

A Lincoln Portrait: Celebrating the Life of Abraham Lincoln

This is America



The statue of President Abraham Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, DC

From VOA Learning English, welcome to This is America. I'm Steve Ember. Today we tell about Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States.

"Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance or insignificance can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. We – even we here – hold the power and bear the responsibility."

That was actor Henry Fonda, speaking the words of President Lincoln. This recitation is part of "A Lincoln Portrait," a work by American composer Aaron Copland.

Today, we tell the story of this great American president. Come along with us.

The words we just heard were part of a speech President Lincoln gave to the United States Congress in 1862. At the time, he was leading the nation during the Civil War. This was the most serious crisis in American history. Lincoln spoke to lawmakers a month before he signed the Emancipation Proclamation. The document declared the freedom of slaves in states controlled by rebel forces.

Abraham Lincoln was born in Kentucky on February 12th, 1809. He grew up in Illinois. His family was poor and had no education. Abraham Lincoln taught himself what he needed to know. He became a lawyer. He served in the Illinois state legislature and in the United States Congress. In 1860, he was elected to the country's highest office.

President Lincoln helped end slavery in the nation. And he helped keep the American union from splitting apart during the Civil War. Lincoln believed that democracy can be a lasting form of government.

In 1863, the president gave what became his most famous speech. Union armies of the north had won two great victories that year. They defeated the Confederate armies of the south at Vicksburg, Mississippi and at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Ceremonies were held to honor the dead soldiers on the Gettysburg battlefield.

President Lincoln spoke at Gettysburg for only about two minutes. But his speech has never been forgotten. Historians say it defined Americans as a people who believed in freedom, democracy and equality. The speech began:

“Four score 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.

“Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of it, as a final resting place for those who died here, that the nation might live.”

Abraham Lincoln wrote some of the most memorable words in American history. Lincoln was assassinated in 1865. He was shot at Ford’s Theater in Washington while he and his wife were watching a play. He died a few days after the Civil War ended. Yet his words live on.

In 1942, orchestra conductor Andre Kostelanetz asked three leading American composers to write musical portraits of famous Americans. One of the three was Aaron Copland. His compositions were often based on traditional American music. In a conversation recorded at the Library of Congress in 1975, on his 75th birthday, Copland recalled:

“I picked Lincoln. And after I decided to do a musical portrait of Lincoln, I began looking around at some of the biographies of him, and I found a very interesting one by an English lord, a man called Lord Charnwood, of all things, and it was in there that I found some of the quotes that I used in the work itself.”

Aaron Copland wrote “A Lincoln Portrait” for speaker and symphony orchestra. The speaker recites words taken from Lincoln’s speeches, letters, and the Gettysburg Address. In our conversation in 1975, Copland remembered the very first speaker.

“It was Carl Sandburg, the great biographer of Lincoln, so that one had full confidence that he knew what he was talking about.

And, did Copland have a favorite speaker over the many years “A Lincoln Portrait” had been performed?

“I’ve heard it done by so many different people, in so many different ways, that it’s hard for me really to decide, in my own mind, who has the perfect way. Obviously, if you get someone with Sandburg’s personality, whom one connects with Lincoln in some way or other, that helps a great deal.”

Copland added a “Note for the Speaker” to the score for “A Lincoln Portrait.” It reads that “the words are meant to be read simply and directly, without a trace of exaggerated sentiment. It is the composer’s wish that the speaker depend for his effect not on his “acting” ability, but on his complete sincerity of manner.”

In 1968, Copland led the London Symphony Orchestra, with Henry Fonda speaking the words of Lincoln – in just the way the composer preferred.

"Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history." That is what he said. That is what Abraham Lincoln said: "Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance or insignificance can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. We – even we here – hold the power and bear the responsibility..."

He was born in Kentucky, raised in Indiana, and lived in Illinois. And this is what he said. This is what Abe Lincoln said:

"Dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves and then we shall save our country."

When standing erect, he was six feet four inches tall, and this is what he said. He said:

"It is the eternal struggle between two principles, right and wrong, throughout the world. It is the same spirit that says 'You toil and work, and earn bread, and I'll eat it,' no matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation, and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race. It is the same tyrannical principle."

Lincoln was a quiet man. Abe Lincoln was a quiet and a melancholy man. But, when he spoke of Democracy, this is what he said.

He said: "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of Democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy."

Abraham Lincoln, 16th President of these United States, is everlasting in the memory of his countrymen, for on the battleground at Gettysburg this is what he said:

He said: "That from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion: that we 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, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Henry Fonda with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by the composer in Aaron Copland's "A Lincoln Portrait."

And that's our program honoring a great American president in his birthday month. I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us again next week for another This Is America program from VOA Learning English.