

THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Classroom: Grades 9-12

President and War Powers: "Lincoln and the Civil War"

Activity - The Lincoln I Knew

In the book, *Lincoln, An Illustrated Biography*, the Kunhardts point out that Lincoln was often severely criticized during his presidency: For many, he was an outright buffoon who endangered the nation by his presence. He offended conservatives and radicals alike, so the charges went—not only Southerners, Northern Democrats, and conservative Whigs but anti-slavery forces as well, drawing criticism from all sides: He moved too slowly. His patience was aggravating. He paid too much attention to border state opinion. At first he was all for preserving slavery. Then, when he did issue his Emancipation Proclamation, it was too little, too late. He botched the war, firing the wrong generals and planning the wrong strategies. He antagonized Congress. He ran a government of misfits and thieves. He stifled civil rights. He pardoned the guilty. Instead of paying attention to business, he was always telling jokes and stories. He was called a "Simple Susan," an "Illinois beast," a "wet rag," a "Kentucky mule," a "political coward," a "butcher," an "imbecile," a "gorilla," a "tyrant." He was "weak," "timid," "foul-tongued," "pitiable," had "no education," was "shallow," "dazed," and "utterly foolish."⁵

Activity:

1. Choose the name of any contemporary of Lincoln's who might be featured in a single biography, or might be included in some of the comprehensive biographies of Lincoln, (*see lesson for bibliography*). Some examples include:

Abolitionists: William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe

Generals: Ulysses S. Grant, George Gordon Meade, William Tecumseh Sherman

Radical Republicans: Senator Charles Sumner, Congressman Thaddeus Stevens

Northern Democrats: General George B. McClellan, James Buchanan

Southerners: Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee

Cabinet Members: William Seward, William Stanton, Salmon Chase;

President Lincoln's Secretaries: John Nicolay, John Hay

Newspaper Editors: Horace Greeley

Photographers: Mathew Brady

Writers: Walt Whitman

Family Members: Lincoln's wife, Mary Todd Lincoln; or his sons, Thomas ("Tad") and Robert Lincoln.

2. Conduct research to discover more about the relationship between Abraham Lincoln and one of his contemporaries. As you read and take notes, consider these questions:

Who was this person? What role did he or she play in that historical period? Was he or she important at a national level?

Did the person you studied know Lincoln personally, or did he or she relate to him in either a public or an official capacity?

Were Lincoln and the person you studied more alike than different? Was the relationship cordial, adversarial, or, over time, both? Explain.

Based on your reading, did any of the criticisms mentioned in the Kunhardts' book seem well founded? How so?

Is there a quotation from the person you researched that specifically describes a relationship with Lincoln?

As a result of your study, what did you learn about Lincoln that you didn't know before?

3. Imagine that it is the six-month anniversary of Lincoln's death, and you, in the role of the contemporary you studied, are being interviewed by journalists who want to find about "the real Abraham Lincoln." You, and your other colleagues, are important, because you knew Lincoln before he became the "martyred president." Have a couple of your fellow classmates act as interviewers to ask questions of you. This forum provides a chance for you to enlighten the interviewers, to give them a unique point of view about what made this president "tick."
4. After the interview presentations, write a brief character sketch of President Lincoln, describing him from the point of view of at least three of his contemporaries.

A follow-up

Using library or Internet resources, find out how your contemporaries view President Lincoln. Compare any recent description of him to that of any one of Lincoln's contemporaries studied above. Share your findings with your classmates.