Could the Union have won the war without Lincoln's leadership? Quora.com

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For the sake of comparisons, I will argue here that the Union might have been able to win the Civil War more quickly WITHOUT Abraham Lincoln as president. Let's take the most likely alternate scenario, that shortly after Lincoln was inaugurated on March 4, 1861, the actor John Wilkes Booth (who was a secessionist and hated Lincoln as much in 1861 as he did in 1865) shot and killed Lincoln.

In that case, the presidency would go to the Vice President, who was Hannibal Hamlin. The reason the Republican Party put Hamlin as Lincoln's running mate was because Hamlin was a Washington insider, a longtime Congressman and Senator from Maine. Hamlin also had much administrative experience, when he served as governor of Maine. Hamlin was seen as an experienced leader, in contrast to Lincoln, who had served only one term in Congress (back in 1847–49) and held zero administrative offices. Lincoln's aides often complained that Lincoln spent too much time listening to his office visitors rather than important matters of state. If Lincoln had been killed in early 1861, many Republican insiders would probably heave a sigh of relief that an experienced leader like Hamlin was president.

We know that from the beginning Hamlin pushed Lincoln to emphasize a naval focus. The Confederates had many army officers, but hardly any naval commanders. The South had to create a navy from scratch, and Hamlin wanted to use the established US navy to gain a prompt victory. He recommended his good friend, Gideon Welles, to be Secretary of the Navy. Lincoln accepted Hamlin's advice and appointed Welles.

Lincoln also accepted the advice of General Winfield Scott, who advocated a naval focus in his Anaconda Plan to lay a blockade of the Southern Atlantic and Gulf coastlines and to capture control of the Mississippi River. Lincoln did as Scott suggested, and declared a naval blockade in April 1861. But during the Lincoln years, 90% of the US military budget was expended by the army. Only 10% of money, men, and materials went to the US navy. Navy Secretary Welles did amazingly effective things with the resources he had, but he did not have the funds to do more. The US blockade was effective in helping to defeat the Confederacy, but it took over two years to have much impact.

General Scott wanted the US navy to build armed riverboats to make a quick capture of the Mississippi River, thus splitting the Confederate States in half and opening the great river to commerce going to and from the Midwest. Being a Midwesterner, and having previously taken a riverboat down the Mississippi to New Orleans, Lincoln should have recognized the strategic value of the Mississippi River.

Instead, Lincoln spent his time from April to June 1861, focused on the militia that he had called for 90 days enlistment. Lincoln's fantasy was that within this time frame he could build up an army to march out of Washington, defeat the rebel army in a "decisive" battle in northern Virginia, capture the Confederate capital at Richmond, and accept their surrender—all within 90 days! US General Irvin McDowell was put in charge of this army, and Lincoln pressed him relentlessly to march on Richmond. McDowell wanted to train his new recruits to build and occupy defensive forts around Washington DC, and he protested that the newly formed army of raw militiamen needed more time to be trained, to execute the kind of offensive tactics that would be required for an invasion of Virginia.

Lincoln answered McDowell by stating that the rebels were just as green, and McDowell should mount an attack anyway.

Lincoln had next to no military experience, and he did not have the slightest idea what he was talking about. Actually, the Confederate army that guarded Manassas, Virginia, just a short distance from Washington, was far

better prepared for battle. Many of its volunteers were experienced riflemen, who had been used to military command that existed in the slave patrols where many of them had served, in their local efforts to keep a tight lid over the enslaved people of the South. Its generals, P.G.T. Beauregard and Joseph Johnston, were high former US officers, and far more experienced than McDowell.

Still, Lincoln pressed. Finally, McDowell marched his army across the Potomac River and into Virginia. After crossing a small creek called Bull Run, he began executing his attack. McDowell's battle plan was actually a good one—for a well-trained and experienced army that is. The green militiamen performed fairly well in the morning hours, slowly pushing the rebels back. But then a new contingent of Confederate troops arrived by train, and they launched a counter-attack. Though McDowell tried his best to rally his men, the raw recruits panicked. Many threw down their rifles and ran for their lives, some of them all the way to Washington.

The Battle of Bull Run, near Manassas, was an unmitigated disaster for the new US administration. Blame for the rout was placed unfairly on General McDowell, but in fact Lincoln was the one really at fault. Lincoln never seemed to learn the lesson of Bull Run, and he kept pressing his generals to attack the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia in many bloody but indecisive battles. He would have been much better to take the advice of McDowell and others, to make strong defensive fortifications around Washington city, and then conduct offensive operations against the rebels in the way that General Scott's Anaconda Plan envisioned.

On the day after the Battle of Manassas/Bull Run, Vice President Hamlin visited Lincoln's office, along with Senator Charles Sumner. They pressed Lincoln to follow General Scott's Anaconda Plan, with emphasis on the blockade. Furthermore, they said that as US navy ships enforced the blockade along the coastline, the ships should pick up black men escaping slavery, bring them on board, and teach them how to be crewmembers. Such a source for sailors would be much more dependable than the 90 day militiamen who had panicked at Bull Run. Hamlin and Sumner said that any

man who served honorably in the Union navy until the rebellion was defeated should be granted their freedom. Escaped slaves would be determined fighters, Hamlin said, if their freedom was at stake.

Lincoln reacted against this idea. After Virginia caught him by surprise and had seceded in April, he was deathly afraid that Kentucky would join the Confederacy as well. If he used black troops to subdue the South, he was afraid Kentucky would secede for sure.

Lincoln was wrong. By July 1861, Kentucky Unionists were well on their way to securing a majority in their state legislature who were opposed to secession.

If Lincoln had given top priority to General Scott's Anaconda Plan, he would have ordered Union gunboats under the command of Captain John Porter to move down the Mississippi River and occupy Memphis, Tennessee, as soon as possible. At the same time, he would order Captain David Farragut to bring his seafaring ships into the mouth of the Mississippi and occupy New Orleans and Baton Rouge.

If such a goal would seem fanciful, it must be remembered that Porter and Farragut orchestrated exactly this plot in April 1862. If that plan had been given priority, it would have been two significant victories for the Union in 1861 instead of a full year later. And, if such a plan had worked well enough to capture New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Memphis, it would have been much easier for the US navy to also capture Vicksburg MS in 1861, rather than two years later when the rebels had made Vicksburg into a heavily fortified citadel. The Union's Western campaign could have been successful within a year, instead of the bloody fighting that was needed to capture Vicksburg in 1863.

If the Union navy captured New Orleans, the South's largest city and busiest port, and the Louisiana capital of Baton Rouge, the US Marines would be in good position to capture the Mississippi state capital at Jackson and the Arkansas state capital at Little Rock. If they had done that, and accepted escaped slaves into the US forces, they could have set up loyal state

governments of Unionists, just like Lincoln actually did in Tennessee and West Virginia. But these Unionists, mainly abolitionists from New England, could have established their residency in 30 days and then formed loyal state governments that would expel whites from black-majority Mississippi and Louisiana.

Vice President Hamlin had been influenced by his wife to favor the Women Suffrage Movement, and if he were president, he could have directed the Unionists who were forming those new state governments to allow voting for any person (both male and female) above age 16 who could read the Preamble to the US Constitution. If this had been done, both Mississippi and Louisiana could have evolved into all-black states. If African Americans had gained and retained control of at least one state, the subsequent history of the United States would have been very different. The Jim Crow system that Southern whites imposed on blacks when they regained control of their state governments in the 1870s, would have been impossible to impose in a state government where black people were in the majority.

The Union should have used escaped slaves to build a defensive force to protect Union gunboat control of the Mississippi River. It takes a lot of training to prepare troops to wage offensive campaigns in war. It is not easy to get attacking troops to move in a coordinated way, to take advantage of unforeseen conditions as they move into enemy land, to handle problems of supply and logistics, and to mount deadly charges on an enemy that was waiting behind defensive fortifications in trenches. However, it is not so difficult to train people to dig earthworks defenses, and then how to load, aim, and fire a musket while defending those earthworks. Preparing defenses along the Mississippi River, and forcing the Confederates to attack, would have given the advantage to armed outposts of escaped slaves.

But instead of following Scott's advice to give priority to capturing the Mississippi River, Lincoln put so much attention on the Army of the Potomac that he never exercised real leadership on the Western theater. Though U.S. Grant gained a victory on the Tennessee River in January 1862,

when he captured the two Confederate strongholds of Forts Henry and Donalson, his whole army was attacked and almost overrun at Shiloh in April. The Union war effort would have advanced strategically if Grant had been ordered to focus first on capturing the Mississippi River in 1861.

Given that Hannibal Hamlin was much closer to the abolitionist wing of the Republican Party than Lincoln was, and that he gravitated around the Radical Republicans in Congress who wanted to attack slavery in 1861, it is not farfetched to conjure that a President Hamlin would have moved much more quickly than Lincoln did to emancipate the enslaved people of the seceded states (Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation did not go into effect until January 1863), and then used them as the primary force to fight the white rebels in 1861 and 1862.

Besides the Mississippi River, the other half of Scott's Anaconda Plan was the US naval blockade. The Southern coastline of Virginia through Georgia was 700 miles. The coastline of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana east of the mouth of the Mississippi River was another 200 miles. But the coastline of Florida alone comprised a whopping 1,350 miles. If the Union navy could knock Florida out of the war, that would mean the US blockade would have to cover only 900 miles as opposed to 2,250 miles. Phrased statistically, the Union blockade would have to patrol 60% less mileage than what they would need to cover if they had to patrol Florida as well. A shorter blockade is a more effective blockade.

Florida was a state ripe for the picking, if Lincoln had followed Scott's and Hamlin's ideas. It was the least populous Southern state, with only 77,700 whites and 62,700 blacks. The US navy never evacuated Fort Pickens near Pensacola and Fort Jefferson near Key West, and these were natural bases for further operations. A naval force was able to capture Jacksonville in early 1862, and some ships going up the Ochlockonee River to capture the state capital at Tallahassee would have been easy since the Confederates quartered few troops in the state. The US Navy could have brought white abolitionists from New England, and after they resided there for thirty days the men would be qualified to vote. They could vote themselves into office,

declare themselves as the new loyal state government, confiscate the land of any person who had supported the Confederacy, abolish slavery, and provide for voting to be awarded to any person (women as well as men) who was able to read.

In 1861 and 1862 Lincoln pushed for establishing colonies of freed slaves in Haiti and other areas of the Caribbean. It is notable that he never saw Florida as a much more practical locale for escaped slaves to be relocated. If he had pushed Florida resettlement for escaped slaves, rather than the Caribbean, such a strategy would be much more practical. Then the president could encourage educated free black people residing in the North to move to Florida and become the political leadership of the state. The Union navy could continue to rescue escaping slaves all along the Confederate coastline, and transport them to Florida. As more black people populated the state, they could expel white residents, so that Florida eventually could become an all-black state. [For those who doubt the practicality of such an idea, in reality this scenario actually almost happened during Reconstruction, if black political leaders had not been betrayed by the white man who headed the Florida Freedmen's Bureau, who threw his support to white conservatives as they took over the state.] Black residents could push whites out, or the whites would flee as black operations became unchallenged.

If Lincoln had been killed in 1861, if is likely that a President Hamlin would have emphasized a naval war. If he had been able to gain control of the Mississippi River in 1861 instead of two years later, and had focused on taking control of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida these three states had the possibility of becoming all black states if a supportive president had been present. Well connected in Washington and with strong ties to the Radical Republicans, Hannibal Hamlin had the potential to become an honored president, for defeating the Southern rebellion within a year, freeing the slaves, and sponsoring the admission of all-black state governments in Louisiana, Mississippi and Florida.

The great failure of Abraham Lincoln was that, even though he grew to strongly press for the 13th Amendment ending slavery in 1865, he did not support plans to redistribute Southern plantation lands to the freed slaves. Because he provided no strong economic base for African Americans after the war ended, it was easy for the landowning Southern white class to force their former slaves to work for them as sharecroppers.

If Lincoln had been assassinated in 1861, it is safe to conjecture that a President Hamlin would have without a doubt built a larger navy and hired black men to staff it. If that had been done, more African Americans would have had a marketable skill to hold jobs in merchant shipping after the war, and would have had more choices besides becoming a sharecropper for their former master. Hamlin was also quite supportive of African Americans in Congress during Reconstruction, and if he had been president he would have undoubtedly followed the plan he outlined to Lincoln in July 1861, to emancipate slaves who volunteered to serve the Union cause.

Lincoln's government enlisted over 180,000 black men as soldiers in the Union army, from late 1862 until 1865, plus many more served as teamsters, fortification builders, camp orderlies, and nurses. If Hannibal Hamlin had been president from 1861 to 1865, this number would have been considerably larger. If the Civil War had been won for the North primarily by black soldiers and sailors, and if they had been able to gain and retain control of some state governments in the South, those two things alone would have tangibly increased their status in society, and the United States would likely not have been plagued by the extreme racism that tainted public life for over a century to come.

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