

ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE CIVIL WAR

BACKGROUND

Born in 1809 into poverty in Kentucky, he grew up in Indiana.

Had a passion for books and newspapers from which he self educated.

Became a lawyer. Had a brief military career, serving as a captain in the Illinois Militia during the Black Hawk War.

He had a political career between 1834, when he was elected to Illinois Legislative, through to 1846 when he served in the US House of Representatives as a Whig.

He was also a US Congressman but by 1849, dissatisfied with politics returned to his law practice.

In 1854 he re-entered politics as a Republican and was elected President in 1860.

In one important speech he made he said “There should be no disturbance of slavery in States where it already existed : The constitution forbids it but we must by national policy prevent the spread of slavery into new territories or free States.” The Southern States were outraged at his election and before his inauguration could take place South Carolina officially seceded from the Union, followed by other deep south States. They feared the rise of the Republicans , who opposed expansion of slavery. They realised that slave holding States would be outnumbered and lose political power.

In the weeks following his election Lincoln saw States secede, which he considered illegal. He was willing to use force to defend Federal Law and the Union. Lincoln, as commander in chief, had no real military training but “read up” on the subject. From his acquired knowledge and innate sense of what needed doing he seemed to understand better than those involved what needed doing. He considered it “better to destroy the enemy armies than capture the Confederacy capital.

The War

April 1861

It started with the Confederate bombardment of the Union post of Fort Sumpter in Charleston harbour and firing on a Union supply convoy. The Fort Sumpter garrison surrendered after a 34 hour battle. There followed many battles, too many to mention, but some more well known than others, eg Balls Bluff, Shiloh, Antietam, Vicksburg, Fredericksburg and Gettysburg etc.

Most of the generals appointed by Lincoln failed in their tasks until Ulysses S. Grant came on the scene in 1864. He was the first one Lincoln could trust.

1863 After the Union victory at Antietam Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in which he declared that all persons held as slaves within the rebellious States shall be free. This was based legally on the President’s right to seize the property of those in rebellion against the State but it only freed those slaves in Southern States where Lincoln’s forces had no control.

But what it really did was to change the focus of the war making it, from the Northern point of view, a fight not just to preserve the Union but to end slavery.

July 1863

Gettysburg was the deadliest battle of the Civil War and a turning point in the war.

In the November dedication ceremony at the Soldiers National Cemetery Gettysburg Lincoln, though not the main speaker gave a two minute speech later known as the Gettysburg Address, in which he resolved that “those dead should not have died in vain, that this Nation shall have a new birth of freedom and that the government of the people by the people for the people shall not perish from this earth”

1864

Lincoln ran for re-election. He did not expect to be re-elected after three years of battles in which there had been an estimated 110,000 casualties. Abolitionists in the North were upset with him for not pressing harder on slavery issues. However, in his favour Sherman captured Atlanta giving the Union a major victory. Also Lincoln allowed serving soldiers to vote in their camps. Thirdly, it was felt that mistakes made by the Democrats helped the vote for Lincoln.

1865

On April 9th Robert E Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomatox Court House, Virginia, which ended the war, with Lincoln asking for lasting peace, malice to none, and charity for all.

While attending a performance at the Ford Theatre in Washington on April 15th Lincoln was assassinated by a Confederate sympathiser John Wilkes Booth (a supporter of slavery, who feared that Lincoln was going to overthrow the Constitution and destroy the South) as part of a plot to eliminate the Northern Government.