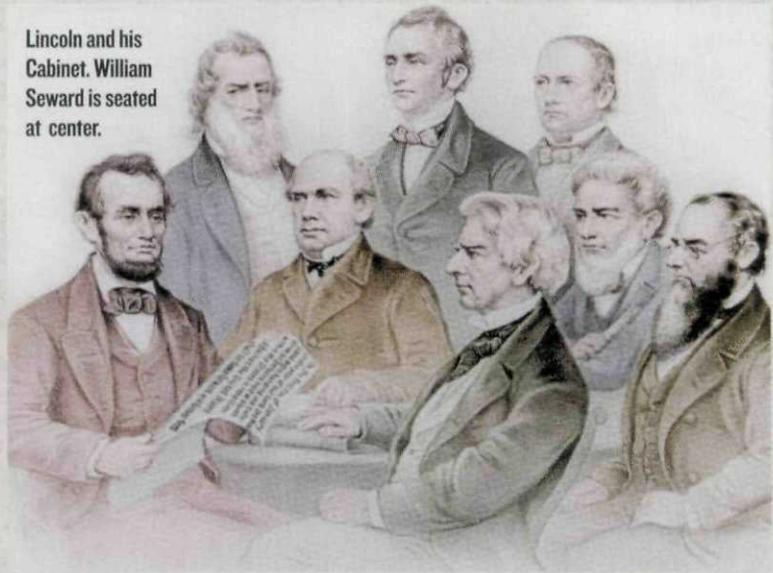


THE LAST BEST HOPE

Abraham Lincoln and The Emancipation Proclamation

Lincoln and his
Cabinet. William
Seward is seated
at center.



CHARACTERS

- * **Abraham Lincoln**, President of the United States
- * **William Seward**, Secretary of State
- Salmon Chase**, Secretary of the Treasury
- Gideon Welles**, Secretary of the Navy
- Charles Wickliffe**, Unionist Representative
from Kentucky
- Nehemiah Perry**, Democratic Representative
from New Jersey
- * **Charles Sumner**, Republican Senator
from Massachusetts
- John Hay**, secretary to the President
- John Nicolay**, secretary to the President
- Narrators A–D**

* Indicates major role.

BY BRYAN BROWN

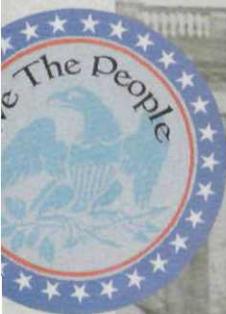
Words to Know

- **abolition**: the abolishing or ending of slavery.
- **border states**: Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware, which stayed in the Union but did not outlaw slavery. West Virginia, admitted to the Union in 1863, was also considered a border state.
- **confiscation**: the taking of property by law.
- **proclamation**: official statement.
- **Unionist**: an individual from a slave state who is loyal to the Union.

INTRODUCTION

Our new *We the People* series features moments in American history that spotlight the struggle, as expressed in the Constitution, “to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice . . . and secure the Blessings of Liberty.” This play examines a time when the Union faced its gravest threat.

When Abraham Lincoln became the 16th President of the United States on March 4, 1861, the future of the country had never been more in doubt. Seven Southern states had **seceded** (withdrawn) from the Union over the issue of slavery and formed the Confederate States of America. War with the South loomed. Even though Lincoln was strongly opposed to slavery, he believed that his primary mission was to preserve the Union. But events would cause him to change his mind—and the document that grew out of this change would mark a turning point in American history.



Abraham Lincoln (beneath the gazebo on the steps) takes the Oath of Office in 1861. Construction on the Capitol dome will continue until 1865.

“This momentous issue of civil war is in your hands, not mine.”
-Abraham Lincoln, Inaugural Address, 1861

SCENE 1

Narrator A: On Inauguration Day 1861, Washington, D.C., is a nervous city. In his inaugural address, the new President pleads with the Southern states for peace.

Abraham Lincoln: Fellow citizens, as I have said before, I do not intend to interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it exists. Nevertheless, it is my duty to uphold the Constitution and preserve the Union. I hope we can do this without bloodshed. To my dissatisfied fellow countrymen I say: This momentous issue of civil war is in your hands, not mine.

Narrator A: War finally comes on April 12, when Confederate forces fire on Fort Sumter, a U.S. Army

post in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina. Union troops surrender the fort the next day. The President and his Cabinet face difficult decisions . . .

William Seward: We have lost 11 states in all to the Confederacy. Only the slave states of Missouri, Delaware, and Maryland remain with us—and Kentucky.

Lincoln: Yes, Kentucky is blessedly neutral—for now. I have promised their Senator Davis that we will respect their *institutions*.

Salmon Chase: You mean their slaves. Mr. President, many Republicans in Congress demand that we take a firmer stand against slavery.

Lincoln: Mr. Chase, I was elected not to put slavery *down* but to put the

flag *back*. If we confine slavery to where it is, it will die a natural death. But in the meantime, we cannot lose the **border states**.

SCENE 2

Narrator B: On August 6, impatient Republican Senators pass the first **Confiscation Act**. The bill allows federal troops to seize Southern slaves from their masters and set them free. But the war is going badly for the North, which has just suffered a shocking defeat at the first battle of Bull Run, spurring a sense of victory in the South.

In February 1862, Lincoln sends a plan to Congress to **compensate** [pay] border states for the gradual **emancipation** [freeing] of their

slaves. Democrats and border-state **Unionists** attack it.

Charles Wickliffe: Where in the Constitution does Mr. Lincoln find the right to buy slaves and set them free?

Nehemiah Perry: We should spend millions to save the Union, I say—but not one cent for **abolition!**

Narrator B: Congress approves Lincoln's plan, but the border states won't accept it. In his search for another solution, Lincoln consults with many people. On July 4, the passionately antislavery Senator Charles Sumner comes to the White House.

Charles Sumner: Sir, it is Independence Day. Imagine what a great gesture it would be to declare the slaves free today.

Lincoln: Unfortunately, I fear that would be too big a lick at one time. The border states would certainly secede.

Sumner: But freeing the slaves would also deprive the South of much of its labor force. Who would pick the cotton? Already, thousands of slaves have escaped to the North. Many of them are anxious to fight for the Union.

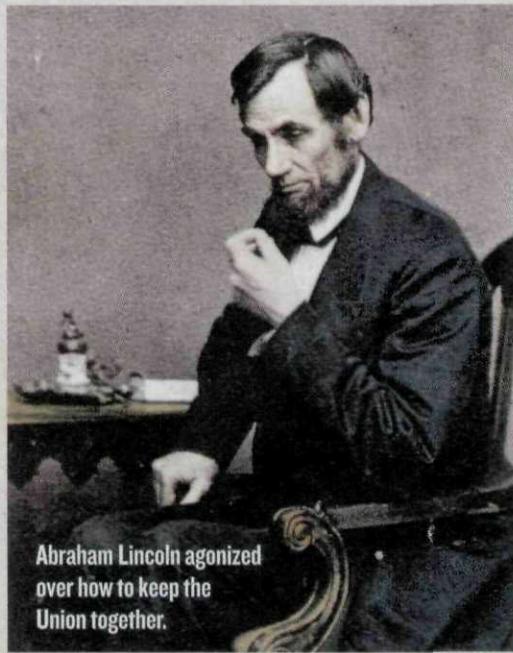
Lincoln: Yes, but what do we do with the slaves who haven't escaped and remain in the South? This is a problem of great complexity.

SCENE 3

Narrator C: As usual, the President thinks carefully about his next move. On July 13, the President attends the funeral of Secretary of War Stanton's infant son. In the carriage, he speaks openly to Secretary of State Seward and Secretary of the Navy Welles.

Lincoln: Gentlemen, I have just about decided on an action of grave importance. I am convinced the slaves of the South must be emancipated by some decree of ours.

Seward: Mr. President, I don't know



Abraham Lincoln agonized over how to keep the Union together.

what to say. The consequences of this action are so vast, I need some time to think about it.

Lincoln: Well, I have done nothing *but* think about it. I believe that it is a military necessity—we must free the slaves or ourselves be **subdued** [conquered].

Gideon Welles: Many will object that such an action is not constitutional.

Lincoln: We are at war. The President has the same power to free the enemy's slaves as to destroy his railroads. Besides, the rebels cannot reject the Constitution, then claim

to be protected by it. Anyway, I have resolved to take this step.

Narrator C: At a full Cabinet meeting on July 22, the President discloses his plan.

Lincoln: If the states in rebellion do not return to the Union by January 1, 1863, their slaves are to be forever free.

Narrator C: The Cabinet is divided over making such a move. But Secretary Seward's opinion is key.

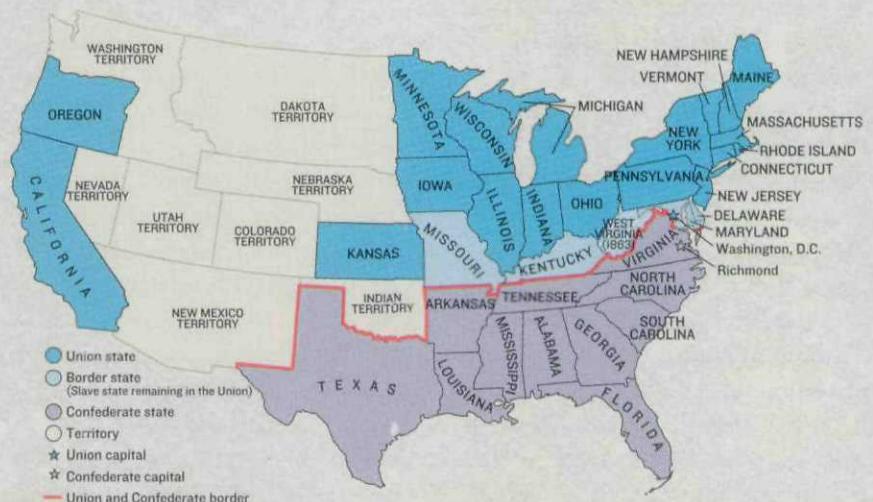
Seward: Mr. President, I wholeheartedly support your decision. But I suggest that we postpone announcing it until we have a firm military victory. Otherwise it may look like the last shriek of a desperate retreat.

Lincoln: Very well, Mr. Seward. I will keep this to myself for the moment. I pray we may have one of those victories you mention before too long.

SCENE 4

Narrator D: Victory does not come soon. In the next weeks, the President continues to struggle with his decision. He also prepares the country for a momentous announcement. On August 22, he writes to Horace Greeley, the editor of the *New York Tribune*.

Lincoln (in his letter): If I could save



CORBIS. MAP: JIM McMAHON/MAPMAN™



Before the Civil War, millions of black Americans were forced into a life of slavery.

the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it. If I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it. And if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would do that. Still, it is my personal wish that all men everywhere could be free.

Narrator D: The war continues to go badly. Finally, on September 17, Union troops stop the Confederate advance at the bloody Battle of Antietam, in Sharpsburg, Maryland. Lincoln believes that this is good enough to count as the victory he was waiting for. On September 23, a working text of the Emancipation Proclamation is released. At the White House soon afterward...

John Hay: Have you read the newspapers? We're getting some good responses. Frederick Douglass [former slave and abolitionist] says, "We shout for joy that we live to record this righteous decree."

John Nicolay: But of course all the usual people are attacking us. I worry if we haven't triggered too passionate of a response.

Lincoln: I agree. We have harpooned this monster slavery—now

I can only hope it doesn't shipwreck the republic.

Narrator D: In December, the President is still reasoning with the country in his annual message to Congress.

Lincoln (in his message): Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves. In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free. We are honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth.

Narrator D: The President cannot sleep on New Year's Eve. On New Year's Day, 1863, he spends hours greeting people in the White House. Finally, he retires to his office with several Cabinet members and takes up his pen.

Lincoln: Gentlemen, if my hand trembles signing this proclamation, I hope it is not from indecision but from shaking so many hands today. I am now sure we are doing the right thing. If my name ever goes into history, it will be for this act.

AFTERWORD

The Emancipation Proclamation did not free any slaves directly because it applied only to states under Confederate control. But it did lead to the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, **ratified** (approved) in 1865, which outlawed slavery in the United States. Eventually, the document Abraham Lincoln had produced as a military necessity would come to be seen as one of the most important in American history. **JS**

Your Turn

WORD MATCH

- | | |
|---------------|-------------|
| 1. confiscate | A. free |
| 2. compensate | B. withdraw |
| 3. emancipate | C. approve |
| 4. secede | D. pay |
| 5. ratify | E. take |

THINK ABOUT IT

What qualities did Abraham Lincoln need to become a good leader? Describe an individual in your life who possesses some of those qualities.