

## [What would happen if Abraham Lincoln had been captured by the Confederate Army during the Civil War? Quora.com 2021](#)

**Walter L. Williams, Ph.D.**

To answer the question what would have happened if Abraham Lincoln had been captured by Confederates during the Civil War, he would have been succeeded in office by his Vice President Hannibal Hamlin. A longtime Senator and Governor from Maine, Hamlin was much more politically experienced than Lincoln, and he had many close contacts in Congress. No doubt Hamlin would have moved to keep the Union war effort moving forward.

Hamlin was much more of a radical than Lincoln, and right after the first battle of Bull Run, in July 1861 Hamlin recommended to Lincoln that he should immediately recruit African American men into the U.S. armed forces, and offer freedom to any of them who were slaves. Lincoln did not take Hamlin's advice because he was fearful that Kentucky, Maryland, and Missouri would secede if he moved against slavery. But when Lincoln did at last decide to move against slavery in July 1862, a full year later, Hannibal Hamlin was the first person he showed the draft of his Emancipation Proclamation to (even before he shared it with his cabinet).

If Lincoln were captured, and Hamlin assumed the office of the presidency, I think he would have moved much more aggressively to quell the rebellion. But since he was from Maine, a major shipbuilding and seafaring state, I think President Hamlin would have emphasized a naval strategy more than Lincoln. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, whom Hamlin had suggested to Lincoln, did a superb job in quickly building a strong navy, but Lincoln allotted the navy only one-tenth of the budget given to the Union army. 90% of men who served in the Union armed forces were in the army, with only 10% in the U.S. navy.

.If Lincoln were captured early in the war, I think Hamlin would have dramatically strengthened the naval blockade of the South's coastline. At the same time, rather than waste resources trying to capture Richmond, which needlessly wasted the lives of many Northern troops over four years of sometimes fruitless fighting over the very same ground, I think Hamlin would have more quickly followed General Winfield Scott's Anaconda Plan, with its emphasis on capturing the Mississippi River. Quickly building gunboats on the Upper Mississippi, the navy could have captured Memphis in 1861 rather a year later, and David Farragut could likewise have captured New Orleans then as well. Vicksburg would also have fallen if the Union navy moved south before the Confederates had years to build their defenses.

In short, if Lincoln were captured, it is likely that a President Hamlin would have prosecuted the war much more effectively. The blockade would have crushed the South, but likely with many fewer deaths than what the long land war caused. If Hamlin had freed the slaves in 1861, and massive numbers had escaped to the coasts and the main rivers to be protected by the Union navy, and trained as sailors to build and man even more ships, the South would have been brought to its knees economically as its black labor force fled to Union lines. By using more black volunteers, the North might not have had to resort to drafting Northern white men, and anti-war sentiment in the North would have been less.

All in all, a naval strategy by President Hamlin could possibly have changed the entire course of American history. The Confederates would have wished they had never laid a hand on Abraham Lincoln. The motto: be careful what you wish for.

Walter L. Williams, Ph.D. retired professor of Civil War history