

What if Abraham Lincoln hadn't been assassinated...?

by Ed Williamson

Whenever my Sons of Confederate Veterans brethren sit around before a meeting is about to start, we sometimes talk about the most off-the-wall subjects. My favorite topic has been if Lincoln hadn't been assassinated. What would have happened in his second term?

1. Abraham Lincoln did not believe that slaves and free men should live in communities together in the United States after the slaves were freed, despite the failure of the Liberian Colony (Liberia began in the early 19th century as a project of the American Colonization Society (ACS), which believed black people would face better chances for freedom and prosperity in Africa than in the United States.

Between 1822 and the outbreak of the War Between the States in 1861, more than 15,000 freed and free-born black people who faced social and legal oppression in the U.S., along with 3,198 freed Caribbean slaves, relocated to Liberia). By early 1861, Lincoln ordered a secret trip to modern-day Panama to investigate the land of a Philadelphian named Ambrose Thompson. Thompson had volunteered his Chiriqui land as a refuge for freed slaves. The slaves would work in the abundant coal mines on his property, the coal would be sold to the Navy, and the profits would go to the freed slaves to further build up their new land.

He supported a bill in Congress that provided money to be expended under the direction of the President of the United States, to aid in the colonization and settlement of such free persons of African descent now residing in said District, including those to be liberated by this act, as may desire to emigrate to the Republic of Haiti or Liberia, or such other country beyond the limits of the United States as the President may determine.

By 1863, realizing Liberia, Haiti and the Chiriqui lands were not reasonable for resettlement (Liberia was considered too great a distance to relocate a large number of freed slaves), Lincoln mentioned moving the “whole colored race of the slave states into Texas.”

Four days before his death, speaking to Gen. Benjamin Butler, Lincoln still pressed on with deportation as the only peaceable solution to America's race problem. “I can hardly believe that the South and North can live in peace, unless we can get rid of the Negroes ... I believe that it would be better to export them all to some fertile country...”

2. Lincoln was the right man to help steer the United States out of war and into the Reconstruction era: the process of readmitting the seceded states and finding a place for around four million former slaves. But after Lincoln's assassination, this colossal undertaking fell instead to the Democrat vice-president, Andrew Johnson. He favored lenient treatment for the

former Confederacy. We know that Andrew Johnson was forced by a group known as the Radical Republicans to impose a cruel reconstruction upon the Confederate States that lasted eleven years and when he didn't give them everything they wanted they brought him up on impeachment charges for violating the Tenure of Office Act. Lincoln also favored lenient treatment for the Confederacy and while he was better at speech making and diplomacy, it is with little doubt that he would have been treated the same as Johnson and eventually faced impeachment as well.

3. Finally, Lincoln wanted to give the Confederacy a Clean Slate. Lincoln hoped, in his second inaugural address, when he spoke of his hope of malice toward none and charity for all after the war. He had no wish to hunt down the Confederacy's leaders after the war ended, but he also had no wish to stop them leaving. "Frighten them out of the country," he said, "open the gates, let down the bars, scare them off." This would clear the way for a new leadership in the South, a leadership of Unionist white Americans and their natural allies, the freed slaves, which in turn would establish a "practical system by which the two races could gradually live themselves out of their old relation."

Whatever Lincoln's intentions, he would have faced large opposition. White northerners hated slavery, but they also disliked African Americans and they routinely voted down black voting rights. Similarly, Lincoln could scarcely have guaranteed the operation of his "practical system" without an ongoing military presence in the South to make it work. Americans were unwilling, in times of peace, to pay large military budgets, and the soldiers themselves were mostly civilians-in-uniform who wanted nothing more than to go home at war's end. Lincoln probably would have never realized his dreams, even if he had lived. His death made him a martyr and elevated his reputation higher than it would have ever been if he had lived.

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