures in American history. He left an indelible mark on the nation's political and moral development for generations to come.

3. DIVERGENT INTERPRETATIONS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S PERSONA

The third chapter of the thesis is simultaneously the first chapter of the analytical part. This chapter, as the title suggests, addresses divergent interpretations of Abraham Lincoln's persona. In particular, the third chapter analyses the construction and significance of Lincoln's most famous nicknames – "Honest Abe" and "The Great Emancipator." It also explores the abolitionists' attitude towards Lincoln, specifically their critiques and evolving perception of Lincoln. Moreover, Lincoln's own perception of himself is examined by discussing how he viewed his own purpose, his role in politics and specific situations, and generally his place in history.

In order to perform a sufficient analysis, this analytical chapter incorporates chosen methodological approaches and certain relevant information, all of which is defined in the two theoretical chapters. Thus, New Historicism, cultural studies criticism, and political discourse analysis are utilized to critically examine the divergent interpretations of Abraham Lincoln and his persona. The main focus of this analytical chapter is centred around three key topics – the duality of Lincoln's image as "Honest Abe" and "The Great Emancipator"; how abolitionists and opponents perceived Lincoln; and Lincoln's own perception of his role and legacy. Furthermore, the first analysed topic concerns how the labels were constructed and used during Lincoln's era, their roles in shaping his public perception and political strategies, while reflecting on the influence of political speeches and historical narratives. The second topic elaborates on Lincoln's criticism from both pro-slavery advocates and radical abolitionist, the evolution of abolitionist rhetoric in response to Lincoln's policies, and the balance between pragmatism and moral leadership in his decisions. Finally, the third topic revolves around insights from Lincoln's letters, speeches, and personal reflections, while also focusing on how his self-perception evolved throughout his presidency and the Civil War.

In conclusion, each methodological approach is applied to a particular problematic in order to perform a scrutinized analysis. New Historicism places Lincoln's public image within the broader political and ideological struggles of the 19th-century America. Cultural studies criticism examines Lincoln's evolving cultural symbolism and his role in shaping national memory. Political discourse analysis explores rhetorical strategies in Lincoln's speeches, abolitionist critiques, and political opposition. Therefore, the analytical chapter ensures a comprehensive and interdisciplinary analysis of Lincoln's persona, while taking into account historical realities, cultural narratives, and political rhetoric.

“HONEST ABE” AND “THE GREAT EMANCIPATOR”

Abraham Lincoln is one of the most extensively examined names in American history. Lincoln is widely regarded as a pivotal figure when considering the preservation of the Union and the abolition of slavery. Nevertheless, his persona still remains subject to various interpretations, critiques, and even contradictions. Lincoln has been depicted as both a pragmatic politician and a moral visionary. Or as Eric Foner describes him: “[...] a cautious strategist and an unwavering advocate for justice.”¹⁰¹ Moreover, his leadership was marked by complex assessment, shifting rhetoric, and an evolving stance on key national issues. All of these issues, including abolitionism and the Civil War, have led not only many scholars but also the general public to continually reassess Lincoln’s motivations and legacy. Foner also mentions that Lincoln’s image was shaped by both his own self-presentation and the perceptions of his contemporaries, as he states: “[...] allows for continuous reconstruction in historical memory, influenced by the political ideologies and cultural narratives of different generations.”¹⁰² Furthermore, Lincoln’s presidential era unfolded during one of the most unstable periods in American history. As a result, interpretations of his character have been shaped by conflicting perspectives on his leadership, policies, and moral compass. Foner further explains: “While some view him as an idealistic reformer driven by moral convictions, others argue that his actions were dictated more by political expedience than unwavering ethical principles.”¹⁰³ This raises critical questions about how to remember Lincoln. Was he a leader guided by an internal moral compass, or did he primarily respond to the pressure of his time? To what extent did his public image align with his personal convictions, and how these interpretations evolved over time? In addition, how much of Lincoln’s legacy was a product of deliberate self-fashioning, and to what extent was it shaped by the political and social forces surrounding him? Eric Foner suggests that as history has shown, great leaders are rarely one dimensional characters,¹⁰⁴ and Abraham Lincoln is no exception. His persona was created not only by his own words and actions but also by the way his contemporaries, both supporters and critics, chose to depict him. Lincoln’s legacy has been shaped by the newspapers that chronicled his speeches, the abolitionists who scrutinized his policies, and the political opponents who either defamed him or reluctantly respected him. Over time, these competing narratives have evolved, which resulted in a colourful picture of Lincoln that is remembered in strikingly different ways. Therefore, people can decide themselves on

¹⁰¹ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 313.

¹⁰² Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 313.

¹⁰³ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 314.

¹⁰⁴ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 314.

which colour they want to concentrate the most. Because of all the following decades after Lincoln's death and so much contradictory information about Lincoln's lifetime, these various representations continue to fuel debates about his true character and intentions even today.

To begin addressing these inquiries, it is essential to first examine two of the most known and enduring representations of Lincoln. First, the honest and humble statesman known as "Honest Abe" and second, the liberator of the enslaved, "The Great Emancipator." These designations, while widely recognized, each carry historical weight and implications that extend beyond mere labels. They reflect not only Lincoln's evolving public image but also the broader cultural and ideological shifts that have influenced his place in national memory. Understanding how these titles emerged, were reinforced, and continued to shape his reputation is crucial in uncovering the complexities of Lincoln's persona.

Lincoln's reputation for honesty is rooted in the widely recognised nickname "Honest Abe." This designation remains one of the defining aspects of his historical persona. It emerged during his early legal and political career. Harold Holzer, a prominent scholar of Lincoln, claims: "Such nickname symbolized not only his personal integrity but also the public's perception of him as a leader of unwavering moral character."¹⁰⁵ Lincoln's reputation for fairness, transparency, and truthfulness was so well established that even his political adversaries acknowledged it. This fact is reinforced by Holzer, who states: "Lincoln's honesty was not merely a political construct but an authentic trait."¹⁰⁶ However, historians debate whether this honesty was absolute, or whether even the great "Honest Abe" employed a strategy of being ambiguous when necessary, like most of the politicians did at that time. Holzer argues that Lincoln was "a paragon of virtue whose honesty set him apart from the corruption of 19th-century American politics."¹⁰⁷ But Merrill D. Peterson, one of the most acclaimed American historians of Lincoln, opposes: "While Lincoln was indeed a man of integrity, he was also a shrewd politician who understood when to withhold full transparency in the name of political pragmatism."¹⁰⁸ Though different, all of these perspectives show that in Lincoln's legal career, and political reputation there are moments where honesty and political necessity intersected. To fully understand why that happened to Lincoln, it is necessary to trace back the moment when the title of "Honest Abe" came to life.

¹⁰⁵ Harold Holzer, *The Lincoln Image: Abraham Lincoln and the Popular Print* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 186.

¹⁰⁶ Holzer, *The Lincoln Image*, 186.

¹⁰⁷ Holzer, *The Lincoln Image*, 187.

¹⁰⁸ Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 97.

The nickname “Honest Abe” is often traced to Lincoln’s years as a lawyer on the Illinois circuit. Lincoln gained there a reputation for fairness, ethical conduct, and commitment to justice. As Michael Burlingame points out: “[...] ethical scrupulousness was widely recognized in the legal profession, with colleagues and judges alike.”¹⁰⁹ In his *Notes for a Law Lecture*, Abraham Lincoln advises young lawyers to conduct themselves with absolute honesty.¹¹⁰ Such statement further underscores the principle. The most famous quote from these notes is: “Resolve to be honest at all events; and if in your own judgment you cannot be an honest lawyer, resolve to be honest without being a lawyer,”¹¹¹ which acknowledges Lincoln’s commitment to the truth. According to Richard Carwardine, a Welsh historian recognized for his work on Lincoln, this reputation for honesty was not a fabrication but rather “a genuine reflection of the universal respect Lincoln earned as a lawyer of scrupulous integrity.”¹¹² This suggests that Lincoln’s truthfulness was not just a carefully constructed public image but an integral part of his professional and personal philosophy. Such reputation for integrity carried over into his political career, where Lincoln’s honesty in debates and reliance on reasoned arguments became a highlight of his leadership. Even Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln’s already mentioned political opponent in 1858 Senate race, acknowledged this honesty, reportedly stating: “He is as honest as he is shrewd, and if I beat him my victory will be hardly won.”¹¹³ Such a high praise from a political rival reinforces the notion that Lincoln’s honesty was truly a defining trait, even among those who opposed him. As Carwardine notes: “Even Lincoln’s political adversaries found it difficult to undermine his reputation for truthfulness.”¹¹⁴ Thus, for Lincoln, honesty was not merely a convenient political tool, but a quality that shaped his entire public and private image.

One of the most compelling examples of Lincoln’s honesty in action was his outspoken opposition to the Mexican-American War, which took place from 1846 to 1848. At a time when the war was widely popular and many politicians justified the conflict, Lincoln challenged the official narrative. He demanded concrete evidence that Mexico instigated the war. In his speech to Congress on January 12, 1848, Lincoln made a bold appeal for transparency, saying:

Let the President [Polk] answer the interrogatories I proposed... Let him answer fully, fairly, and candidly. Let him answer with facts and not with arguments. Let him

¹⁰⁹ Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Volume 2)*, 1054.

¹¹⁰ Abraham Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln 1809-1865* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 82.

¹¹¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln 1809-1865*, 82.

¹¹² Richard Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 225.

¹¹³ Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power*, 225.

¹¹⁴ Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power*, 225.

remember, he sits where Washington sat; and so remembering, let him answer as Washington would answer... so let him attempt no evasion, no equivocation.¹¹⁵

Although quite risky, this stance demonstrated Lincoln's view of honesty, even when it placed him in opposition to the prevailing political sentiment. According to Peterson, Lincoln's actions in this instance cemented his reputation as a man who prioritized facts over political expediency.¹¹⁶ Lincoln was willing to challenge his own government and risk alienating his party rather than support a war based on questionable justifications. Peterson further argues that this moment in Lincoln's career is a clear demonstration of why the nickname "Honest Abe" was well deserved.

While Lincoln's reputation for honesty was arguably justified, it is overly simplistic to suggest that he was always entirely sincere in his political dealings. Like any successful politician, Lincoln sometimes walked a fine line between transparency and strategy. Several instances from his career illustrate moments where his actions raised questions about the extent of his honesty. For instance, in his 1858 letter to Norman Judd, a U. S. representative from Illinois and a member of the Senate, Lincoln suggested that his party consider tactics to counter potential election fraud. While he did not propose dishonesty outright, he hinted questionable political strategies, by writing: "Now the great remaining part of the campaign is finding a way to head this thing off. Can anything be done at all?"¹¹⁷ Based on this behaviour, it is possible to argue that Lincoln's suggestion of political manoeuvring in this letter challenges the idealized version of "Honest Abe." While Lincoln did not engage in outright deception, he did consider tactical responses to Democratic political strategies, suggesting that his honesty was not always absolute but sometimes pragmatic. Overall, it is visible that Lincoln's transparency was context dependent. One possible argument is that Lincoln's honesty was most evident when he was fully comfortable with the subject matter, as seen in his law speeches on democracy. However, in high-stakes political situation, his rhetoric became more calculated, revealing a pragmatic approach to truthfulness.

Despite these moments of strategic ambiguity, Lincoln's overall reputation for integrity remains as one of the most enduring aspects of his legacy. Carwardine refers to Lincoln as "the very soul of integrity."¹¹⁸ At the same time, some scholars share an opinion stated by Alonzo Rothschild, a Lincoln's contemporary, who raised an intriguing question whether Lincoln was honest because he genuinely believed in moral integrity, or he understood that his reputation

¹¹⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln 1809-1865*, 82.

¹¹⁶ Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 106.

¹¹⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln 1809-1865*, 102.

¹¹⁸ Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power*, 226.

for honesty helps his political career. Rothschild suggests: “Lincoln’s honesty may have been both a personal conviction and a strategic advantage – a quality he cultivated knowing it would serve him well politically.”¹¹⁹ Ultimately, this question is impossible to answer with adamant conviction, as the only one who knew was the one and only Abraham Lincoln. Therefore, the world argues whether Lincoln emphasized his honesty for political gain, however, it is rather difficult to argue that his integrity was purely performative. His legal career, public statements, and political decision indicate that his commitment to truth was deeply ingrained. The nickname “Honest Abe” remains a fitting but nuanced descriptor of Lincoln’s character. He was indeed a man of integrity, yet he was also a pragmatic politician who understood that governance required tact, negotiation, and at times, calculated rhetoric. His legacy as both underscores the complex relationship between morality and politics, a balance that defined Lincoln’s presidency and continues to shape his historical memory.

Abraham Lincoln’s legacy as “The Great Emancipator” remains one of the most debated aspects of his historical persona. However, there seems to be a discussion whether it is a justified tribute or merely a misleading myth. The title suggests that Lincoln was responsible for abolition, a leader whose moral vision and leadership brought slavery in the United States to an end. This portrayal, which has been celebrated by many as a rightful tribute to Lincoln’s effort in securing emancipation, is nowadays deeply ingrained in American memory. Nevertheless, others challenge the validity of the title by arguing that Lincoln was a reluctant emancipator who acted primarily out of political necessity rather than moral conviction. Some critics, such as John Hope Franklin in his essays on Lincoln, claims that enslaved individuals themselves were the true liberators, forcing Lincoln’s hand through their acts of defiance, escape, and resistance.¹²⁰ This controversy surrounding Lincoln’s role in abolition reveals the complexities of his leadership, the intersection of morality and politics, and the evolving nature of historical interpretations.

Unlike the nickname “Honest Abe”, which was widely recognized during Lincoln’s lifetime, the exact origins of “The Great Emancipator” remain unclear. Holzer notes that the phrase was rarely used before Lincoln’s assassination in 1865 by saying: “Before then, his stance on emancipation had been highly contentious, drawing criticism from both abolitionists and pro-slavery factions [...] there was no Great Emancipator involved”¹²¹ Holzer further suggests that the title gained traction after *the Emancipation Proclamation* in 1863, particularly

¹¹⁹ Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power*, 226.

¹²⁰ Sean Wilentz, *The Best American History Essays on Lincoln* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 104.

¹²¹ Holzer, *The Lincoln Image*, 211.

among African-American communities who viewed Lincoln as a liberator.¹²² However, Donald argues that the label was largely a posthumous creation, that emerged in the wake of national mourning after Lincoln's death.¹²³ Hence, the lack of clear origin for the title reflects the broader uncertainty about true role of Lincoln in emancipation. Nowadays people are allowed to decide whether Lincoln was truly that bold and decisive leader in the fight against slavery or simply reacting to the forces around him.

To determine if Lincoln truly deserves the title, it is essential to examine his actual stance on slavery and the sequence of events that led to the abolition of the institution. Throughout his political career, his position on slavery was clear but cautious. Lincoln personally opposed slavery but did not advocate for its immediate abolition. He believed that slavery was indeed morally wrong but considered it a constitutional issue best left to the state. In his 1854 famous speech in Peoria, Illinois, Lincoln declared: "Slavery is founded in the selfishness of man's nature – opposition to it is in his love of justice."¹²⁴ However, in the 1858 debates with Stephen Douglas, Lincoln reassured Southern moderates by stating: "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it exists."¹²⁵ This stance highlights the tension in Lincoln's approach. While he viewed slavery as a great moral evil, he was also aware of the political realities that constrained his ability to act decisively against it. Lincoln's most famous act regarding slavery was *the Emancipation Proclamation*, issued on January 1, 1863. The document declared that "all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free."¹²⁶ This fundamentally transformed the Civil War. As Donald informs: "It [the Emancipation Proclamation] shifted the purpose from merely preserving the Union to actively dismantling slavery."¹²⁷ Nevertheless, the proclamation had crucial limitations. It did not apply to enslaved individuals in border states like Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, and Delaware, nor did it immediately free those in Confederate territories. Donald elaborates by stating: "Lincoln justified the measure as a military necessity rather than as a universal moral principle, aiming to weaken the Confederacy's economic power rather than issuing an outright abolitionist decree."¹²⁸ As a

¹²² Holzer, *The Lincoln Image*, 211.

¹²³ Donald, *Lincoln*, 584.

¹²⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln 1809-1865*, 118.

¹²⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln 1809-1865*, 119.

¹²⁶ National Archives, *The Emancipation Proclamation (Transcript)*, last modified [May 5, 2017], <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/emancipation-proclamation/transcript.html>.

¹²⁷ Donald, *Lincoln*, 587.

¹²⁸ Donald, *Lincoln*, 587.

result of these limitations, Eric Foner describes the proclamation as “a transformative document, but not an immediate deliverance.”¹²⁹ Slavery in the United States was permanently abolished with *the Thirteenth Amendment*, which Lincoln successfully enforced before his assassination. Despite these significant achievements, critics still challenge the idea of Lincoln being the primary force behind emancipation. Ira Berlin, one of the leading historians of slavery, argues: “[...] enslaved people secured their own freedom through acts of self-emancipation [...] by fleeing plantations, enlisting in the Union Army, and resisting their oppressors, they forced the government to recognize their rights.”¹³⁰ Therefore, it is an assertion that enslaved individuals were not passive recipients of freedom but active agents in the destruction of slavery. This perspective challenges the traditional narrative that credits Lincoln as the sole emancipator. Even Frederick Douglass, an early critic of Lincoln’s cautious approach, initially expressed frustration with Lincoln’s reluctance to act boldly. Douglass once remarked: “Viewed from the genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent.”¹³¹ Such quote, although biased at that time, disrupts the notion which names Lincoln as “The Great Emancipator.” However, Douglass later acknowledged Lincoln’s growth and commitment to abolition, by stating: “Abraham Lincoln is a progressive man, always willing to listen and learn.”¹³² Another significant critique of Lincoln as “The Great Emancipator” is the argument that he was driven profoundly by political pragmatism. Lerone Bennet famously argues that Lincoln was, in fact, “a white supremacist who only acted against slavery when it became politically expedient.”¹³³ Bennet adds: “Lincoln did not free the slaves, the slaves freed themselves.”¹³⁴ While this opinion was widely debated, it adds to the initial inquiry about Lincoln’s role in abolitionism and his political decisions. To react, Lincoln’s role in ensuring the passage of *the Thirteenth Amendment* suggests a level of genuine commitment to ending slavery. Unlike *the Emancipation Proclamation*, which had strategic and military justifications, *the Thirteenth Amendment* permanently abolished slavery nationwide. Lincoln personally lobbied Congress, pressured hesitant legislators, and made abolition a central issue of his 1864 re-election campaign. His famous statement underscores his conviction: “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.”¹³⁵ In this sense, even if Lincoln’s early approach to slavery

¹²⁹ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 389.

¹³⁰ Ira Berlin, *The Long Emancipation: The Demise of Slavery in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 166.

¹³¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln 1809-1865*, 119.

¹³² Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln 1809-1865*, 120.

¹³³ Bennett, *Forced into Glory*, 153.

¹³⁴ Bennett, *Forced into Glory*, 153.

¹³⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln 1809-1865*, 125.

was cautious, his final actions demonstrated a firm commitment to ensuring its complete eradication. Ultimately, the question of whether Lincoln deserves the title “The Great Emancipator” is complex. While he was not the first nor the only advocate for abolition, and while his early policies were marked by hesitation, it is undeniable that his leadership was instrumental in the final destruction of slavery. The title itself oversimplifies a process that involved countless enslaved individuals, abolitionist, and political leaders. But Lincoln’s role is not to be dismissed as purely reactionary. He was a leader who evolved over time. He listened to criticism, and ultimately took decisive actions. Lincoln’s role was not just a wartime necessity but a permanent and binding reality. Thus, while the title “The Great Emancipator” no fully captures Lincoln’s complex journey, it remains a powerful and historically significant recognition of his contributions. His leadership, though imperfect and often strategic, finally transformed the course of American history, while ensuring that the fight for freedom extended beyond the battlefield into the foundational laws of the whole nation.

In conclusion, the analysis of Abraham Lincoln’s dual legacy as “Honest Abe” and “The Great Emancipator” reveals the complexities of his historical persona and the evolving interpretations of his leadership. While Lincoln was widely regarded for his integrity and moral character, his honesty was also tempered by political pragmatism, allowing him to navigate the turbulent political landscape of his time. Similarly, his role in the abolition of slavery, though undeniably significant, was shaped by both his own evolving convictions and the broader forces at play, including the self-emancipation efforts of enslaved individuals. The application of chosen methodological approaches to the analysis highlights how Lincoln’s reputation was influenced by both contemporary narratives and later historical reinterpretations. Ultimately, Lincoln’s legacy resists simplistic categorization. He was neither a perfect moral visionary nor a purely pragmatic politician, but rather a leader whose actions were shaped by the constraints and possibilities of his era. Lincoln’s ability to adapt, listen, and ultimately act ensured his lasting influence, making him a figure of both historical debate and enduring admiration.

ABOLITIONISTS' ATTITUDE TOWARD LINCOLN AND LINCOLN IN HIS OWN WORDS

The relationship between Abraham Lincoln and the abolitionists was complex and often fraught with tension. While Lincoln detested slavery, he did not align himself with the abolitionist movement, nor did he advocate for immediate emancipation at the outset of his political career. Instead, he was primarily driven by a commitment to preserving the Union. His policies on slavery evolved over time, largely in response to political pressures and wartime necessities. Therefore, an examination of abolitionist critiques of Lincoln, their evolving perception of him, and how Lincoln himself understood his role in history is necessary to fully understand the relationship between Lincoln and slavery. Such analysis allows to explore how Lincoln's public image and self-perception were shaped by contemporary narratives and subsequent historical interpretations.

Abolitionists viewed Lincoln with scepticism, often expressing frustration at his reluctance to take a firm stance against slavery. Among those who criticized Lincoln's cautious approach were – William Lloyd Garrison, an American abolitionist, journalist, and social reformer; Wendell Phillips, an attorney who represented exclusively African-Americans; and Frederick Douglass, the most important leader of the movement for African-American civil rights in the 19th century. Garrison initially dismissed Lincoln as “a dwarf in mind,”¹³⁶ criticizing his refusal to immediately link the war effort to emancipation. Phillips derisively referred to Lincoln as a “huckster in politics,”¹³⁷ highlighting the abolitionist view that he was a pragmatic politician rather than a committed moral reformer. Lincoln's own statements reinforced these concerns. During his 1858 debates with Stephen A. Douglas, he declared: “I am not, nor ever have been, in favour of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races.”¹³⁸ Such remarks alienated abolitionists, who sought not only the end of slavery but full civil rights for African-Americans. However, Lincoln's words are better understood within the political context of the time. He was operating in a deeply racist society where outright abolitionist rhetoric could alienate key voting blocs. As Kaplan explains: “He needed to balance his personal distaste for slavery with the political necessity of appealing to a divided electorate.”¹³⁹ This tension between his moral beliefs and political calculations

¹³⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln 1809-1865*, 125.

¹³⁷ Taylor Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 449.

¹³⁸ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 462.

¹³⁹ Kaplan, *Lincoln and the Abolitionists*, 255.

made him an ambiguous figure in the abolitionist movement, one whose legacy remains debated by historians.

Despite their fears, many abolitionists supported Lincoln's presidency. They hoped he could be influenced toward emancipation. But Lincoln's primary concern was preserving the Union, as supported by his famous letter to Horace Greeley, his political companion, in 1862: "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it."¹⁴⁰ This stance frustrated abolitionists who saw slavery as the root cause of the war. However, when Lincoln issued *the Emancipation Proclamation* in 1863, it softened many critics. Nevertheless, some continued to view it as a strategic wartime measure rather than a moral commitment. Lincoln himself admitted that emancipation was first and foremost a military policy aimed at undermining the Confederacy rather than an expression of an absolute moral conviction.¹⁴¹ Kaplan argues that Lincoln's gradual embrace of abolitionist goals reflects not political opportunism but an evolving moral consciousness shaped by the realities of war and shifting public opinion.¹⁴² To contradict, some historians, including Bennett, contend that Lincoln's actions were primarily pragmatic and dictated by the need to maintain Northern unity to weaken the Southern war effort.¹⁴³ This highlights the fundamental difference between Lincoln and the abolitionists. While the latter demanded immediate action based on moral imperatives, Lincoln was constrained by political realities and the constitutional limits of his office.

Lincoln's views evolved over time. Initially, he supported "gradual emancipation, compensated manumission, and colonization,"¹⁴⁴ which was the idea that all freed African-Americans should be resettled in Africa or Central America. This policy angered abolitionists, who argued that African-Americans were as much a part of the United States as any other citizens. Lincoln himself actively promoted colonization, meeting with African-American leaders in 1862 and suggesting that it was in their best interest to leave the United States. Lincoln said: "But for your race among us there could not be war,"¹⁴⁵ emphasizing his belief that the racial divide was irreparable as with no African-Americans no war exists. Nevertheless, the failure of colonization efforts led Lincoln to shift his approach. By April 1865, in his final public address, he had come to support limited African-American suffrage, stating that voting

¹⁴⁰ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 464.

¹⁴¹ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 464.

¹⁴² Kaplan, *Lincoln and the Abolitionists*, 258.

¹⁴³ Bennett, *Forced into Glory*, 164.

¹⁴⁴ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 465.

¹⁴⁵ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 465.

rights should be granted to “the very intelligent, and on those who serve our cause as soldiers.”¹⁴⁶ This transformation reflects Lincoln’s ability to adapt to changing circumstances, yet it also underscores his reluctance to embrace full racial equality. Even though he took decisive steps toward the abolition of slavery, scholars debate whether Lincoln’s shift was due to genuine moral evolution or simply a strategic adjustment to wartime realities and political pressures. Fred Kaplan argues: “Lincoln’s change in position was a necessary step in securing broader political support for abolition, while others view it as a reflection of his deeply ingrained belief in white superiority.”¹⁴⁷ As a result, abolitionists’ reactions to Lincoln remained divided. Although, initially sceptical Garrison later acknowledged Lincoln’s role in ending slavery, Phillips continued to view him as a reluctant emancipator. However, Frederick Douglass praised Lincoln for his stances, while also recognizing the limits of Lincoln’s devotion by stating: “Abraham Lincoln is pre-eminently the white man’s President [...]”¹⁴⁸ This duality in Lincoln’s legacy illustrates how different audiences interpreted his actions in varied ways. To some, he was a great emancipator but to others he was an opportunist. The complexity of Lincoln’s legacy is further visible in his struggle for *the Thirteenth Amendment*. Kaplan informs: “Some abolitionists saw this as a final vindication of his leadership, while others viewed it as a long-overdue concession to a movement that had been pressuring him for years.”¹⁴⁹ To provide Lincoln with chance to justify himself, his own words from a private remark are helpful: “My views are not so different from the abolitionists’, only a month or six weeks behind.”¹⁵⁰ In addition, Lincoln’s famous statement conveys his internal struggle: “If I had my way, this war would never have been commenced... If I had been allowed my way, this war would have ended before this.”¹⁵¹ Thus, the statement of Kaplan brilliantly concludes this by saying: “Lincoln was acutely aware of the limitations of his power and how abolitionists pushed him in directions he might not have taken otherwise.”¹⁵²

Lincoln’s own perception of himself and his role was equally complex. To highlight his pragmatism and leadership style, the following words underscore Lincoln’s belief in shaping the nation’s future through calculated moves rather than impulsive moral crusades: “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present [...] I will prepare and someday

¹⁴⁶ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 511.

¹⁴⁷ Kaplan, *Lincoln and the Abolitionists*, 258.

¹⁴⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln 1809-1865*, 125.

¹⁴⁹ Kaplan, *Lincoln and the Abolitionists*, 260.

¹⁵⁰ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 511.

¹⁵¹ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 512.

¹⁵² Kaplan, *Lincoln and the Abolitionists*, 262.

my chance will come.”¹⁵³ Such quotes mirror Lincoln’s strategic thinking to politics and the gradual manner which he approached emancipation with. Lincoln’s carefully calculated decisions on slavery are seen in his hesitance to embrace full racial equality. He once proclaimed: “No man is good enough to govern another man without the other’s consent.”¹⁵⁴ While some see it as a clear support of abolitionism, it is crucial to realize the political reality that forced Lincoln to act within the constraints of public sentiment, which delayed any direct action. Lincoln’s resistance to abolitionists’ immediate demands are viewed through the lens of his statement: “I am a slow walker, but I never walk back,”¹⁵⁵ which suggests while he did not move at speed many desired, he saw his progress toward abolition as inevitable. This evolving perception of Lincoln from cautious politician to emancipator aligns with his observation: “Those who look for the bad in people will surely find it.”¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, unlike the abolitionists, who saw the eradication of slavery as a moral imperative, Lincoln viewed it as a constitutional issue and a means to an end in preserving the Union. “He saw himself primarily as a steward of democracy, whose duty was to navigate the country through its greatest crisis,”¹⁵⁷ Howard Schuman, a professor of sociology, explains. Lincoln’s speeches and writings reveal a man who was both pragmatic and deeply reflective. In his first inaugural address, Lincoln reassured Southerners that he had “no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery where it now exists.”¹⁵⁸ Moreover, even *the Emancipation Proclamation* only freed enslaved individuals in Confederate areas, which left slavery intact in border states loyal to the Union. As Schuman notes: “Lincoln’s proclamations applied only to those slaves that Lincoln could not help.”¹⁵⁹ This selective application of emancipation led some abolitionists argue that Lincoln was motivated more by military strategy than by humanitarian concerns. However, his eventual push for *the Thirteenth Amendment*, which permanently abolished slavery, demonstrated a more decisive commitment to ending the institution. He came to view the abolition of slavery as necessary for national unity, by saying: “Whenever I hear anyone arguing for slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally.”¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, Lincoln’s acknowledgment of the deep racial divisions in the United States, is reflected in his remark: “America will never be destroyed from the outside. If

¹⁵³ Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln 1809-1865*, 143.

¹⁵⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln 1809-1865*, 144.

¹⁵⁵ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 515.

¹⁵⁶ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 515.

¹⁵⁷ Amy Corning, and Howard Schuman, *Generations and Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 52.

¹⁵⁸ Reynolds, *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times*, 374.

¹⁵⁹ Corning, and Schuman, *Generations and Collective Memory*, 52.

¹⁶⁰ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 518.

we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.”¹⁶¹ These words represent a clear link to Lincoln’s fears of racial tensions persisting beyond his presidency.

Lincoln’s evolving views on racial equality and his own legacy are clearly stated in final years of his life. By the end of his life, Lincoln’s vision of racial justice had expanded, as seen in this endorsement of African-American suffrage in 1865: “As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy.”¹⁶² Lincoln’s words truly capture his belief in reconciliation and progress. In addition, his reflections on personal integrity and leadership are tied to this quote: “Nearly all men are inclined to serve themselves when they can, but he who would be truly great must rise above selfish considerations.”¹⁶³ Thus, Lincoln saw his presidency as a test of character, one in which he had to balance morality with governance. His remark: “And in the end, it is not the years in a life, it is the life in the years,”¹⁶⁴ is particularly poignant given his assassination. Lincoln’s short presidency left an enduring impact, which reinforces the idea that his leadership was defined more by transformative decisions than longevity.

In conclusion, from a New Historicism perspective, Lincoln’s actions must be understood within the political realities of 19th-century America. He was not a radical abolitionist but was constrained by the need to maintain public and political support. Cultural studies criticism highlights how Lincoln’s evolving stance on slavery contributed to his posthumous mythologization as “The Great Emancipator,” despite the pragmatic nature of many of his decisions. Political discourse analysis reveals how Lincoln strategically framed his rhetoric, shifting from a focus on Union preservation to moral opposition to slavery as public sentiment changed. Overall, the relationship between Lincoln and the abolitionists illustrates the tensions between pragmatism and moral leadership. While abolitionists viewed Lincoln with suspicion, they also recognized his potential to enact meaningful change. Lincoln, for his part, navigated a difficult political landscape, while adapting his policies to balance Union preservation with the growing demand for emancipation. His legacy is thus one of both cautious strategy and moral evolution. By examining his shifting rhetoric, abolitionist critiques, and his own reflections, it becomes evident that Lincoln was not the unambiguous liberator of American mythology but rather a complex figure whose leadership was shaped by the pressures and possibilities of his time.

¹⁶¹ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 518.

¹⁶² Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 522.

¹⁶³ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 522.

¹⁶⁴ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 522.

4. LINCOLN AS “THE SAVIOR” – *EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION* AND *GETTYSBURG ADDRESS*

This is the fourth chapter overall and the second chapter of the analytical part. It addresses another famous nickname of Abraham Lincoln – “The Savior.” This specific title is possibly the most complimentary of all as it truly captures the magnitude of Lincoln’s role and leadership in American history. To fully examine this sobriquet, it is essential to include two pivotal texts of Lincoln’s era – *the Emancipation Proclamation* and *the Gettysburg Address*. These landmark texts and speeches are undoubtedly of utmost importance in analysing Lincoln’s title as “The Savior.” They offer invaluable context and additional points of view the analysis utilizes. Consequently, the analysis seeks to explore Lincoln’s scope of ideas, beliefs, and statements regarding slavery and abolitionism and to examine his role under the impact of the Civil War and how *the Emancipation Proclamation* and *the Gettysburg Address* show Lincoln’s evolving views.

In order to perform a sufficient analysis, this analytical chapter includes chosen methodological approaches and certain relevant information, all of which is defined in the two theoretical chapters. Therefore, political discourse analysis, cultural studies criticism, and New Historicism are utilized to critically examine Lincoln as “The Savior” in context of *the Emancipation Proclamation* and *the Gettysburg Address*.

The primary focus of this analytical chapter is centred on three key areas – *the Emancipation Proclamation* as both a moral act and a political strategy; *the Gettysburg Address* as a redefinition of national identity; and the historical reception and modern interpretation of these texts, all of which contribute to Lincoln’s enduring image as “The Savior” of the Union. The first area explores Lincoln’s motivations behind issuing *the Emancipation Proclamation*, assessing whether it was a genuine step toward abolition or a calculated wartime measure, as well as its reception by abolitionists, Confederate states, moderate Unionists, and European observers. The second topic delves into *the Gettysburg Address*, examining how Lincoln’s rhetorical choices elevated the Civil War from a military conflict to a moral struggle and redefined the meaning of democracy. Finally, the third topic analyses the contemporary and modern reception of both texts, considering how newspapers, political commentators, and historians interpreted them in their time, and how they have been reframed in literature, film, and political discourse.

To achieve a comprehensive analysis, each methodological approach is applied to a specific aspect of Lincoln’s rhetoric and leadership. New Historicism situates *the Emancipation*

Proclamation and Gettysburg Address within the broader ideological and political currents of the Civil War, highlighting Lincoln's ability to adapt his messaging to the constant shifting of wartime realities. Cultural studies criticism examines the public reception of these texts in the 19th-century America and their later mythologization, assessing Lincoln's evolving cultural symbolism and his role in shaping national memory as "The Savior." Political discourse analysis explores Lincoln's rhetorical strategies, particularly his use of framing, repetition, metaphor, and persuasive language, all of which he used to craft messages that were both unifying and divisive. This interdisciplinary approach ensures a nuanced examination of how Lincoln's leadership, as reflected in these landmark texts, cemented his legacy as "The Savior" of the Union and redefined the ideological trajectory of the entire nation.

"The Savior" title is often ascribed to Abraham Lincoln particularly in relation to two of his most consequential texts – *the Emancipation Proclamation* and *the Gettysburg Address*. These texts not only define Lincoln's legacy but also belong within the most transformative moments in American history, as they shaped the ideological and moral trajectory of the entire nation. *The Emancipation Proclamation*, issued on January 1, 1863, declared enslaved people in Confederate controlled territories as forever free. Such definition brilliantly captures how Lincoln managed to balance moral language with strategic framing of the act. In the text, Lincoln explicitly present emancipation as "a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion."¹⁶⁵ This statement invokes Lincoln's constitutional authority as president. At the same time, he concludes by appealing to higher principles. Lincoln states: "Upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favour of Almighty God."¹⁶⁶ By calling the proclamation an "act of justice" as well as a military necessity, Lincoln framed it as both morally righteous and legally justified. This dual framing was no accident. As Eric Foner mentions: "Salmon P. Chase, Lincoln's Treasury Secretary and a devoted abolitionist, had urged Lincoln to add a declarative moral conclusion [...] including the act of justice phrasing."¹⁶⁷ Consequently, it is visible that Lincoln's carefully chosen words lend the act moral legitimacy in the eyes of the public while grounding it in constitutional war powers.

Lincoln's motivations in issuing *the Emancipation Proclamation* have been a subject of extensive historical debate. Was he always an antislavery advocate acting on deeply held moral conviction, or was he a pragmatist using emancipation as a strategy to win the war? The

¹⁶⁵ National Archives, *The Emancipation Proclamation (Transcript)*.

¹⁶⁶ National Archives, *The Emancipation Proclamation (Transcript)*.

¹⁶⁷ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 418.

evidence suggest a combination of both Lincoln's personal conviction and political manoeuvring. Foner illuminates: "Lincoln had long believed slavery was wrong; there is no reason to doubt this claim."¹⁶⁸ Yet before the war, and in its early years, Lincoln was cautious about abolitionism. As the thesis mentions multiple times, Lincoln prioritized preserving the Union over immediate emancipation, and he pursued a moderate antislavery approach. Foner informs: "[...] urged the gradual and voluntary ending of slavery with compensation to slaveowners and even promoting colonization as supposed solution."¹⁶⁹ This plan found little success. Even Delaware, a loyal slave state with relatively few enslaved people, rejected Lincoln's compensated emancipation proposal in 1862. By 1863, it became clear to Lincoln that gradual measures were not enough. Thousands of enslaved individuals were fleeing the Union lines and subsequently the Union war effort had stalled. The public opinion in the North was also shifting. Foner claims that more Northerners began agreeing with abolitionists that slavery must become a target in order to win the war.¹⁷⁰ Moreover, Congress was already moving ahead with abolishing slavery in Washington D. C. and permitting African-American troops to fight, which resulted into Lincoln having no choice but to approve of this decision. In this context, Lincoln demonstrated what Foner calls "open-mindedness and capacity for growth,"¹⁷¹ meaning that Lincoln moved in the direction of immediate emancipation when circumstances demanded it. Politically, Lincoln also understood that foreign policy of Britain and France, with their largely anti-slavery views, likely prevent these states from intervening into the war on behalf of the Confederacy. Thus, Lincoln's motivation blended moral belief and strategic calculus. He waited for a Union battlefield victory to announce a *Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation* to avoid it seeming like an act of desperation. "The preliminary decree gave the Confederacy an ultimatum to return to the Union by January 1, 1863 or face an emancipation order,"¹⁷² Foner states. Such a shrewd move put the responsibility on the rebels and prepared the North for a policy shift. When *the Emancipation Proclamation* came, it was both limited and revolutionary. It is necessary to contextualize the document, because contrary to later popular belief, it did not free the nearly four million slaves with a stroke of Lincoln's pen. In fact, it applied only to the Confederate states still in rebellion, which liberated Border States like Kentucky or Missouri and even parts of the Confederacy under Union control. Almost a million enslaved individuals in loyal or occupied areas remained in slavery on paper.

¹⁶⁸ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 418.

¹⁶⁹ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 420.

¹⁷⁰ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 422.

¹⁷¹ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 425.

¹⁷² Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 426.

However, as Foner suggests: “[...] the other three million were declared free, and if the Union won, slavery was as good as doomed.”¹⁷³ This means *the Emancipation Proclamation* had no immediate effect on every enslaved individual, which highlights its strategic intent. Foner elaborates that the goal was to undermine the enemy in terms of labour force while not alienating slaveholding Unionists.¹⁷⁴ Ultimately, this strategy made abolition an official war aim and ensured that “if the Union emerged victorious, slavery would perish.”¹⁷⁵ In other words, it was irreversible as from January 1, 1863 onward as the Civil War’s purpose was fundamentally altered. As Lincoln later said: “[...] the promise being made, must be kept,”¹⁷⁶ thus there was no turning back on emancipation. To support this claim, even when Lincoln faced criticism regarding war-weariness in 1864, he refused suggestions to withdraw the proclamation in exchange for peace. Lincoln said that to do so would mean he “should be damned in time and eternity.”¹⁷⁷

The language of *the Emancipation Proclamation* is strikingly restrained and legalistic. The text lacks the passion of a gifted speaker Lincoln is considered to be. This fact, that such momentous moral decree lacks emotions, is often noted by its readers. Paludan notes that Lincoln was deliberately sober in tone, issuing it as an official proclamation rather than an ascending speech.¹⁷⁸ Lincoln underscored the nature of the proclamation as a lawful executive act. The tone reassured moderates that this was a measured policy, not a radical Jacobin decree. Only in the final lines did Lincoln infuse a moral dimension invoking divine favour by calling the proclamation, as mentioned, “act of justice.” Such careful framing inevitably shaped public perception. It signalled that emancipation was a necessary step to save the Union, not just a revolutionary impulse. As summarized in the National Archives, the proclamation “added moral force to the Union cause and strengthened the Union both militarily and politically.”¹⁷⁹ In essence, Lincoln’s rhetoric blended politics with idealism. By presenting emancipation as both to win the war and a fulfilment to America’s founding ideals of justice and liberty, Lincoln broadened support for the overall policy.

The immediate reception of *the Emancipation Proclamation* in January 1863 revealed deep divisions in American society. Abolitionists, who had long criticized Lincoln for being too cautious, largely rejoiced at this bold step, even as some acknowledged its limits. The

¹⁷³ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 426.

¹⁷⁴ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 426.

¹⁷⁵ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 426.

¹⁷⁶ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 733.

¹⁷⁷ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 733.

¹⁷⁸ Paludan, *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln*, 397.

¹⁷⁹ National Archives, *The Emancipation Proclamation (Transcript)*.

radical Republican Senator Benjamin Wade excitedly shouted on the Senate floor: “Now, hurrah for Old Abe and the proclamation!”¹⁸⁰ which reflected the joy of antislavery politicians. African-Americans in the North celebrated the proclamation as a triumphant milestone. David R. Shaffer, an awarded Civil War scholar, mentions reverend Henry Highland Garnet, who seen the proclamation for “one of the greatest acts in all history.”¹⁸¹ Moreover, one of the most famous abolitionists, Frederick Douglass, called it “the greatest event in our nation’s history.”¹⁸² Such praise from Douglass is particularly telling. Earlier in the war, he had been frustrated by Lincoln’s delays, but now he recognized the proclamation as a fundamental turning point. In Douglass’s view, Lincoln “had transformed the war into a crusade for freedom,”¹⁸³ which validates the sacrifices of those fighting to end slavery. Many abolitionists, regardless of race, held late night watch meetings on New Year’s Eve 1862 as they awaited the moment of emancipation. This moment was later termed “Freedom’s Eve.” This sentiment underscores the profound cultural significance the proclamation held for those who despised slavery.

On the other side, moderate Unionists and war Democrats were those who supported the war to preserve the Union but were less enthusiastic about abolition. As Shaffer notices: “Some in the Union ranks worried that making the war explicitly about slavery would alienate the Border States or undermine unity in the North.”¹⁸⁴ Indeed the Democratic press bitterly attacked Lincoln’s proclamation. The *Cincinnati Enquirer* accused Lincoln of betraying his office by condemning the idea as “a complete overthrow of the Constitution he swore to protect and defend.”¹⁸⁵ Across the North, detractors labelled the proclamation as “wicked, atrocious, and impudent.”¹⁸⁶ Such views suggest overtly racist or constitutional objections. Such criticism saw Lincoln not as “The Savior” but as an overstepping tyrant. The rhetoric shows that political discourse of the time was sharply polarized. Where Lincoln framed emancipation as saving the Union, opponents framed it as destroying the Constitution. It is worth noting that Lincoln himself had doubts about the proclamation’s legal solidity. He feared courts’ possible willingness to reverse it once the war ended. This concern was why Lincoln pushed urgently

¹⁸⁰ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 733.

¹⁸¹ Donald R. Shaffer, *After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 35.

¹⁸² Shaffer, *After the Glory*, 35.

¹⁸³ Shaffer, *After the Glory*, 35.

¹⁸⁴ Shaffer, *After the Glory*, 42.

¹⁸⁵ Shaffer, *After the Glory*, 42.

¹⁸⁶ Shaffer, *After the Glory*, 43.

for *the Thirteenth Amendment* to permanently abolish slavery and to ensure freedom of those enslaved and put emancipation beyond legal challenges.

The reaction in the Confederate South was predictably furious. Shaffer explains that to slave holders, Lincoln's decree was "an incendiary attempt to foment slave rebellions and a vindictive attack on their society."¹⁸⁷ Confederate president, Jefferson Davis, denounced *the Emancipation Proclamation* as an act of vengeful desperation by referring to it as "the most execrable measure recorded in the history of guilty man."¹⁸⁸ Far from seeing Lincoln as "The Savior", Davis painted him as a criminal. Confederate officials declared that the proclamation was "a futile and impotent rage that deserves only contempt."¹⁸⁹ More disturbingly, P. G. T. Beauregard, a Confederate general, responded with violent threats. Since the proclamation authorized enlistment of African-American soldiers in the Union army, Beauregard urged his Confederate forces that "any captured Union officers leading African-American troops should be executed."¹⁹⁰ This cruel order foreshadowed the harsh treatment and outright murder of African-American Union troops by Confederate forces later in the war. An extreme response like that illustrates how culturally threatening the idea of emancipation was to the Southern social order. It struck at the cornerstone of Confederate identity and economy. Southern propaganda also seized on the proclamation to rally "whites", as called back then, while also portraying Lincoln as a tyrant. Ultimately, Shaffer explains that the aim was "to incite a servile insurrection as a way to unify Southerners in hatred and fear."¹⁹¹

Internationally, Lincoln's move for emancipation had significant repercussions. Situated in a global context, the Civil War and *the Emancipation Proclamation* were being watched closely by European powers, especially Britain and France. Prior to emancipation, there had been rumours of European meditation or even recognition of the Confederacy – due to economic interests in Southern cotton. Lincoln and his cabinet understood this, and William Seward, a Secretary of State, saw emancipation as "a double-edged sword abroad,"¹⁹² which could either help or hurt Lincoln's diplomatic efforts. Therefore, Lincoln was unsure whether Europe applauds the Union for aligning itself with human freedom, or dismisses the proclamation as a cynical ploy. Actually, it was both, depending on whom Lincoln asked in Europe. Public opinion in Britain swung decisively in Lincoln's favour after the proclamation.

¹⁸⁷ Shaffer, *After the Glory*, 47.

¹⁸⁸ Shaffer, *After the Glory*, 48.

¹⁸⁹ Shaffer, *After the Glory*, 48.

¹⁹⁰ Shaffer, *After the Glory*, 49.

¹⁹¹ Shaffer, *After the Glory*, 50.

¹⁹² Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 739.

Working-class Britons, many of whom were already sympathetic to the antislavery cause, held mass rallies celebrating the measure. One Union diplomat in London reported that *the Emancipation Proclamation* “has rallied all the sympathies of the working classes.”¹⁹³ Indeed British workers suffering a cotton famine supported the Union because they hated slavery, which was a testament to the proclamation’s powerful moral diplomacy. Meanwhile, the British government’s official response was not that positive. The Foreign Secretary of Britain sneered at the proclamation as “a measure of a very questionable kind and essentially an act of vengeance on the slaveowner.”¹⁹⁴ This dichotomy between popular enthusiasm versus governmental caution meant that while Britain did not openly ally with the Union, the support of pro-Union and anti-slavery sentiment among its citizens made it politically difficult for Britain, or France for that matter, to assist the Confederacy. In conclusion, *the Emancipation Proclamation* effectively achieved a key strategic goal. As William Cullen Bryant, a poet and redactor for *New York Evening Post*, wrote: “It put the Union right before Europe [...] aligned the North’s cause with the global.”¹⁹⁵ Europe no longer viewed the conflict in simply sectional or economic terms. Lincoln had reframed it as a fight for human freedom, which made foreign aid to the slaveholding South morally indefensible.

Another intriguing moment related to *the Emancipation Proclamation* is an 1864 painting by Francis B. Carpenter. His *First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation of President Lincoln* depicts Lincoln and his cabinet deliberating over the proclamation. The artist spent months in the White House to capture this moment on canvas. Carpenter himself expressed how deeply moved he was while painting what he called “an act unparalleled for moral grandeur in the history of mankind.”¹⁹⁶ The finished painting was later displayed in the U. S. Capitol, which reflects how quickly *the Emancipation Proclamation* came to be seen as a pivotal event in the nation’s history. Culturally, the proclamation has since become a cornerstone of the Lincoln mythos and the image of Lincoln as “The Savior.” By examining how society mythologizes figures like Abraham Lincoln, it suggests that Lincoln’s cautious and calculated path to emancipation was soon overshadowed by a simpler heroic narrative. In the popular imagination, January 1, 1863 became the day Lincoln freed the slaves – an oversimplified but enduring narrative. This oversimplification, as it omits *the Thirteenth Amendment* completely, still speaks to the symbolic power on Lincoln’s act. In the postwar

¹⁹³ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 740.

¹⁹⁴ Shaffer, *After the Glory*, 50.

¹⁹⁵ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 741.

¹⁹⁶ Shaffer, *After the Glory*, 52.

years, Foner adds that Frederick Douglass continued to praise Lincoln's name in the context of *the Emancipation Proclamation*, while also reminding Americans the fight for equality was unfinished.¹⁹⁷ Over time, African-American communities celebrated "Emancipation Day" annually on January 1, to commemorate the proclamation. This gratitude further cements the place of *the Emancipation Proclamation* in American culture as a moment of deliverance. However, the mythologizing of Lincoln as "The Savior" who ended slavery on his own has also been critically examined by modern historians. Already mentioned and discussed historian, Harold Holzer, notes that emancipation was a process of efforts by enslaved individuals themselves, abolitionist activists, and the exigencies of war, as well as Lincoln's leadership.¹⁹⁸ It is therefore important to see *the Emancipation Proclamation* in context, not as an isolated miracle. Lincoln's role was crucial but not secluded. As Holzer adds: "Without the pressure created by enslaved people fleeing to Union lines and Northern public opinion shifting, he might not have acted when he did."¹⁹⁹ In 1863, some of this complexity was recognized. But as decades passed, a more idealized view took hold, especially as Lincoln's birthday and the Civil War commemorations became part of civic culture. By the 20th century, popular media often portrayed Lincoln as being a moral hero who was destined to free the slaves. This view was reinforced by literature and Hollywood. To illustrate, in the film *Lincoln*, directed by Steven Spielberg in 2012, *the Emancipation Proclamation* is a backdrop to Lincoln's push for *the Thirteenth Amendment*. The film underscores Lincoln's wit and moral resolve, even having Union soldiers recite *the Gettysburg Address*. Perhaps it was an artistic goal to showcase how iconic those words had become in American memory and to highlight Lincoln's two great acts. Nevertheless, while popular culture simplifies the depiction, the enduring image of Lincoln speaks to a permanent truth. Through this document, Lincoln transformed the Civil War's purpose and earned a place in history as a liberator.

In conclusion, *the Emancipation Proclamation* reveals Lincoln as a leader who merged moral vision with political strategy. It was not a sudden conversion to abolitionism but the result of careful deliberation and evolving circumstances. By examining *the Emancipation Proclamation* through the text's framing, its reception, mythologization, and its causes and effects, it allows for further appreciation of how Lincoln navigated the line between being "The Savior" and strategist. The proclamation was both a pragmatic war tactic, which crippled the Confederacy and bolstered the Union, and a moral milestone that redefined what the Union was

¹⁹⁷ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 428.

¹⁹⁸ Holzer, *The Lincoln Image*, 231.

¹⁹⁹ Holzer, *The Lincoln Image*, 231.

fighting for. It set the stage for “a new birth of freedom,” a phrase Lincoln famously employed in his next great piece of rhetoric – *the Gettysburg Address*.

On November 19, 1863, in the midst of the Civil War’s bloodshed, Abraham Lincoln delivered a brief speech at the dedication of the Soldier’s National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. In only approximately two hundred and seventy words, and under two minutes, Lincoln achieved a rhetorical performance that has resonated through the ages. *The Gettysburg Address* transcended its immediate occasion to honour fallen Union soldiers. The speech became so powerful it reframed the war as not just a struggle to preserve the Union, but a struggle to redeem the Union’s founding ideals. As Holzer claims: “Through a blend of lofty language and profound simplicity, Lincoln redefined the terms “nation” and “democracy” [...] effectively crafting a new American identity out of the carnage of war.”²⁰⁰ To be specific, *The Gettysburg Address* is rich in strategic word choice and persuasive techniques that elevate its message. Lincoln opens by coming back to the birth of the nation: “Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”²⁰¹ In these words, Lincoln explicitly quotes the central claim of equality by invoking *the Declaration of Independence* and its utmost relevance, despite having been written in 1776. By doing so, Lincoln accomplishes two things. First, he redefines the origin story of the United States, which casted the nation as one founded on an idea of liberty and equality, not just a constitutional framework or a union of states. This is significant because prior to the war, many Americans spoke to the United States in the plural, which emphasized the states’ sovereignty. By contrast, Lincoln speaks of a single nation brought fort by “our fathers,” which emphasizes unity and common purpose. Second, by highlighting equality as a founding principle, Lincoln subtly corrects the course. The Constitution written in 1787 had compromised with slavery, but Lincoln implies the true founding ideal to cherish the Declaration’s promise of equality. In effect, he ties the Union cause directly to the most noble principle of all, which asserts that the outcome of the war determines if that principle survives.

Lincoln also poses the Civil War’s central question by stating: “Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.”²⁰² In this formulation, the war is not merely a fight over territory or sovereignty.

²⁰⁰ Holzer, *The Lincoln Image*, 237.

²⁰¹ Library of Congress, *The Gettysburg Address (Transcript)*, Accessed February 27, 2025. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.24404500/>.

²⁰² Library of Congress, *The Gettysburg Address (Transcript)*.

It is a “test of the viability of democracy itself,”²⁰³ Holzer claims. The phrase “any nation so conceived and so dedicated” enlarges the scope beyond America, which suggests that if the United States fails, the hope of democracy, or “government by the people,”²⁰⁴ soon vanishes. This aligns with the Union’s sense of a mission. Lincoln is framing the Union war effort as something of global importance. “A stand for the proposition that free self-government can work,”²⁰⁵ Holzer elaborates. Such framing was an excellent political manoeuvre. It granted Union sacrifices with a higher meaning and put the Confederacy in the position of not just rebels against the U. S., but antagonists to the cause of democracy.

Moreover, the usage of inclusive language such as “we,” “our fathers,” “this nation,” fosters unity and resolve. The same is achieved through abstract ideals such as “liberty,” “equality,” which inspire moral commitment. Rhetorically, *the Gettysburg Address* is renowned for its poetic and mnemonic qualities. These features made it “timeless and memorable.”²⁰⁶ Furthermore, Lincoln employs parallelism and repetition masterfully. A famous example is the tricolon, which is a series of three parallel words, phrases or clauses: “[...] we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground.”²⁰⁷ The repetition of “we cannot” creates a solemn rhythm as well. Thus, it emphasizes that the living cannot add anything to the sacrifice made by the dead soldiers. It is a humbling statement that flips the purpose of the ceremony, because instead of the living dignifying the dead, the dead have consecrated the nation through their sacrifice. Another powerful tricolon comes at the conclusion of the speech: “[...] government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”²⁰⁸ The phrasing defines democracy in plain language that any listener understands as democracy is people’s government, no more, no less. The cadence and alliteration of “people, by the people, for the people” makes it easy to remember. For many, these words have become the most quoted definition of democracy in history. Nevertheless, Lincoln’s diction throughout the address is notably simple and concrete. Despite the seemingly boring and plain language, the true genius lies within. Due to mostly short, common words such as “new nation,” “great war,” “we are met,” “we have come,” “the dead,” “the living,” the speech gains directness and clarity. Yet these plain words are woven into profound concepts through structure and context. Lincoln also uses antithesis, a direct opposite of something else, to highlight contrasts: “The world will little

²⁰³ Holzer, *The Lincoln Image*, 241.

²⁰⁴ Library of Congress, *The Gettysburg Address (Transcript)*.

²⁰⁵ Holzer, *The Lincoln Image*, 241.

²⁰⁶ Holzer, *The Lincoln Image*, 243.

²⁰⁷ Library of Congress, *The Gettysburg Address (Transcript)*.

²⁰⁸ Library of Congress, *The Gettysburg Address (Transcript)*.

note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.”²⁰⁹ The juxtaposition of “say” versus “did” diminishes the importance of Lincoln’s own speech and elevates the deeds of the soldiers. It is both a modest rhetorical pose and a moral lesson, because actions speak louder than words, in this case the soldiers’ sacrifice. Ultimately, such humility in tone likely endeared Lincoln to listeners and kept the focus on the collective sacrifice rather than on himself. The briefness of the speech contradicted its significance. In those few minutes, Lincoln’s words profoundly reshaped national ideals for generations.

Building on the last point of reshaping national ideals, one of the most significant contributions of *the Gettysburg Address* is how Lincoln redefined the concept of the American nation. Prior to the Civil War, loyalty towards America was to their state. The Union was often described as a voluntary federation. Holzer mentions that in 1861, one of the Southern secessionists claimed they were preserving the original vision of the United States, a voluntary union that could be abandoned.²¹⁰ However, Holzer points out the address argues that the nation is something “sacred and non-divisible.”²¹¹ “Dedicated” is the word that appears multiple times thorough the text. Based on *the Declaration of Independence*, it suggests the mission for equality that must be upheld. By speaking of “a new birth of freedom,” Lincoln implies that the nation, as conceived in liberty, is reborn only when closer to its ideals. This is once again a subtle but powerful redefinition, which suggests that United States is not just a contractual union, as the Confederates see it, but a moral community founded on equality. Holzer brilliantly describes this through his claim: “In Lincoln’s revised narrative, equality and freedom are the core of American nationhood, and the Civil War is the furnace in which the nation will be remade true to those cores.”²¹² Lincoln’s proposed ideas had deep cultural ramifications. It laid conceptual groundwork for the Reconstruction, during which the Constitution was amended to extend liberty and equality. First, *the Thirteenth Amendment* abolishing slavery, second *the Fourteenth Amendment* granting equal protection, and finally *the Fifteenth Amendment* with voting rights. All of this is considered to fulfil the “new birth of freedom” Lincoln suggested.

In retrospect, *the Gettysburg Address* reads like a prophecy of those Reconstruction Amendments. Holzer claims: “By tying the Civil War to the Declaration’s promise, Lincoln prepared America to later accept changes that would write the Declaration of Independence’s commitment to freedom and equality into the Constitution.”²¹³ In this sense, *the Gettysburg*

²⁰⁹ Library of Congress, *The Gettysburg Address (Transcript)*.

²¹⁰ Holzer, *The Lincoln Image*, 251.

²¹¹ Holzer, *The Lincoln Image*, 251.

²¹² Holzer, *The Lincoln Image*, 252.

²¹³ Holzer, *The Lincoln Image*, 252.

Address did not just redefine terms, it helped shift the political culture to enable a new beginning after the war, which is now known as America's "Second Founding." Additionally, the moral elevation of the Civil War in *the Gettysburg Address* is achieved not only by invoking the past with its founding ideals but also by sanctifying the present sacrifice. With phrases such as "final resting place," "these dead shall not have died in vain," and the concept of a "birth of freedom," Lincoln uses spiritual and sacrificial imagery. Thus, the speech has an undertone of almost religious significance. When scrutinizing the text, it is in fact visible that Lincoln never explicitly mentions slavery, the Union, or the Confederacy, as he only talks about broader principles, which are used to abstractly define them. The effect is nicely illustrated in Holzer's words: [...] the Civil War is cast as a trial by fire, a kind of purification."²¹⁴ This is a characteristic which allows the speech to be seen as a piece of civil religion or national mythology. The audience at the time found solace and purpose in this perspective, as their loved ones had died so that the nation might live.

Furthermore, it is worth noting how different Lincoln's rhetorical approach was compared to the standards of the day. Edward Everett, the renowned orator who spoke for two hours before Lincoln at Gettysburg, delivered a classical speech full of historical allusions to Greek antiquity. By contrast, Lincoln rooted his speech in Biblical and founding imagery rather than classical references. His cadence and choice of words gave the address a sermonic quality that ordinary Americans, aware of the Bible, immediately related to. This difference in style meant Lincoln's words were more accessible and emotionally resonant to his audience than Everett's academic oration. Everett himself recognized Lincoln's achievement. The very next day, he wrote to Lincoln and praised the address by humbly saying: "I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes."²¹⁵ Lincoln's reply was modest and expressed relief that his remarks were "not a total failure."²¹⁶ The contrast between the two speeches at Gettysburg also highlights a transitional moment in American public discourse, which shifted from the spectacular oratory of the 19th century into a simpler and more democratic eloquence. In the very essence, *the Gettysburg Address* proves that a few plain words, rooted in shared ideals, move the nation more than unnecessary flowery language.

To enrich the analysis, historical reception and modern interpretations also deserve attention. The historical reception of *the Emancipation Proclamation* and *the Gettysburg*

²¹⁴ Holzer, *The Lincoln Image*, 252.

²¹⁵ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 766.

²¹⁶ Anderson, *The Complete Papers and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, 766.

Address was mixed at the time of their delivery, but their modern interpretation has been overwhelmingly respectful. Such a shift reveals how national memory is constructed. By examining contemporary reactions and then tracing the evolution of these texts' reputations, it is possible to see how Lincoln's words were transformed from contentious wartime interventions into almost sacred scriptures of American civic culture. In Lincoln's own time, reactions to both speeches were closely connected with political lines. It was visible how *the Emancipation Proclamation* was admired by abolitionists and Unionists of strong antislavery sentiment, just as it was denounced by others in the North and, of course, by Confederates. Moreover, newspapers provide a vivid record of this divide. Miers includes *Harper's Weekly*, a Northern publication, which printed celebratory illustrations of emancipation, such as an engraving showing the figure of Columbia rejoicing and slaves breaking the chains.²¹⁷ This image expectedly gained widespread approval in Republican circles. Contrarily, Democratic papers vilified Lincoln's actions. Miers adds that *New York World* and *Chicago Times* harshly criticized Lincoln for allegedly turning the conflict into a race war.²¹⁸ One common complaint was that Lincoln had exceeded his constitutional authority. Although this view was later disrupted by Union victory and *the Thirteenth Amendment*, it was still taken quite seriously in 1863. *The Gettysburg Address* initially received a similarly split reception. However, Miers claims that many listeners and readers immediately recognized its beauty and power.²¹⁹ Consequently, *Chicago Tribune*, a Republican newspaper, predicted that "the dedicatory remarks by President Lincoln will live among the annals of man."²²⁰ Also *the Springfield Republican*, expanded that Lincoln's speech was "a perfect gem, deep in feeling, compact in thought and expression, and tasteful and elegant in every word and comma."²²¹ These positive reviews understood that something special had occurred at Gettysburg. As previously mentioned, Lincoln, with his verbal perfection, "outspoke" even the famed orator Edward Everett. Nevertheless, Democrats and some critics still derided the speech. The infamous *Chicago Times* showed its hostility toward Lincoln by printing: "The cheeks of every American must tingle with shame as he reads the silly, flat, and dishwater utterances of the man who has to be pointed out to intelligent foreigners as the President of the United States."²²² Such critique not only dismissed the address as embarrassingly inadequate, but also hurt Lincoln's position.

²¹⁷ Miers, *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809-1865*, 894.

²¹⁸ Miers, *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809-1865*, 894.

²¹⁹ Miers, *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809-1865*, 894.

²²⁰ Miers, *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809-1865*, 895.

²²¹ Miers, *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809-1865*, 895.

²²² Miers, *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809-1865*, 896.

These negative reactions were politically motivated, which reflected the disdain for Lincoln. The reactions also show that not everyone in 1863 immediately heard the Gettysburg Address as the monumental utterance it is considered today. In fact even Miers adds that because the speech was so brief some attendees barely registered it.²²³ As noted, Lincoln himself feared his speech being a “failure,” until feedback like Everett’s letter and the Republican press reassured him.

Over the later decades of the 19th century, the perception of these texts shifted as Lincoln’s own legacy was glorified. Donald supports such claim by stating: “After Lincoln’s assassination in 1865, many of his former critics softened their tone and the martyred President became an object of national mourning.”²²⁴ Donald goes even further by suggesting that *The Emancipation Proclamation* quickly acquired nearly a biblical significance for the millions of formerly enslaved people and their descendants.²²⁵ In Reconstruction and after, African-Americans celebrated Lincoln as “Father Abraham,” the great liberator. It was a narrative that lasted even while the country struggled with the realities of racial inequality. White Americans in the North, who had doubted it initially, also began to retrospectively view the proclamation as a courageous and noble act. By the turn of the 20th century, school textbooks routinely credited Lincoln with freeing the slaves and saving the Union. The complexity, that emancipation was also a strategic war act, receded in favour of a more straightforward heroic story. Donald explains how the act was seen: “[...] part of a broader national reunion mythos that cast the Civil War’s outcome as a moral vindication for the Union, personified by Lincoln.” *The Gettysburg Address* likewise gained prestige with time. As seen in Donald’s comments: “[...] did not become widely famous immediately after the war [...] was reprinted occasionally, and political figures quoted “government of the people, by the people, for the people” here and there, but it was not yet enshrined.”²²⁶ It was around the World War I era and the early 20th century that the address truly entered the American canon as a sacred text. The creation of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D. C, dedicated in 1922, was a watershed moment. Inside the Greek-temple-like monument, *the Gettysburg Address* along with Lincoln’s *Second Inaugural Speech*, was carved into the marble walls. This reflects how Lincoln had been elevated to almost mythic status as the “The Savior.” To demonstrate such transition, Donald’s rather surprising insight states: “[...] half way through the 20th century, American students were often required

²²³ Miers, *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809-1865*, 896.

²²⁴ Donald, *Lincoln*, 620.

²²⁵ Donald, *Lincoln*, 620.

²²⁶ Donald, *Lincoln*, 620.

to memorize the Gettysburg Address.”²²⁷ Therefore, the educational practice helped cement the speech and its interpretation as a timeless statement of American values. *The Emancipation Proclamation* has been featured in popular culture as well, though often in less explicit ways. One powerful reappropriation was by Dr Martin Luther King Jr. in his *I have a Dream* speech of 1963. King began by echoing Lincoln: “Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation.”²²⁸ By invoking the proclamation at the start of his most famous speech and delivered at the Lincoln Memorial, King linked the civil right movement to Lincoln’s legacy of emancipation. King called the proclamation “a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves.”²²⁹ However, King noted that one hundred years later, African-Americans are still not fully free, thus challenging America to make the real promise of equality. Thus, it is visible that modern interpretations both venerate Lincoln’s act and demand the completion of its intent. The civil right era is a clear example of how historical texts are reframed to serve contemporary struggles for justice.

In conclusion, the journey of *the Emancipation Proclamation* and *the Gettysburg Address* from 1860s controversy to sacred national scripture illustrates how historical texts gain meaning over time. Through political discourse analysis, it is possible to see how Lincoln skilfully framed these texts to address his immediate political needs while appealing to enduring values. Through cultural studies criticism, the analysis traces how audiences then and now have received, celebrated, and sometimes contested these texts by turning them into pillars of American identity. With New Historicism, Lincoln’s words are placed back into their 19th-century context and sees them not as isolated divine utterances, but as products of a particular historical moments, which intertextually linked to the needs of the Civil War. Overall, Lincoln’s role as “The Savior” is justified not because he saved the Union or freed the slaves, as history is never that simple. But, because in these two texts, Lincoln articulated the moral meaning of the Union’s cause. With no doubts, *The Emancipation Proclamation* and *the Gettysburg Address* together shaped both the outcome of the war and the future course of American democracy. The former ensured that Union victory brought “a new birth of freedom” by creating a pathway to destroy slavery and the latter gave such struggle a profound ideological narration of United States being reborn and fulfilling the promise that “all men are created equal.”

²²⁷ Donald, *Lincoln*, 620.

²²⁸ Martin Luther King Jr. *I Have a Dream (The Essential Speeches of Dr MLK Jr.)* (California: Harper One, 2022), 4.

²²⁹ King, *I Have a Dream*, 5.

5. MARTYRDOM OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

The third analytical chapter, which is also the fifth and final chapter of the thesis, addresses the reputation of Abraham Lincoln as a martyr and the legacy that surrounds him. Lincoln's assassination on April 14, 1865, transformed his historical image in profound ways. In the immediate aftermath of his death, Lincoln was elevated from a controversial wartime president to almost a saint figure in American memory. This chapter examines how Lincoln's violent death shaped his image as a martyr and how his legacy has been memorialized from the 19th century until today. The analysis employs Rüsen's theory of historical depiction to understand how each era reconstructs Lincoln's image to fit its narrative needs. It also utilizes cultural studies criticism to situate Lincoln's martyrdom within broader cultural narratives of sacrifice and redemption. Modern political invocations of Lincoln's legacy are also analysed to show the enduring symbolic power of the martyred president.

Lincoln's assassination elicited a wave of public grief in the North and even South, which immediately casted him as a martyr for the nation's ideals. Thousands of Northern mourners participated in funeral processions. In his article, Phillip Kunhardt mentions reports of *Evening Post*, stating: "[...] never in human history has there been so universal, so profound an expression of a nation's bereavement."²³⁰ Such wave of mourning reflected not only personal sorrow but also a collective sense that Lincoln had died for the country's sins and salvation. In Easter sermons, preachers drew explicit parallels between Lincoln and Christ. It was noted that Lincoln was shot on Good Friday and thus his sacrifice was linked to a "sacrificial atonement for the sin of slavery."²³¹ This religious imagery elevated Lincoln to a status of a messiah in the Northern imagination. As Kunhardt quotes one of the citizens from that dark day: "it felt as if the whole world had lost a dear, personal friend."²³² These feelings transformed the fallen president into a beloved martyr and hero almost overnight. However, reactions from Lincoln's political enemies and Confederate sympathizers stood in stark contrast, yet paradoxically also contributed to his martyrdom narrative. Some Southern Confederates openly rejoiced at the news. Emma LeConte, the Confederate diarist, wrote: "Hurrah! Old Abe Lincoln has been assassinated! [...] The man we hated has met his proper fate."²³³ Such celebrations of the "tyrant's" death reflected real hatred. Kunhardt informs about Northern reactions: "These remarks only deepened Northern reverence for Lincoln by painting his assassin, John Wilkes

²³⁰ Phillip Kunhardt, "Lincoln's Contested Legacy," *Smithsonian Magazine* (2009): 12.

²³¹ Kunhardt, "Lincoln's Contested Legacy," 12.

²³² Kunhardt, "Lincoln's Contested Legacy," 12.

²³³ Emma LeConte, *The Diary of Emma LeConte 1864-1865* (N. P., 2010), 35.

Booth, as the embodiment of evil.”²³⁴ Nevertheless, even Southern people mourned Lincoln’s death, because they feared his kinder plan for rebuilding the country would be replaced with stricter punishments. In essence, to Lincoln’s supporters his death confirmed his righteousness, while his detractors’ responses helped cement his image as the martyred leader who had given his life to preserve the Union. The narrative of Lincoln’s life was quickly reframed into a timeless story of martyrdom serving a higher purpose. One particular remark was uttered near Lincoln’s deathbed: “Now he belongs to the ages.”²³⁵ It beautifully summarizes how Lincoln’s contemporaries saw his passing and elevated him into a hero. Bill O’Reilly, an American journalist and author, notes that Americans soon spoke of Lincoln in almost hallowed terms such as “a leader who had ascended to the status of a godlike martyr for the nation.”²³⁶ O’Reilly further observes that Lincoln’s legacy “has stood remarkably tall and strong,”²³⁷ which has inspired generations of Americans to see Lincoln as national hero whose death provided final proof of his moral greatness. Lincoln’s assassination fits a classic narrative of sacrifice and redemption. The leader who perishes at the triumphant moment and secures his ideals through his very own blood. Thus, the nation’s civic culture absorbed Lincoln’s death as a redemptive sacrifice. Sociologist Robert Bellah argues that with Lincoln’s death a new theme of sacrifice and rebirth entered American civil religion.²³⁸ In this civil religious narrative, Lincoln became a figure whose martyrdom brought rebirth to the nation. He saved the Union and abolished slavery at the cost of his own life, all of which made people compare him to Christ. Such powerful symbolism has made Lincoln a lasting example of a president who died for a cause, honoured with deep, almost religious, respect in American history.

In the decades following 1865, Americans began memorializing Lincoln in monuments, literature, and popular culture, all of which continually reshaped his legacy. Immediately after his death, prints proclaimed Lincoln as “The Martyr President.” O’Reilly informs Lincoln was often depicted with angelic figures or as ascending to heaven.²³⁹ Another example is a famous elegy *O Captain! My Captain!* by Walt Whitman, a profound poet of Lincoln’s era. Whitman depicted Lincoln as the fallen captain who saved the ship of state and thus strengthened Lincoln’s legacy. Moreover, the 19th-century memorials casted Lincoln as “The Savior” of the

²³⁴ Kunhardt, “Lincoln’s Contested Legacy,” 12.

²³⁵ Bill O’Reilly, and Martin Dugard, *Killing Lincoln: The Shocking Assassination that Changed America Forever* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2011), 215.

²³⁶ O’Reilly, and Dugard, *Killing Lincoln*, 215.

²³⁷ O’Reilly, and Dugard, *Killing Lincoln*, 215.

²³⁸ Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 73.

²³⁹ O’Reilly, and Dugard, *Killing Lincoln*, 217.

Union and “The Great Emancipator”. Both titles further reinforced his martyr image in the public consciousness. Over time, each generation reconstructed Lincoln’s image according to its values and needs. By the turn of the 20th century, Lincoln was upheld as a unifying national icon, though different aspects of his legacy were emphasized or downgraded. For instance, during the post-Reconstruction era, the mainstream commemorations focused on Lincoln as the preserver of the Union, which often minimized his role as emancipator in order to avoid the sensitive topic in a still segregated society. O’Reilly notes that in 1909, on the centennial of Lincoln’s birth, Lincoln was widely celebrated as a symbol of national unity as “The Savior” of the Union, not “The Great Emancipator,” the man who had freed the slaves.²⁴⁰ This selective memory served a cultural need to reunite North and South, which illustrates John Rüsen’s notion that historical narratives are reframed to foster identity and continuity.

Furthermore, major monuments erected in the 20th century reflected and shaped Lincoln’s evolving legacy. The Lincoln Memorial in Washington D. C., dedicated to him in 1922, presented Lincoln as an enduring figure of wisdom and unity. Architect Henry Bacon and sculptor Daniel French deliberately portrayed Lincoln as an ordinary human. Martin Dugard, a co-author of *Killing Lincoln* by previously mentioned O’Reilly, suggests that the aim was to represent Lincoln as a man and not a god, which made him more accessible and humanized him even in marble form.²⁴¹ Nevertheless, the design and its sacred atmosphere still casted Lincoln in almost godlike state, which testifies to the tension between humanizing Lincoln and elevating him to myth. Interestingly, the inscription above the statue does not mention emancipation at all, but praises Lincoln for saving the Union. For Dugard, this omission was intentional as he explains: “The early 20th-century memorial planners chose to appeal to both Northern and Southern audiences by honouring Lincoln’s role in reunifying the nation while saying nothing about slavery.”²⁴² At the memorial’s dedication, the irony was dreadful, as the ceremony was segregated by race, even when speakers praised Lincoln’s deeds and legacy. In this period, Lincoln’s martyrdom was framed chiefly as sacrifice for Union, which aligned with a cultural narrative of national redemption. Indeed, as Dugard notes: “Lincoln assumed the role of Christ in American civil religion, signifying national redemption,”²⁴³ although at the cost of temporarily marginalizing Lincoln’s emancipator image. As the 20th century progressed, Lincoln’s legacy was reinterpreted again through the lens of civil rights and universal freedom.

²⁴⁰ O’Reilly, and Dugard, *Killing Lincoln*, 218.

²⁴¹ O’Reilly, and Dugard, *Killing Lincoln*, 244.

²⁴² O’Reilly, and Dugard, *Killing Lincoln*, 244.

²⁴³ O’Reilly, and Dugard, *Killing Lincoln*, 244.

The Lincoln Memorial itself became a stage for redefining its symbolism. In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech consciously linked Lincoln's memory to the cause of racial equality on the very steps of the memorial. Dugard points out that from that moment on, the Memorial and Lincoln's image gained new dimensions as a symbol of civil rights and racial justice.²⁴⁴ This evolution demonstrates how cultural memory, through what Rüsen calls a genetic narrative, as defined in the methodological chapter, incorporates new moral interpretations of Lincoln as the martyr who now stood for the unfinished work of equality as well as the unity of the nation.

Likewise, Lincoln's portrayal in literature, film, and popular media has shifted with cultural currents. Early films like *The Birth of a Nation*, produced in 1915, portrayed Lincoln as "The Savior" whose death was a national tragedy, which aligns with the reconciliation narrative. Mid-century films, like *Young Mr. Lincoln*, produced in 1939, presented Lincoln in a mythical light, which emphasized his humanity and destiny. By the 21st century, depictions such as Spielberg's film *Lincoln* focus on his political skill and moral resolve to end slavery, while portraying him as both deeply human and mythical. Hence, each era reflects its own ideals as Lincoln has been simultaneously the self-made man, "The Great Emancipator", the gentle father figure, and the untouchable icon on Mount Rushmore. Yet, through all these cultural depictions, the theme of martyrdom remains a thread that elevates Lincoln's story. Narratives of Lincoln's martyrdom align with a broader archetype of the hero's sacrifice. This symbolic power of Lincoln's image endures in American politics precisely because of this narrative. By invoking Lincoln, modern leaders attempt to hide themselves behind the moral authority of a martyr who died for the nation's unity and ideals. O'Reilly argues that political rhetoric often turns Lincoln into almost sacred figure, while using his name to justify policies by suggesting a continuum with the mission of saving the nation.²⁴⁵ Even the contemporary presidents from both parties frequently cite Lincoln in speeches to appeal to unity and implicitly invite comparisons between their agenda and Lincoln's legacy. This politicized invocation shows how Lincoln's martyrdom is a cultural resource and a moral purpose that lends weight to modern causes. It also reflects how historical depiction is never static, because as times change, so does Lincoln's memory.

To conclude, in the century and a half since his assassination, Abraham Lincoln's image has been continually remodelled – from grieving nation's martyr, to symbol of reconciliation, to champion of freedom and equality. It is undeniable that historical figures are reinterpreted to

²⁴⁴ O'Reilly, and Dugard, *Killing Lincoln*, 244.

²⁴⁵ O'Reilly, and Dugard, *Killing Lincoln*, 252.

find new meaning for new times, which supports Jörn Rüsen's insight. Through the lens of cultural narratives, Lincoln's martyrdom stands as a powerful story of sacrifice and redemption at the heart of American identity. Even as he has been idealized as mythical, it is crucial to remember the human being behind. After all, Lincoln's enduring legacy derives not from perfection, but from his humanity, moral conviction, and the ultimate sacrifice he made for his country.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the thesis, depiction of Abraham Lincoln emerges as a dynamic construct, evolving from a pragmatic wartime leader into an enduring national martyr. The thesis demonstrates that Lincoln's public image was continually reshaped through his own rhetoric, actions, and narratives woven by subsequent generations. By applying an interdisciplinary methodological framework – Jörn Rüsen's theory of historical depiction; cultural studies criticism; New Historicism; and political discourse analysis – the thesis uncovers how each aspect of Lincoln's character was contextually defined and later culturally reinterpreted. The methodologies, defined in the first chapter, collectively underscore that Lincoln's depiction was not a fixed truth but a constructed historical narrative reflecting the needs and values of different eras. The constructed nature of Lincoln's legacy is evident in how his image as both leader and martyr has been used to shape American national identity and historical memory across time. The analysis is also based on the second theoretical chapter, which offers necessary background information and context.

The third chapter of the thesis analyses divergent interpretations of Abraham Lincoln's persona. This dual persona as "Honest Abe" and "The Great Emancipator," reveals a leader of paradoxical complexity. While celebrated for his integrity and humble origins, Lincoln's honesty was tempered by political pragmatism. This allowed him to navigate the turbulent political landscape of Civil War era, often balancing moral conviction with strategic restraint. His stance on slavery exemplified this balance as Lincoln transformed from a cautious politician focused on Union preservation into a visionary statesman committed to abolition. The analysis shows that Lincoln was neither a flawless moral crusader nor a cynical politician, but a statesman defined by the constraints and possibilities of his time. For instance, he initially distanced himself from radical abolitionism, responding gradually to mounting pressures and the moral imperative of emancipation. Yet, by the end of the war, his leadership had been instrumental in the final destruction of slavery. This evolution from "Honest Abe" to "The Great Emancipator" highlights the interplay between Lincoln's personal ideals and political strategy, illustrating how he merged ethical goals with practical governance. Through New Historicism, the thesis situates Lincoln's decisions within 19th-century realities, showing that his policies, such as delaying emancipation early on, were shaped by the political and ideological struggles of the era. Political discourse analysis of Lincoln's speeches and letters further exposes how he carefully framed public statements to maintain support while inching the nation toward justice. Meanwhile, cultural studies criticism helps assess how contemporaries and later commentators

perceived these dual nicknames, from abolitionists' early scepticism to historians' eventual respect. Taken together, these findings underline that Lincoln's leadership legacy resists simplistic categorization. It was forged in a combat between moral vision and pragmatic action, evolving as Lincoln listened, adapted, and ultimately acted. This nuanced understanding of "Honest Abe" and "The Great Emancipator" reinforces the idea that Lincoln as a national leader is remembered not for unchanging virtue, but for growth and principle amidst adversity.

The fourth chapter analyses Lincoln as "The Savior" and his wartime rhetoric, most notably *the Emancipation Proclamation* and *the Gettysburg Address*, which illuminate how he assumed the image of "The Savior" of the Union. Lincoln's political judgment and moral messaging converged to redefine the nation's ideals. *The Emancipation Proclamation* was scrutinized both as a moral act and a strategic manoeuvre, revealing Lincoln as a leader who merged moral vision with political strategy. Issued at a crucial moment, the proclamation effectively achieved a key strategic goal by weakening the Confederacy and aligning the Union with the cause of freedom, while remaining within the legal war powers of Lincoln's presidency. At the same time, it carried profound symbolic weight, casting the war as a fight for human liberation. *The Gettysburg Address* likewise exemplified Lincoln's rhetorical genius in elevating a moment of national crisis into a timeless statement of democratic values. In just 272 words, Lincoln reframed the Civil War from a mere struggle for Union into a "new birth of freedom," thereby redefining American national identity around the principles of equality, sacrifice, and national rebirth. Through political discourse analysis, the thesis shows how Lincoln skilfully crafted his language by using alliteration, inclusive language, and evocative imagery to unite a fractured public and sacralise the Union's cause. New Historicism contextualizes both texts, reminding that Lincoln's words were products of particular historical moments tailored to the urgent needs of 1863 and informed by contemporary ideologies. In parallel, cultural studies criticism traces the reception and mythologization of these speeches, noting that neither address was universally respected in its own time. However, over the late 19th and early 20th centuries, *the Emancipation Proclamation* and *the Gettysburg Address* became sacred documents, often memorialized as cornerstones of American nation. This evolution from 1860s controversy to sacred national scripture vividly illustrates how historical texts gain meaning over time. By the mid-20th century, students routinely memorized *the Gettysburg Address*, cementing its status as a pillar of national identity. The thesis finds that Lincoln's image as "The Savior" is justified not by simple fact of Union victory, but by his success in conveying moral purpose to that victory. His achievements of freeing the slaves in principle and reimagining the American creed ensured that the Union's triumph was imbued

with enduring ideals of liberty and equality. In summary, Lincoln's wartime rhetoric and political strategy worked in tandem to shape the ideological trajectory of the nation, reinforcing a national identity founded on unity, freedom, and democratic governance.

The fifth and final chapter analyses the martyrdom of Abraham Lincoln. It addresses Lincoln's assassination and the subsequent memorialization that cement him as a martyr in American memory. The tragic end of Lincoln's life on April 14, 1865 immediately transformed his public image. In the North, and even parts of the South, a wave of public grief and veneration elevated Lincoln from an embattled leader to an almost saint figure. As mourners linked his sacrifice to Christ's on Good Friday, Lincoln was recast as a redeemer for the nation's sins, with clergy and citizens interpreting his death as a "sacrificial atonement for the sin of slavery." This narrative laid the foundation for Lincoln's enduring martyr image. Utilizing Rösen's theory of historical depiction, the thesis traces how each successive eras reconstructed Lincoln's story to fit their own narrative needs. In the immediate postwar period, Lincoln was memorialized as "The Martyr President," a fallen hero who saved the Union. Cultural studies criticism illuminates how these memorials and cultural products contributed to a broader narrative of sacrifice and national rebirth, integrating Lincoln into America's civil religion. As decades passed, the focus of Lincoln's legacy shifted according to the nation's priorities. By the turn of the 20th century, in an effort to foster reconciliation between North and South, mainstream commemorations emphasized Lincoln as "The Savior" who preserved the Union, while downplaying his role as emancipator. This selective remembering, exemplified by the 1922 Lincoln Memorial's portrayal of Lincoln and its conspicuous silence on slavery, illustrates how historical narratives are reframed to foster identity and continuity, validating Rösen's insights. It was only later in the 20th century, especially during the Civil Rights Movement, that Lincoln's image as "The Great Emancipator" was revived and woven into contemporary struggles for equality. Notably, Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 *I Have a Dream* speech, delivered at the Lincoln Memorial, deliberately linked Lincoln's memory to the cause of civil rights, casting the martyred president as an enduring ally in the quest for racial justice. This moment symbolizes how cultural memory can be reinterpreted to inspire new generations – a process Rösen describes as the development of a genetic narrative that adds new moral meaning to a historical figure. Furthermore, popular media and literature throughout the 19th to 21st centuries have variously depicted Lincoln as self-made man, compassionate father-figure, or untouchable icon, each reflecting the prevailing values of its time. Yet, across these changing depictions, the archetype of the martyr and hero has remained a constant thread, elevating Lincoln's story as one of ultimate sacrifice. Even in contemporary politics, leaders invoke

Lincoln's martyrdom to hide modern agendas in the moral authority of his legacy. The analysis shows that this enduring symbolic power attests that Lincoln's posthumous image became a flexible and unifying national myth, which is a testament to how historical memory is shaped by the cultural and political needs.

Together, the findings from each analytical chapter underscore how Lincoln's rhetoric, political strategies, and posthumous memorialization have profoundly shaped American national identity and historical consciousness. His eloquent words and calculated decisions during the Civil War did more than just achieve immediate goals. They forged narratives of purpose and unity that Americans have inherited as part of their national story. Likewise, the remembrance of Lincoln as a martyred "The Savior" has provided a symbolic foundation for national values, from unity and reconciliation to liberty and equality. The multidisciplinary methodologies employed in this thesis enrich understanding of these phenomena. Political discourse analysis reveals how Lincoln's use of language and framing bolstered his image as a principled yet pragmatic leader, persuading diverse audiences to embrace his vision. Cultural studies criticism exposes the cultural context and reception of Lincoln's persona and how public opinion, media, and later popular culture continually reconstructed Lincoln as a cultural symbol in line with shifting societal values. Through New Historicism, the thesis situates Lincoln's actions and writings firmly in their historical environment, showing that his choices were products of their time and that text and context are inextricably linked in interpreting his legacy. Finally, Jörn Rüsen's theory of historical depiction proves invaluable for examining the narrative evolution of Lincoln's image, demonstrating how each generation imbues Lincoln's story with new meanings to suit contemporary identity needs. Overall, by synthesizing these approaches, the thesis confirms that Lincoln's character is not a static portrait, but rather an active dialogue between the past and the present, which is continually being reinterpreted to reinforce collective memory and identity.

In conclusion, Abraham Lincoln's evolving image as both leader and martyr attests to the power of historical narrative in shaping national consciousness. His life and afterlife in memory form a continuum. The values Lincoln articulated and the image he cultivated during his presidency laid the groundwork for the martyr, hero, and legend that followed. Each chapter of this thesis shows how Lincoln's words and deeds, and subsequently the myths about him, became cornerstones of American identity – whether by defining the meaning of freedom and union or by offering a symbol of ultimate sacrifice for the nation's ideals. The significance of these conclusions lies in recognizing that Lincoln of today is as much a product of history as a shaper of it. By examining Lincoln through multiple critical lenses, this thesis highlights how

leadership and legacy connect and a how Lincoln’s actions influence the trajectory of a nation, and in turn, the nation continually reshapes that leader’s legacy to navigate its own journey. Lincoln’s story exemplifies how historical memory is crafted, teaching that what endures is not only what a leader achieved in life, but also how those achievements are remembered and reinterpreted for future generations. Thus, the thesis reinforces the enduring argument that Lincoln’s character – as “Honest Abe,” “The Great Emancipator,” “The Savior,” and a martyr – has been integral to American historical memory and identity, reflecting the evolving values and aspirations of the United States itself. After all, understanding Abraham Lincoln’s multifaceted character enriches comprehension of how the United States has continually defined itself through the image of its most iconic leader, forging a narrative of unity, freedom, and sacrifice that remains vital to its national story even today.

RESUMÉ

Diplomová práce zkoumá proměny osobnosti a odkazu, který Abraham Lincoln zanechal prostřednictvím politických projevů, dobových reakcí a následného historického vyobrazení. Analýza vybraných názorů a projevů je kontrastována s protichůdnými postoji jeho politických protivníků a také zasazena do jeho obecného historického obrazu. V analýze jsou zkoumány především Lincolnovy názory na otroctví a jeho role v abolicionistickém hnutí a poté i v období občanské války, zejména s přihlédnutím k Proklamaci emancipace a Gettysburskému projevu. V neposlední řadě se práce zaměřuje také na Lincolnův odkaz.

Metodologický rámec je interdisciplinární a opírá se o čtyři hlavní teoretické přístupy. Prvním je Rüsenova teorie historického vyobrazení, která zdůrazňuje, že historické narativy nejsou pouhým souhrnem faktů, ale kulturním konstruktem utvářejícím kolektivní paměť a identitu. Rüsenův koncept také využívá tzv. genetického narativu, který umožňuje sledovat vývoj určitého obrazu v čase – v tomto případě sleduje vývoj Lincolnova vyobrazení jakožto politického lídra a následně legendy. Rüsenův přístup vybízí k analýze, jak konkrétní doba interpretuje a využívá minulost. Práce tedy zkoumá, jak různé generace rekonstruovaly postavu Lincolnova a přisuzovaly jí významy podle svých aktuálních hodnot a potřeb. Druhým použitým přístupem je kritika v rámci kulturních studií, která rozšiřuje analýzu o společenské a ideologické souvislosti. Kulturní studia nahlízejí historii jako dynamický proces, jenž formuje kulturu a mocenské vztahy. V kontextu této práce pomáhá tento přístup odhalit, jak Lincolnův obraz fungoval v dobovém politickém diskursu a národní mytologii – ku příkladu jak byla Proklamace emancipace a jiné klíčové akty chápány veřejností a později mytologizovány. Třetím teoretickým východiskem je Nový historismus, literárně-historický přístup, spojený se Stephenem Greenblattem, který zdůrazňuje zasazení textů a činů do dobového kontextu. Nový historismus v práci slouží k propojení Lincolnových projevů a činů s konkrétními společenskými, kulturními a mocenskými podmínkami 19. století. Umožňuje tak vidět Lincolnova politická rozhodnutí a rétoriku v kontextu ideologie tehdejší Ameriky, kdy otázky otroctví, občanské války, Unie vs. Konfederace, a další, neměly jednoduchá řešení. Čtvrtým přístupem je analýza politického diskursu, jež poskytuje nástroje k detailnímu zkoumání jazyka, argumentačních strategií a vyjadřování moci v Lincolnových projevech i v projevech jeho současníků. Tento přístup pomáhá odhalit, jak Lincoln pomocí rétoriky utvářel své názory, jak vyjadřoval rámcová témata jednoty, svobody, obětí, a jak naopak jeho odpůrci konstruovali odlišné narativy, kdy Lincolnova vykreslovali jako tyрана či nekompetentního vůdce. Kombinací těchto čtyř metodologických perspektiv získává práce komplexní náhled – všechny se shodují,

že historický obraz je konstruktem ovlivněným dobovým kontextem a jeho následným výkladem, a společně tak umožňují důkladně a mnohostranně analyzovat Lincolnovu osobnost a její proměny.

Ve druhé kapitole práce, která je kapitolou teoretickou, je Abraham Lincoln zasazen do historického a kulturního kontextu své doby. Tato kontextuální kapitola popisuje Lincolnovu životní cestu, politickou kariéru a hlavní ideové střety poloviny 19. století. Kapitola ukazuje, že Lincoln působil v mimořádně vypjatém období amerických dějin. V éře rozdělené sporem o otroctví, která vyústila v Americkou občanskou válku (1861–1865). Tento kontext je zásadní pro pochopení jeho rozhodování – Lincoln se profiloval jako umírněný odpůrce otroctví, jehož primárním cílem bylo udržet jednotu Unie. Zpočátku nepatřil k radikálním abolicionistům požadujícím okamžité zrušení otroctví, ale tento postoj se postupně vyvíjel pod tlakem okolností. Práce zdůrazňuje, že už za Lincolnova života existovaly protichůdné interpretace jeho osobnosti a politiky. Mnozí abolicionisté, jako William L. Garrison či Frederick Douglass, zpočátku pohlíželi na Lincolna skepticky a kritizovali jeho váhání, jelikož ho pokládali za příliš opatrného politika, který v boji proti otroctví nezachází dostatečně daleko. Ostatní, včetně umírněných republikánů a široké veřejnosti na Severu, ho vnímali jako morální autoritu a nadaného státníka, jenž s mimořádnou moudrostí a integritou manévruje složitou politickou situací. Tato rozporuplná dobová percepce – od oslav až po ostrou kritiku – ukazuje, že Lincolnova pověst nebyla v jeho době jednotná. Polarizace názorů, sever vs. jih, republikáni vs. demokraté, abolicionisté vs. unionisté, to vše předznamenalo, že se obraz Lincolna v budoucnu stal předmětem reinterpetací. Právě tato počáteční kontroverze je jedním z důvodů, proč se Lincolnov odkaz v následujících generacích proměňoval.

Analytická část práce se zaměřuje na tři klíčové vyobrazení Lincolna – „Pocitivý Abe“, „Velký emancipátor“ a „Spasitel“. Nejprve je rozebrán Lincolnov obraz čestného vůdce „Pocitivý Abe“, který se zrodil již během jeho právnické a rané politické kariéry v Illinois. Práce analyzuje, jak toto přívěsko odkazovalo k jeho pověsti neúplatného a spravedlivého člověka, kdy symbolem byly drobné příhody o jeho pocivosti, jež si získaly oblibu veřejnosti. Tento mýtus o osobní integritě sehrál významnou roli v Lincolnově politické image. V době rozšířené korupce a stranických bojů 19. století představoval Lincoln ve veřejném povědomí ideál ryzího charakteru stojícího nad politickými šarvátkami. Zároveň však výzkum ukazuje, že Lincoln nebyl prostou morální ikonou. Jeho upřímnost a mravnost byly vyvažovány politickým realismem. Lincoln uměl být pragmatický a v některých situacích volil opatrná či nejednoznačná vyjádření, pokud to bylo nutné k udržení široké podpory. Tato dvojí tvář mravní zásadovosti a politické pragmatičnosti je jedním z ústředních motivů, které práce identifikuje v

jeho vůdcovském stylu. Lincoln tak nenaplnil jednostranný obraz „svatého“, ale ani „pouhého politika“. Byl státníkem, který se snažil skloubit morální ideály s reálnými možnostmi své doby. Právě tato schopnost balancovat mezi ideály a nutností činí jeho vůdcovství složitým, ale efektivním, a přispěla tak k jeho trvalému vlivu.

Další důležitý okruh analýzy představuje jak Lincoln přispěl ke zrušení otroctví a obrazu „Velkého emancipátora“. Práce detailně sleduje vývoj jeho názorů na otroctví a abolicionismus. Ukazuje, že ačkoliv Lincoln dlouho kladl důraz na zachování Unie i za cenu kompromisu s otrokářstvím, postupem času dospěl k přesvědčení, že osvobození otroků je nezbytné jak morálně, tak strategicky. Klíčovým mezníkem v tomto ohledu byla Proklamace emancipace z 1. ledna 1863 – dokument, který Lincoln vydal během vyvrcholení občanské války. Práce analyzuje text z hlediska obsahu i jazyka a konstatuje, že ačkoliv šlo primárně o válečné opatření a emancipace se vztahovala na otroky v Konfederaci, čímž oslabovala nepřítele, nesla také silné symbolické poselství. Lincolnův podpis pod proklamací fakticky proměnil válku za zachování Unie ve válku za osvobození a tím zásadně posunul vlastní obraz z politika usilujícího o jednotu k morálnímu vůdci bojujícímu za svobodu. Text proklamace navíc pečlivě opíral své zdůvodnění o prezidentovy ústavní válečné pravomoci, ale zároveň obsahoval jazyk morálky a spravedlnosti, čímž Lincoln ospravedlnil emancipační akt nejen právně, ale i eticky. Z hlediska Lincolnova odkazu se emancipace stala jedním z ústředních pilířů jeho historické reputace a zrodil se příběh o „Velkém emancipátorovi“, osvoboditeli ztotočených, který navždy spojil Lincolnovo jméno s principem zrovnoprávnění. Práce ovšem kriticky zmiňuje i opačné pohledy některých historiků – například názor, že otroci se osvobodili do značné míry sami a že Lincolnova role byla spíše reaktivní než iniciativní. Tyto polemiky nicméně potvrzují, že titul „Velký emancipátor“ je selektivní interpretací, která zvýrazňuje jedno hledisko Lincolnova odkazu. Výsledky analýzy tak vykreslují Lincolna jako komplexního aktéra, který byl nepochybně klíčovou postavou zrušení otroctví, avšak své rozhodné kroky učinil teprve ve chvíli, kdy to umožnily podmínky a kdy se k tomu sám postupně dopracoval svým svědomím.

Zvláštní pozornost věnuje práce rozboru dvou zásadních textů – Gettysburského projevu a zmíněné Proklamace emancipace. Tyto dokumenty jsou analyzovány jako diskurzivní nástroje, jimiž Lincoln formoval veřejné vnímání války a národních ideálů, a zároveň jako texty, které pozdější generace povýšily na symboly amerických hodnot. Gettysburský projev, pronesený po krvavé bitvě u Gettysburgu, představoval krátké avšak mimořádně působivé shrnutí smyslu občanské války. Práce zdůrazňuje, že v tomto projevu Lincoln nově definoval ideály Unie, kdy prohlásil rovnost jako: „zasvěceno myšlenkou, že všichni lidé jsou stvořeni sobě

rovni“ a jádro amerického zřízení a obětování padlých považoval „novým zrozením svobody“. Slavná závěrečná slova projevu o „vládě lidu, lidem a pro lid“ pak zřetelně artikulovala tento demokratický étos. Analýza ukazuje, že Gettysburský projev posílil obraz Lincolna jako vizionářského vůdce, jenž dokázal i v temných časech nabídnout morální směr a naději na sjednocení národa na vyšších principech. V kombinaci s Proklamací emancipace tak Lincoln skrze své projevy a akty vytvořil narativ „Spasitele“, jako prezidenta, který spasil Unii a zároveň položil základy osvobození otroků. Tato reputace Lincolna coby „Spasitele“ se začala formovat ještě za jeho života, avšak naplno rozkvetla až po jeho smrti.

Závěrečná část práce se soustředí na Lincolnovo mučednictví – tj. na to, jak jeho tragická smrt ovlivnila utváření jeho odkazu a historickou paměť USA. Lincoln byl zavražděn 14. dubna 1865, jen několik dní po skončení občanské války, a tato událost okamžitě změnila způsob, jakým na něj veřejnost pohlížela. Práce detailně analyzuje vlnu národního truchlení, jež po atentátu zachvátila Spojené státy. Lincolnova smrt na Velký pátek vedla k častým náboženským příměrům – mnozí kazatelé a komentátoři přirovnávali Lincolnovu oběť ke Kristově. V očích severoamerické společnosti se Lincoln stal mučedníkem, jenž prolil krev za spásu národa. Dobové noviny označovaly zemřelého prezidenta jako „Mučednického prezidenta“ a líčily jej obklopeného anděly či vstupujícího na nebesa. Práce uvádí, že jeden z bezprostředních svědků u Lincolnova lože pronesl památnou větu: „Nyní patří věčnosti“. Tento výrok symbolicky stvrdil, že Lincolnova osobnost se pozvedla z roviny smrtelníka do roviny nadčasového hrdiny národa. Severní veřejnost vnímala radostné reakce nepřátel jako důkaz Lincolnovy spravedlivosti a atentátník John W. Booth byl okamžitě vykreslen jako ztělesnění zla a Lincoln naproti tomu jako mučedník pro ideály Unie. Tím se ještě upevnilo přesvědčení, že prezident položil život za jednotu země a svobodu utlačovaných a Lincolnův příběh oběti a znovuzrození národa začal plnit funkci jakéhosi národního mýtu o vykoupení skrze vlastní oběť.

Práce dále sleduje, jak se Lincolnova památka a kulturní reprezentace vyvíjely v následujících etapách amerických dějin. Zjištění ukazují, že každá generace znovu interpretovala Lincolna po svém a kladla důraz na jiné aspekty jeho odkazu v souladu s převládajícími hodnotami. V desetiletích po roce 1865 se Spojené státy snažily zacelit rány občanské války a Lincoln byl postupně kanonizován jako národní hrdina. Koncem 19. století a zejména kolem roku 1900 dominoval obraz Lincolna coby sjednotitele národa. V éře Rekonstrukce bylo politicky výhodné zdůrazňovat Lincolna jako „Spasitele“, zatímco jeho role osvoboditele otroků ustupovala do pozadí – připomínka rasové otázky byla v době přetrvávající segregace nežádoucí. Práce vnímá, že při příležitosti 100. výročí Lincolnova narození v roce

1909 byl oslavován především jako symbol národní jednoty, nikoli primárně jako bojovník za emancipaci. Tato selektivní paměť sloužila k posílení národní identity a usmíření; odpovídá to Rūsenově tezi, že historické narativy se přetvářejí tak, aby upevnily společenskou soudržnost a kontinuitu. Ve 20. století pak Lincolnův obraz dále prodělával proměny reagující na společenský vývoj. Velké pomníky a památníky zhmotnily jeho odkaz a zároveň ovlivnily způsob Lincolnova vnímání veřejností. Například Lincolnův památník ve Washingtonu (odhalen 1922) představuje Lincolna jako moudrého ochránce Unie – architektonicky působí téměř jako antický chrám, což dokládá, že i když se autoři snažili ztvárnit Lincolna lidsky (socha sedícího muže, zdůraznění jeho přívětivé tváře), výsledný dojem ho stejně povýšil na nadčasový symbol. Symbolika památníku se vědomě vyhýbá zmínce o otroctví (nápís nad sochou vzdává čest zachránci Unie, aniž by zmínil emancipaci), což odráží dobový konsenzus vyzdvihovat jednotu nad kontroverznější otázky. Ironií zůstává, že slavnost odhalení památníku byla segregovaná podle rasy – i to dokládá rozpor mezi ideálem a realitou v etapě, kdy byl Lincoln uctíván jako mučedník za jednotu, ale jeho odkaz rovnosti nebyl plně aplikován. S postupem století se však interpretace Lincolnova znovu posunula. Hnutí za občanská práva ve druhé polovině 20. století zdůraznilo Lincolnovu roli emancipátora a jeho odkaz byl nyní citován na podporu rasové rovnosti. Kulturním mezníkem bylo vystoupení Martina Luthera Kinga Jr. s projevem *I Have a Dream* v roce 1963 na schodech Lincolnova památníku. King vědomě navázal na Lincolnův odkaz a rozšířil jeho význam o výzvu k naplnění slibu svobody pro všechny bez rozdílu. Tím se Lincoln v kulturní paměti pevně spojil nejen s jednotou národa, ale i s ideálem občanské rovnosti. Jeho odkaz emancipátora byl znovu plně doceněn jako nedílná součást národní identity. Práce usuzuje, že kulturní reprezentace Lincolnova se promítla i do literatury, výtvarného umění a filmu, pokaždé způsobem odpovídajícím duchu doby. Walt Whitman ve slavné básni *O Captain! My Captain!* (1865) oplakává Lincolna jako padlého kapitána, který zachránil loď státu a tím posílil romantický obraz mučedníka a ochránce. Naopak raný film *Zrození národa* (1915) vykresluje Lincolna jako smířlivého zachránce, jehož smrt je národní tragédií, což zapadá do narativu poválečného usmíření. V průběhu 20. století se ve filmech objevuje Lincoln jako hrdina s lidskou tváří (*Young Mr. Lincoln*, 1939) i jako rozhodný politik a vizionář (novější snímky jako Spielbergův *Lincoln*, 2012, zdůrazňují jeho odhodlání skoncovat s otroctvím a současně ho představují jako člověka z masa a kostí). Tyto příklady potvrzují, že Lincolnův příběh byl neustále rekonstruován a přizpůsobován aktuálním ideálům – a přesto motiv oběti a mučednictví zůstává spojující linkou. Narativ hrdiny, jenž přináší nejvyšší oběť, se stal archetypem, který dodává Lincolnovu obrazu mimořádnou sílu napříč generacemi.

Z klíčových závěrů analýzy vyplývá, že obraz Abrahama Lincolna coby vůdce a mučedníka je výsledkem dlouhodobého vývoje a různorodé interpretace. Lincolnova historická osobnost odolává zjednodušujícím vyobrazením – nelze jej jednoduše označit ani za dokonalého morálního světce, ani za čistě pragmatického politika. Diplomová práce dokazuje, že Lincoln byl osobností plnou paradoxů. Byl známý svou poctivostí, a přesto nucený ke kompromisům. Byl oslavovaný jako osvoboditel, a přesto opatrný ve svých krocích. Byl milován i nenáviděn současníky. Právě tato komplexita přispěla k tomu, že se jeho odkaz neustále proměňuje. Jednotlivé metodologické přístupy v práci shodně ukazují, že historické vyobrazení není statické, jelikož si každá generace vytváří „svého Lincolna“ dle vlastního obrazu, ať už jako vzor integrity, sjednotitele, či symbol nedokončených aspirací. Přesto lze vysledovat jisté trvalé rysy. Lincoln je trvale považován za symbol národních ideálů Spojených států. Jeho morální vůdcovství v době krize, zrušení otroctví a sebeobětování pro blaho Unie, z něj učinily ikonickou postavu americké identity. Závěrem práce je konstatování, že Lincolnův odkaz vůdce a mučedníka sehrál ústřední roli v americké historické kultuře a jeho životní příběh slouží jako inspirace v otázkách vůdcovství, spravedlnosti a národní jednoty. Zároveň jeho smrt slouží jako mocný mýtus o vykoupení a oběti, jenž dodnes ovlivňuje Americkou identitu a vnímání Lincolna. Abraham Lincoln tak nadále „patří věčnosti“ a zůstává živý v historické paměti, která v něm nachází poučení a morální vzor pro současnost i budoucnost.

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Statement: In this thesis, I used ChatGPT 4 on several occasions to ensure textual cohesion and coherence, discuss possible grammatical structures, and enhance readability and academic style of the text. I also used Scispace for literature reviews. After using these, I carefully reviewed and edited the content as needed. I take full responsibility for the final content of the thesis.