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What If Abraham Lincoln Had Lived?

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Abstract

The lead .41-calibre bullet with which John Wilkes Booth shot President Abraham Lincoln on the night of April 14, 1865, was the most lethal gunshot in American history. Only five days earlier, the main field army of the Southern Confederacy had surrendered at Appomattox Court House, and the four dreary years of civil war were yielding to a spring of national rebirth. But by then, the man to whom everyone looked for guidance in reconstructing the nation was dead. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Abraham Lincoln, Civil War, Reconstruction, Assassination, John Wilkes Booth, Ford's Theater, Appomattox, Alternate History

Disciplines

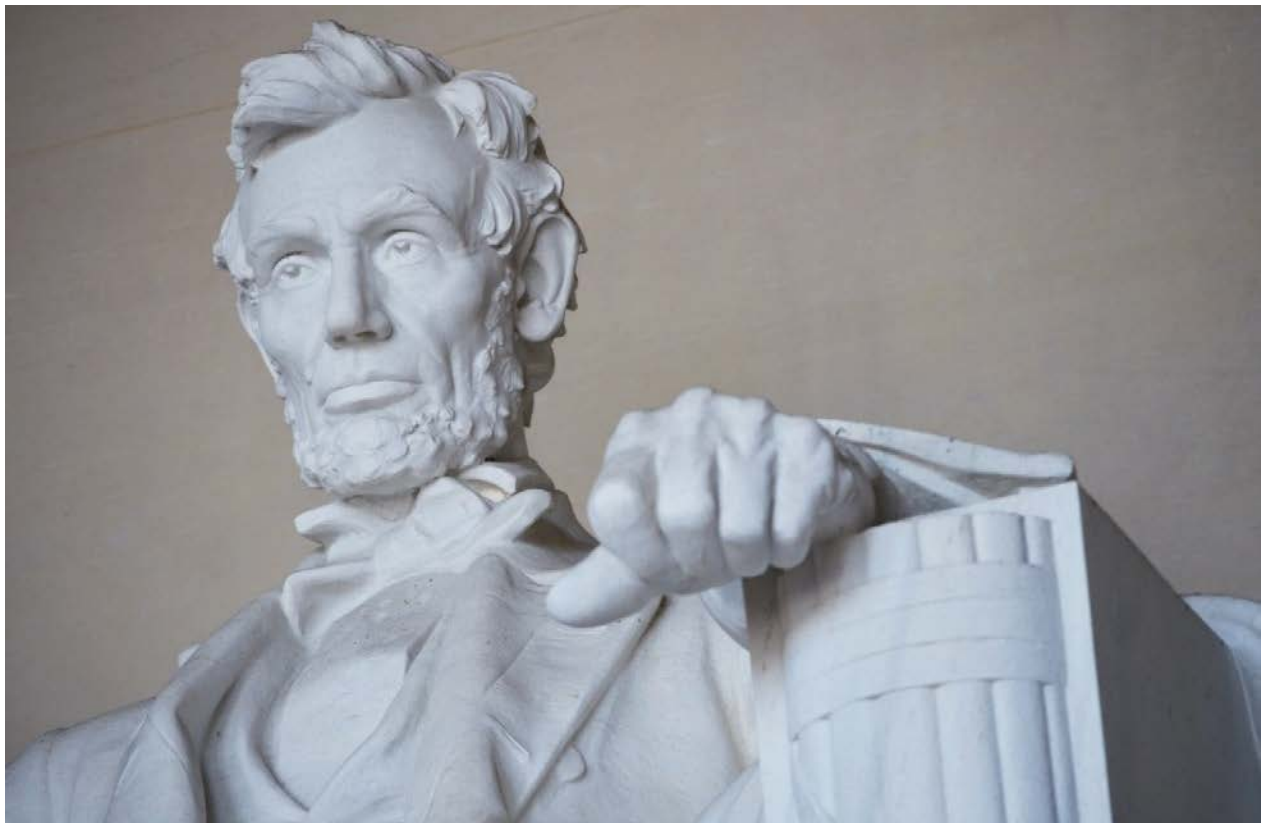
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The Washington Post

What if Abraham Lincoln had Lived?

His plan for Reconstruction would've been difficult to realize.

By Allen Guelzo April 13, 2015



President Lincoln was assassinated 150 years ago. (MANDEL NGAN/AFP/Getty Images)

The lead **.41-calibre bullet** with which John Wilkes Booth shot President Abraham Lincoln on the night of April 14, 1865, was the most lethal gunshot in American history. Only five days earlier, the main field army of the Southern Confederacy had **surrendered** at Appomattox Court House, and the four dreary years of civil war were yielding to a spring of national rebirth. But by then, the man to whom everyone looked for guidance in reconstructing the nation was dead.

The result was a costly but successful war followed by a botched and even more costly reconstruction. Lincoln's vice president, Andrew Johnson, took the presidential oath [within hours of Lincoln's death](#). But Johnson had none of Lincoln's political skills, much less Lincoln's convictions about justice and equality for the 4 million slaves freed after the Civil War. The defeated Confederates gained a second wind from Johnson's follies, and by the time he left office in 1869, reconstruction was already faltering. The victorious North sank into "reconstruction fatigue," while the former Confederates simply substituted Jim Crow for slavery.

Would it have been different if Booth's bullet had missed? Having guided the nation through a wartime valley of shadows, could Lincoln have found, [as he once described it](#): "some practical system by which the two races could gradually live themselves out of their old relation to each other, and both come out better prepared for the new"?

Lincoln never laid out a specific plan for reconstruction. Still, if he had lived, all the evidence points us toward four paths to reconstruction which he would likely have adopted:

Voting rights: If the Confederates wanted amnesty, Lincoln, as he wrote in January 1864, could not "[avoid exacting in return universal suffrage](#), or, at least, suffrage on the basis of intelligence and military service." Even if the Confederates balked at trading amnesty for voting rights, there was still no practical alternative to black voting rights, since only the voting power of the newly freed slaves could offset the political dominance of unbowed whites in the South.

Economic integration: Economic independence gives heft to political aspiration, something Lincoln understood from his own struggle to rise from poverty. "I want every man to have the chance — and I believe a black man is entitled to it -- in which he can better his condition," [Lincoln said in 1860](#). But in Lincoln's world, economic opportunity was tied to the ownership of land, and the newly freed slaves owned none. Lincoln's means for redressing this imbalance was the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, known as the [Freedmen's Bureau](#). It was launched

in March 1865 with a mandate to claim land that had been abandoned by plantation owners — or land that had been forfeited by non-payment of taxes during the war — and divide it in 40-acre plots for former slaves to farm as their own.

Western development: The Civil War actually sprang from the dispute of free and slave states over the future of the Western territories — and Lincoln regarded the West as an integral part of Reconstruction. He signed homestead legislation that opened huge tracts of public land to private ownership, and he pledged government support to a transcontinental railroad that would carry the harvests of those homesteads to world markets. On the day of his assassination, Lincoln promised Speaker of the House Schuyler Colfax that he planned to point Union veterans “[to the gold and silver that waits for them in the West.](#)” Turning the freedmen’s gaze westward would accomplish the same goal as the Freedmen’s Bureau.

Cleaning the Confederate slate: Lincoln was not exaggerating, in his second inaugural address, when he spoke of his hope of [malice toward none and charity for all](#) after the war. He had no wish to hunt down the Confederacy’s leaders after the war ended, but he also had no wish to stop them leaving. “Frighten them out of the country,” he said, “[open the gates, let down the bars ... scare them off.](#)” This would clear the way for a new leadership in the South, a leadership of Unionist white Americans and their natural allies, the freed slaves, which in turn would establish a “practical system by which the two races could gradually live themselves out of their old relation.”

Bear in mind, though, that whatever Lincoln’s intentions, he would have faced stiff opposition. White northerners hated slavery, but they also disliked African Americans and they routinely turned back state ballot initiatives on black voting rights. Similarly, Lincoln could scarcely have guaranteed the operation of his “practical system” without an ongoing military presence in the South to enforce it. Yet Americans were chronically unwilling, in times of peace, to foot large military budgets, and the soldiers themselves were mostly civilians-in-uniform who wanted

nothing more than to go home at war's end. Above all, Lincoln would have been in office only until 1869, which is not a long time to implement the vast programs his version of Reconstruction would have required. His successor would surely have been (as Johnson's was) Ulysses Grant, and Grant had problems of his own.

Even Abraham Lincoln might not have been able to bulldoze his way to a triumphant "Mission Accomplished." But it is hard to imagine how we could have done worse. One hundred and fifty years later, we are still struggling to do better.

Allen Guelzo is the Henry R. Luce Professor of the Civil War Era and Director of the Civil War Era Studies at Gettysburg College. His most recent book is "Gettysburg: The Last Invasion."

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