

Lincoln was born into poverty in a log cabin in Kentucky and was raised on the frontier, primarily in Indiana. He was self-educated and became a lawyer, Whig Party leader, Illinois state legislator, and U.S. Congressman from Illinois. In 1849, he returned to his law practice but became vexed by the opening of additional lands to slavery as a result of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. He reentered politics in 1854, becoming a leader in the new Republican Party, and he reached a national audience in the 1858 Senate campaign debates against Stephen Douglas. Lincoln ran for President in 1860, sweeping the North to gain victory. Pro-slavery elements in the South viewed his election as a threat to slavery, and Southern states began seceding from the Union. During this time the newly formed Confederate States of America began seizing federal military bases in the south. Just over one month after Lincoln assumed the presidency, the Confederate States attacked Fort Sumter, a U.S. fort in South Carolina. Following the bombardment, Lincoln mobilized forces to suppress the rebellion and restore the Union.

Lincoln, a moderate Republican, had to navigate a contentious array of factions with friends and opponents from both the Democratic and Republican parties. His allies, the War Democrats and the Radical Republicans, demanded harsh treatment of the Southern Confederates. Anti-war Democrats (called "Copperheads") despised Lincoln, and irreconcilable pro-Confederate elements plotted his assassination. He managed the factions by exploiting their mutual enmity, carefully distributing political patronage, and by appealing to the American people. His Gettysburg Address appealed to nationalistic, republican, egalitarian, libertarian, and democratic sentiments. Lincoln closely supervised the strategy and tactics in the war effort, including the selection of generals, and implemented a naval blockade of the South's trade. He suspended habeas corpus in Maryland, and he averted British intervention by defusing the Trent Affair. In 1863 he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared the slaves in the states "in rebellion" to be free. It also directed the Army and Navy to "recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons" and to receive them "into the armed service of the United States." Lincoln also pressured border states to outlaw slavery, and he promoted the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which upon its ratification abolished slavery.

Lincoln managed his own successful re-election campaign. He sought to heal the war-torn nation through reconciliation. On April 14, 1865, just days after the war's end at Appomattox, he was attending a play at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C., with his wife Mary when he was fatally shot by Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth. Abraham Lincoln is remembered as a martyr and a national hero for his wartime leadership and for his efforts to preserve the Union and abolish slavery. Lincoln is often ranked by both popular and scholarly polls as the greatest president in American history.