

Abraham Lincoln And the Reframing of America

- I. About Abraham Lincoln
- II. Summary
- III. Thinking about the Text
- IV. Thinking with the Text

How To Use This Discussion Guide

Materials Included | For this discussion guide, we recommend the following texts from our reader, “Abraham Lincoln’s Birthday”:

- Abraham Lincoln, Lyceum Address
- Abraham Lincoln, Farewell Address
- Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address
- Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address

Materials for this guide include background information about Lincoln and discussion questions to enhance your understanding and stimulate conversation. In addition, the guide includes a series of short video discussions conducted by WSPWH Diana Schaub with Allen Guelzo (Gettysburg College) and Michael Zuckert (University of Notre Dame). These seminars help capture the experience of high-level discourse as participants interact and elicit meaning from a classic American text. These videos are meant to raise additional questions and augment discussion, not replace it.

Learning Objectives | Students will be able to:

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it;
- Cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text;
- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development;

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The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

STUDY GUIDE

- Summarize the key supporting details and ideas;
- Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text;
- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone; and
- Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning and the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

Common Core State Standards Addressed | Literacy in History/Social Studies:

RH.9-10.1, RH.9-10.2, RH.9-10.3, RH.9-10.5, RH.9-10.8
RH.11-12.1, RH.11-12.2, RH.11-12.4, RH.11-12.8, RH.11-12.9

English Language Arts:

RL.9-10.1, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.3, RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.9
RL.11-12.1, RL.11-12.3, RL.11-12.4, RL.11-12.5

Writing Prompts

- What is Lincoln’s view of the Founding Fathers?
- In the rankings of our greatest Presidents does Lincoln deserve top billing, with Washington in second place?
- Which task is harder: founding or perpetuation of a nation?

I. About the Author

The sixteenth president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln (1809–65) was born in Kentucky and studied law in Illinois, earning the nickname “Honest Abe” for his upright moral character. In 1858, he ran for U.S. Senate against Stephen A. Douglas, catapulting him to national fame even though he lost the race. He was elected to the presidency in 1860, just before the Civil War began. Lincoln did not accept the secession of the Confederacy, declaring the states to be in a state of rebellion. Assassinated in 1865,

Lincoln would be remembered as a great wartime leader who was deeply devoted to maintaining the national union. His Gettysburg Address of 1863 is one of the most quoted speeches in American history.

II. Summary

Abraham Lincoln is often credited with having saved or re-founded the American Union by giving it a “new birth of freedom.” He is also often recognized as the creator of a new form of public speech. In this guide, we will seek to understand Lincoln’s statecraft in conjunction with his literary craft—and thus the relationship between Lincoln and the American Founding.

III. Thinking about the Text

In this section, we will use some of Lincoln’s greatest speeches as a guide to his views on the Founding Fathers and his understanding of the relation between founding and perpetuating a nation.

A. Perpetuating Our Political Institutions: Lincoln’s Lyceum Address

1. Lincoln begins by contrasting the task of founding to the task of perpetuation. What do we learn from this early speech about Lincoln’s view of the Founding Fathers?
2. What threats to self-government does Lincoln foresee?
3. After giving his diagnosis of the problem of lawlessness, Lincoln proposes a remedy. What is his solution?
3. Does the need for such a solution imply that the original founding was somehow defective or incomplete?
4. What is “reverence for the laws”? Does it differ from fear of punishment?
5. How does Lincoln’s call for reverence comport with his closing attack on passion? Is reverence closer to reason than to passion?
6. Lincoln warns his listeners of the threat of a preeminent man who belongs to “the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle.” Is Lincoln himself such a preeminent man? Why should Lincoln remain true to the people, if leonine glory is within his reach? Why should he settle for custodial work in the house of the fathers?

B. Abraham Lincoln and George Washington

1. In his Farewell Speech, Lincoln says that he faces a task “greater than that which rested upon Washington.” What were their respective tasks?
2. What does Lincoln mean by calling his task “greater”?
3. Is Lincoln right that his task is greater than Washington’s?

C. Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address

1. In the Declaration of Independence, human equality is called a “self-evident truth.” Do you see any significance in the fact that Lincoln refers to equality as a proposition to which the nation is dedicated?
2. What is Lincoln’s understanding of the founding principle of equality? Is it the same as Jefferson’s or not?
3. What does Lincoln mean by this phrase “a new birth of freedom”? How does it relate to the description of the new nation in the opening paragraph, where we were said to have been “conceived in Liberty”? Are we to understand the “new birth of freedom” as a culmination of the nation’s founding trajectory? Or, is it better understood as a departure from or a correction of the nation’s founding? Is Abraham Lincoln re-founding the nation in this moment?
4. How does the new birth of freedom relate to the argument of the Lyceum Address about the requirements for the perpetuation of our republic?

D. Lincoln’s “Sacred Effort”: The Second Inaugural

1. Lincoln himself seemed to believe that the Second Inaugural was a greater speech even than the Gettysburg Address. Frederick Douglass seconded that opinion. Douglass met Lincoln at the reception afterwards. When Lincoln greeted him he said “there is no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours. I want to know what you think of it?” Douglass replied “Mr. Lincoln, that was a sacred effort.” That description might be the best way into the speech. What was Lincoln’s effort? What was he trying to achieve with this speech? And what was sacred about it?
2. What do you make of Lincoln’s use of powerfully religious language, in both speeches, but more explicitly in the Second Inaugural?
3. In the Lyceum Address, Lincoln argues that the wounds of the Revolutionary generation are helpful in creating a sense of national unity. But once those wounds are healed and especially once the men bearing those wounds are gone, the nation needs new sources of unity. By contrast, why in the Second Inaugural, does Lincoln say we are called to bind up the nation’s wounds?

IV. Thinking with the Text

In this section, we return to the theme of founding versus perpetuation of a political order/nation, this time with a view toward assessing Lincoln as a statesman and president seemingly having to choose between the two. Did the circumstances of the Civil War require Lincoln to choose one or the other? Or is Lincoln a second, and greater Washington? Could Lincoln have maintained the principles and institutions of American government in deed but re-founded America through speech?

A. Foundings and Perpetuation

1. Which task is harder: founding or perpetuation?
2. How important are principles and institutions to the task of founding a nation? Does one matter more than the other?
3. To perpetuate a way of government and way of life, how important are principles and institutions? Does one matter more than the other?
4. Is Lincoln a second Washington, or does Lincoln as (re)Founder obviate the need to look to Washington and the original Founding generation?
5. In the rankings of our greatest Presidents does Lincoln deserve top billing, with Washington in second place?
6. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural are widely considered to be the greatest speeches ever pronounced by an American political leader. What accounts for this judgment?

EXTRA:

E. "Lincoln": The Movie and Lincoln the President

1. We have recently been treated to a dramatization of this battle in the Spielberg movie *Lincoln*. Did you like the movie? Is it basically accurate? Is it worthwhile even if less than accurate?