

# The Remarkable Vision of Abraham Lincoln

*By Dennis Knight*

Abraham Lincoln was a self-educated lawyer who served as President of the United States from March 1861 until his assassination in April 1865. Lanky and craggy in appearance, Honest Abe was unquestionably a man of the people, a visionary who promoted the modernization of industry and brought about land grants to build universities and connect the country with railroads.

The first president to be elected as a member of the new Republican Party, Lincoln was a moderate among party conservatives favoring the status quo and radicals campaigning for the end of slavery. He was born in Kentucky, a slave state, interested in preserving the union and not in favor of the wedge of abolishing slavery. But he was morally sympathetic to the abolition cause, declaring in 1853 his own vision of the vile institution, "I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world."

The South couched the Civil War as about states' rights, but it was really about preserving slavery and advancing it into the western territories. Lincoln would have acquiesced to a continuation of slavery on a limited basis if it would have held the country together and ended the war. He saw that as his duty under the oath he had taken to uphold a constitution which at that time expressly permitted the hunting down and return of fugitive slaves.

Abe Lincoln was acutely aware of the conflict between our nation's key governing document and its foundation under the Declaration of Independence, that "...all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

It eventually became clear to him that allowing southern slave states to maintain the status quo was not viable. "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe that this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free."

In January of 1863, nearly two years into office, Lincoln came to his ultimate position on slavery by signing under his special wartime powers the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring, "That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State..., the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be...forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States... will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons...in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom."

On November 19, 1863, with the Union beginning to get an upper hand, the President spoke at the dedication of a cemetery for soldiers killed at Gettysburg. "Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." In just three paragraphs, Abraham Lincoln delivered one of the greatest speeches in the history of our nation, concluding with a promise. "[W]e here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."