

THE  
CONNELL SHORT GUIDE  
TO



# PRESIDENT LINCOLN

“What fantastic guides these are – I wish I’d  
had them when I was eighteen.”

EMMA THOMPSON

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW IN  
ONE CONCISE VOLUME

*by Mark Power Smith*

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# Introduction

America's 16th President, Abraham Lincoln, has a towering reputation. He led the United States through the Civil War, abolished slavery and redefined the nation's role in the world. He occupies a sanctified position in American political life, consistently ranked among the best presidents. But he is also an enigma – as hard to pin down temperamentally as he is politically – which is perhaps why he remains such a source of fascination for historians today.

Lincoln was still only a young man when his closest friend (and possible lover) Anne Rutledge died. After that, an acquaintance recalled that he “seemed retired, and loved solitude, he seemed wrapped in profound thought, indifferent to transpiring events”.<sup>\*</sup> Others reported that he talked frequently of suicide.

Contrast this with the view of a journalist watching Lincoln campaign for a Congressional seat in 1858: “I could not take a real personal liking to the man, owing to an inborn weakness to which he was even then notorious... he was inordinately fond of jokes, anecdotes and stories.”<sup>\*\*</sup> Looking though the thousands of pictures of stiff-faced politicians before the Civil War, it sometimes seems

<sup>\*</sup> Henry McHenry quoted in J.W. Shenk, *Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness*, (Mariner Books, 2006), 19.

<sup>\*\*</sup> H. Villard, “Recollections of Lincoln,” *The Atlantic*

that Lincoln is the only one with a faint smile. Was it, as he himself claimed, that he only told jokes to alleviate what friends called his “melancholy”?

The same inconsistency ran through other parts of his life. He was at ease in the fraternal world of antebellum politics, but intensely shy around women. He was a member of the relatively conservative Whig Party, and associated with crusty old “nativist” politicians like Millard Fillmore - yet the President of Liberia called him “a father to millions of a race stricken and oppressed”.<sup>\*</sup> Faced with such conflicting characteristics, it's not surprising that historians have clashed over his legacy.

Whilst the scholar Lerone Bennett Jr. condemned him as a “conservative politician who said repeatedly that he believed in white supremacy,”<sup>\*\*</sup> James McPherson credits him with

<sup>\*</sup> W. Marrs, “International Reaction to Lincoln's Death,” *Office of the Historian*, December 12th, 2011

<sup>\*\*</sup> L. Bennett Jr., *Abraham Lincoln's White Dream*, (Johnson Publishing Company, 2007), 1.



## A STRANGE FIGURE

Lincoln cut a strange figure. He was thin and incredibly tall,

reaching 6ft. 4 ins. by the age of 21. By all accounts, he wasn't very attractive either. In a debate with Stephen Douglas in 1858, he was accused of being two-faced. The soon-to-be President replied: “Honestly, if I were two-faced would I be showing you this one?” ■

presiding over a ‘second revolution’ in American politics. Historian Jon Burts says he possessed the quality of “negative capability”, a rare capacity, defined by the poet John Keats, to be comfortable in the face of uncertainty.\* But another scholar, Sean Wilentz, thinks he was simply a talented politician who knew how to say the right thing at the right time.\*\*

Although Lincoln modestly said of his political career “I have not controlled events but I confess plainly that events have controlled me”\*\*\*, his assassination sent shockwaves across the world. After he was shot in Ford’s Theatre in the closing days of the Civil War, the *London Evening Standard* wrote “never, perhaps, since the assassination of Caesar – has a murder been committed more momentous in its bearing upon the times”\*\*\*\*.

## What was Lincoln’s early life like?

Lincoln was born in 1809 in Kentucky, one of the “border states” of the 19th century US, straddling the boundary between “North” and “South”. His

\* J. Burt, *Lincoln’s Tragic Pragmatism: Lincoln, Douglas and Moral Conflict*, (Belknap Press, 2013)

\*\* S. Wilentz, “Who Lincoln Was,” *New Republic*, July 15th, 2009

\*\*\* Abraham Lincoln, *Letter to Albert G. Hodges*, April 4th, 1864

\*\*\*\* *The London Evening Standard* quoted in “How the World Mourned Lincoln,” *The Atlantic*, April 14th 2015

humble origins would gain seismic proportions in Lincoln’s later political career, as he attempted to save the nation from interminable division. His childhood was, in some senses, a gloomy one. He never knew his mother, who died when he was very young. His father, the tyrannical Thomas Lincoln, raised the boy on his Kentucky farm. Thomas was a carpenter and farmer. Since money was tight, he made Abraham work long hours on the farm, which the studious boy quietly resented. He was also a hard task-master, who beat his son when he misbehaved. Historians have speculated that Lincoln got his persistent hatred of slavery from the mistreatment he suffered at his father’s hand.

Although Thomas was a committed Baptist, and a well-respected man in the local community, his son disliked his insular ways and disdain for learning. Even when Thomas was on his deathbed, Abraham refused to visit him, writing: “say to him if we could meet now, it is doubtful whether it would not be more painful than pleasant; but that if it be his lot to go now, he will soon have a joyous meeting with many loved ones gone before”.\*

The redeeming feature of his childhood was his stepmother, Sarah Bush Lincoln. She acted as a mother to the young boy, and, unlike his father, appreciated and encouraged his love of learning. Lincoln never had a bad word to say about her either, and recalled how they bonded over a shared

\* Abraham Lincoln quoted in D.M. Epstein, *The Lincoln’s: Portrait of a Marriage*, (Ballantine Books, 2009), 162.

sense of humour.

Lincoln spent his early career in New Salem, Illinois. He became involved in local politics, spent a short time as a captain in the Illinois militia during the Black Hawk War and finally settled on a legal career. After winning a seat in the state legislature in 1834, he was admitted to the Bar in 1836 in Springfield, Illinois. Success came quickly and he developed a talent for cross-examining witnesses and putting forward methodical arguments; a legalistic style that would resurface during his Presidency. In 1846 Lincoln took his place on the national stage when he was elected to the House of Representatives, where he served one two-year term.

During his early life, Lincoln demonstrated three qualities that played a significant role in his political career. Firstly, he had an intense work ethic, acquiring the knowledge required for the Bar almost entirely on his own initiative. He studied Blackstone's "Commentaries of the Laws of England" for long hours in total seclusion. Later, whilst serving in Congress, he taught himself complex geometry in his free time. His goal was to improve his mind, much as you would any other muscle.

Secondly, through his legal work, he developed a ruthlessly logical and methodical style of reasoning. Lincoln would later apply this approach to political problems; thinking through his response to Southern secession by looking at the issue from every possible angle, and weighing up arguments as if he were in court. Lastly, Lincoln craved popularity

and was intensely ambitious. His early forays into state politics, in particular, reveal a man who yearned for acceptance among his peers, and longed to develop a lasting reputation.

## Early years in politics: why was Lincoln a Whig?

It was precisely Lincoln's personal qualities that attracted him to the Whig Party, which he represented both at the local level in the Illinois



### LINCOLN'S LOVE OF STORY TELLING

Although Lincoln had a difficult relationship with his father, he inherited his love of storytelling. He admired the way Thomas could capture the attention of his neighbours, and tried to copy his father's style. Lincoln's Treasury Secretary during the war, Hugh McCullough, said that "the habit of storytelling was part of his nature, and he gave free rein to it even when the fate of the nation seemed to

be trembling in the balance".\* In a Cabinet meeting on the Emancipation Proclamation during the darkest period of the war, some of Lincoln's fellow-Republicans were horrified when he chose to lighten the mood with an amusing story. Disappointed, Lincoln said: "Gentlemen why don't you laugh? With the fearful strain that is upon me night and day, if I did not laugh I should die, and you need this medicine as much as do I."\*\* ■

\* *The Gilder Lehrman Institute*  
"Abraham Lincoln's Stories and Humor"

\*\* *Lincoln quoted in Ibid.*

legislature and in the House of Representatives in 1846. As historian Daniel Howe has pointed out, “Abraham Lincoln’s Whig Party loyalty is not part of the popular legend of this great President”.<sup>\*</sup> Most historians concentrate on his articulation of Republican ideology; the anti-slavery party that made a remarkable rise to pre-eminence in the Northern states in just six years, from 1854 to 1860. Lincoln’s support for the Whigs, however, is vital for understanding his whole career, as the party strongly influenced his political philosophy. At the outbreak of Civil War, Lincoln still told friends that he was an “old line Whig” whose political hero was the great national statesman and rival of “the Democracy”, Henry Clay.<sup>\*\*</sup>

When Lincoln ran for office, American politics was dominated by what historians have termed the “Second Party System”. The two main parties were the Whigs and the Democrats. Historians endlessly debate what separated them but, by and large, they disagreed on a number of key issues: Whigs supported federal funding for “internal improvements”, a high tariff on foreign imports, and a conservative foreign policy, while Democrats advocated free trade, minimal government interference in the economy and an expansionist foreign policy.

<sup>\*</sup> D. W. Howe, “Why Abraham Lincoln was a Whig?” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, Vol. 16, 1995, 27.

<sup>\*\*</sup> “The Democracy” was a popular name for the Democratic Party in the antebellum United States



*Portrait of Abraham Lincoln (1864)*

Lawrence Kohl, among others, suggests that these policy disputes came down to more fundamental disagreements about political philosophy.<sup>\*</sup> The Democrats stressed negative liberty – freedom *from* government interference in their personal lives, or the economy. The Whigs, on the other hand, emphasised positive liberty – giving the government licence to increase people’s freedom to obtain an education, improve their economic status and embrace evangelical religious reforms, like temperance and women’s rights. In this context, it is possible to see why Abraham Lincoln was a

<sup>\*</sup> L. F. Kohl, *The Politics of Individualism: Parties and the American Character in the Jacksonian Era*, (New York: Oxford University press, 1989).

Whig. He placed an enormous value on education and was ambitious to improve his social status and acquire an eminent reputation.

Lincoln also largely rejected the frontier environment of Illinois and Kentucky where he grew up. In these states, Democrats tended to do a lot better than the Whigs. In fact, Lincoln was the only Whig in the Illinois House of Representatives in 1836. This success was partly due to the Democrats' embrace of immigration, which attracted a lot of Europeans who had settled in the West in search of a better life.

But it was also because the Democrats – in a larger sense – embodied the “pioneering” values of the frontier. The party’s hero and two-term president, Andrew Jackson, was a symbol of a new democratic culture. He embodied a “Jacksonian” way of life that emphasised personal freedom for an egalitarian class of white working men. Jacksonians shunned “women’s rights”, self-cultivation and temperance reform as the preserve of an overbearing aristocratic elite. In this distinctly “Democratic” vision of the nation, white men from all countries, and of all classes, would enjoy the freedom to do as they pleased – a view of life that came to embody the Midwest.

For Lincoln, Jacksonian culture of this kind was anathema. He abstained from alcohol, advocated the education of women and believed in the moral improvement of mankind, along the lines of Evangelical Protestantism. Although Lincoln’s

image as a hardy pioneer won him the Presidency, he, in many respects, embraced a culture of Whiggery that shunned the more extreme elements of his Western heritage.

## What did Lincoln do in the House of Representatives?

For just two years – from 1847 to 1849 – Lincoln served as a Whig in the House of Representatives. As well as being driven by a concern for civic life, Lincoln was also keen to establish a distinguished reputation among his peers. A first taste of electoral success came to him during the Black Hawk War,



### DEMOCRACY IN THE 19TH CENTURY UNITED STATES

The years between 1840-1900 are commonly seen as a “golden age” for turnout in American elections. Although only white men were assured of their votes, turnout, as a proportion of the eligible electorate, reached an all-time

high, which has not been exceeded since. During these years, 70-80% of the electorate cast ballots in general elections, compared with around 55-60% today. Behaviour on Election Day was also very different then. The secret ballot was not introduced until the 1880s, meaning that voting took place in full view of neighbours and friends. Fights frequently broke out and politically-motivated murders were not uncommon. Party bosses used bribes – both money and whiskey – to induce people to vote. ■