If Lincoln Hadn’t Died...

*Would the disastrous Reconstruction era have taken a different course?*

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What would have happened had Abraham Lincoln not been assassinated? Every time I lecture on Lincoln, the Civil War, or Reconstruction, someone in the audience is sure to pose this question—one, of course, perfectly natural to ask but equally impossible to answer. This has not, however, deterred historians from speculating about this “counterfactual” problem.

The answer to the question depends in part on one's opinion of Reconstruction, which for many decades historians viewed as the lowest point in the saga of American democracy— a “tragic era” of corruption and misgovernment brought about by the decision of the victorious North to give the right to vote to the South's freed black men, who were allegedly unfit to exercise it properly. In this interpretation, Lincoln, before his death, had envisioned a quick and lenient reuniting of the nation, centered on forgiving most Confederates and quickly bringing their states back to full participation in the Union. His successor, Andrew Johnson, supposedly sought to implement Lincoln's plan but was eventually thwarted by the Radical Republicans who controlled Congress. Motivated by a thirst for vengeance upon the defeated South or, in some accounts, the object of placing the South under the heel of northern capitalism, the Radicals swept aside Johnson's plan and turned southern government over to incompetent former slaves and their nefarious allies: unscrupulous carpetbaggers from the North and traitorous scalawags (white southerners who cooperated with the Republican Party). Eventually, "patriotic" groups like the Ku Klux Klan overthrew this misgovernment and restored "home rule" (or what we would call white supremacy) to the South.

Ironically, in this account, Lincoln's assassination actually made little difference to the course of Reconstruction. Lincoln, these historians believed, had long been at odds with the Radical Republicans, who would have treated him much as they did Andrew Johnson had Lincoln refused to go along with their plans. They would have forced their own plan of Reconstruction through Congress, overridden any vetoes, and tried to remove Lincoln from office through impeachment, just as they attempted with Johnson in 1868.

This traditional view of Reconstruction has long since been abandoned by historians (although it retains a remarkable hold on popular understanding of the era). Today historians emphatically reject the racist underpinnings of the old interpretation, viewing the Reconstruction as a noble if flawed experiment, the first attempt to introduce a genuine inter-racial democracy in the United States. The tragedy was not that Reconstruction was attempted, but that it failed, leaving the problem of racial justice to future generations. In the modern view, blacks were active agents in shaping the era’s history, not simply the victims of manipulation by others.

Andrew Johnson was a stubborn, racist politician, whose policies alienated not only Radicals (who never controlled Congress) but the vast majority of Republicans.

Where does this new interpretation leave Lincoln? First of all, it is wrong to think that, during the Civil War, Lincoln embraced a single “plan” of Reconstruction. To be sure, in his annual message to Congress of December 1863 he advocated a body of measure by which loyal governments could be established in Confederate states, offering pardons to most southern whites if they swore an oath to support the Union and accept the end of slavery. When 10 percent of the voters of 1860 (all whites, of course) had subscribed to such an oath, they could elect a new state government. Lincoln was particularly interested in creating a loyal government in Louisiana, part of which had been occupied by Union forces since mid-1862. With his encouragement, a pro-Union governor, Michael Hahn, was elected, and a constitutional convention gathered in 1864 that abolished slavery. Lincoln also refused to sign the Wade-Davis Bill, enacted by Congress in the summer of 1864, which established a more stringent set of requirements for the creation of new governments in the South.

It would be wrong, however, to see Lincoln's actions relating to Reconstruction as a fully worked-out post war blueprint. Lincoln viewed wartime Reconstruction primarily as a means of winning the war and ending slavery. Governments resting on the consent of 10 percent of the white population could hardly be considered models of democracy. (Inverted pyramids, one critic called them.) But for even that number to form a government and “secede” from the Confederacy would certainly have been a major victory for the North. In addition, Lincoln allowed other modes of Reconstruction to operate in other states. In Tennessee Andrew Johnson, as military governor, imposed much more demanding requirements on white southerners before they could vote than had been envisioned in Lincoln's 1863 plan. In Arkansas a military-dominated Unionist government functioned during the latter part of the Civil War. Both these states abolished slavery before peace arrived.

Lincoln was not a Radical Republican. Before the Civil War, he had never supported voting rights for free blacks, and he did not see Reconstruction as an opportunity for a sweeping social revolution in the South (apart from emancipation itself)—unlike such Radicals as Thaddeus Stevens, who called for dividing the planters' lands among the former slaves. When he did think about the postwar South, he seems to have envisioned control passing to former Whigs who had been reluctant secessionists. He assumed that this group would treat the former slaves fairly and be attracted to the Republican Party, which before the war had had no presence in the southern states. Universal black male suffrage, already being demanded by Radicals as the war came to an end, was the furthest thing from his mind.

Nonetheless, the hallmarks of Lincoln's greatness were his ability to grow and his willingness to change his mind. During the war, he had come to embrace the Radical position on immediate emancipation and the enlistment of black soldiers (both policies he had initially opposed). In 1864 he privately suggested to Governor Hahn that Louisiana allow some blacks to vote under its new constitution, singling out the educated, propertied free blacks of New Orleans and those who had served in the Union army. In April 1865, shortly before his death, Lincoln for the first time publicly stated his support for this kind of limited black suffrage.

Andrew Johnson lacked Lincoln's qualities of greatness. While Lincoln had been open-minded, willing to listen to criticism, attuned to the currents of northern public opinion, and able to get along with all elements of his party, Johnson was stubborn, deeply racist, and insensitive to the opinions of others. If anyone was responsible for the wreck of his presidency, it was Johnson himself, first by establishing new governments in the South in which blacks had no voice whatsoever, and then refusing, when these governments sought to reduce freedpeople to a situation akin to slavery through the Black Codes, to heed the rising tide of northern concern. As congressional opposition mounted, Johnson refused to budge. As a result, Congress swept aside Johnson's Reconstruction plan, enacting a series of measures pivotal in the rightful enlargement of American citizenship and freedom: the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which accorded blacks equality before the law; the Fourteenth Amendment, which put the idea of equality unbounded by race into the Constitution; and the Reconstruction Acts of 1867 and 1868, which mandated the establishment of new governments in the South, enabling black men to vote for the first time in U.S. history. Despite the Constitution's injunction that the president enforce the laws, Johnson did everything in his power to obstruct the implementation of these measures. In 1868, fed up with his intransigence and incompetence, the House impeached Johnson; after a trial in the Senate, he came within one vote of conviction.

It is impossible to imagine Lincoln, had he lived, becoming so alienated from Congress, the Republican Party, and the northern public as to be impeached and almost removed from office. Nor does it seem likely that he would have enunciated a policy and then stuck to it in the face of self-evident failure. Lincoln had grown enormously during the Civil War, and his ideas would undoubtedly have continued to evolve during Reconstruction. Even if, like Johnson, he had set in motion the establishment of all- the South in 1865, he undoubtedly would have listened carefully to complaints about the Black Codes and been willing to heed the outcry in the North for further guarantees of the rights of former slaves.

Lincoln had always been willing to work closely with all factions of his party, including the Radicals on numerous occasions. I think it is quite plausible to imagine Lincoln and Congress agreeing to a Reconstruction policy encompassing basic civil rights for blacks (as was enacted in 1866) plus limited black suffrage, along the lines he proposed just before his death. The Radicals would have demanded more, but moderates, not Radicals, dominated Congress. Ironically, it was Johnson's intransigence that pushed moderates toward the Radical position, resulting in the Reconstruction Acts. Had Lincoln and Congress reached an agreement in 1866, universal black male suffrage would not have followed, at least not immediately.

Would a more moderate Reconstruction, backed by a united Republican Party and overseen by Lincoln, have sunk deeper, more permanent roots than the more radical plan eventually implemented? No one, of course, can say. The vast majority of white southerners, supported vociferously by the Democratic Party of the North, were deeply opposed to any equality for the former slaves. Johnson encouraged them to resist the implementation of congressional measures, helping to set the stage for the wave of terror by the Ku Klux Klan and kindred groups that did much to undermine Reconstruction.

Perhaps, confronted by a united Republican Party and a president willing to enforce the law, white southerners would have accepted the basic rights of the former slaves. In that case, the nation might have been spared the long nightmare of disenfranchisement, segregation, and racial violence that followed the end of Reconstruction. Or perhaps even a more moderate Reconstruction would have aroused violent opposition, and Lincoln would have faced the alternative that in fact eventually faced Congress—moving forward to full black suffrage and a federal commitment to protect blacks' rights as citizens, or relegating the freed people to quasi citizenship under the domination of their former masters. It is impossible to say what choice Lincoln would have made under those circumstances. All we do know is that his assassination brought to the White House a man unable to rise to the demands of one of the most challenging moments in our nation's history.