Abraham Lincoln, 16th President of the United States, has undoubtedly left a distinguished mark upon American history. The five years he served in office were certainly some of the most violent and dangerous years of the Republic. From the secession of South Carolina to the surrender of Gen. Robert E. Lee at Appomattox Courthouse, Lincoln’s America faced numerous problems and situations that required a strong leader. In addition, the entire fabric of American democracy and liberalism was attacked. However, in what light must Lincoln be presented? Was Lincoln a simple man, whose development from defender of slavery to its moral opposition can be seen?

In short, no. Lincoln is not a simple personality. By examining official speeches from throughout his time served as President, the official progression from 1861 to 1865 is visible. Lincoln’s 1861 Inaugural Address would, if given in 1865, be almost unrecognizable. Lincoln had greatly changed his rhetoric and war language. Was this change mainly due to a maturation of thought, or instead was this part of a calculated plan developed in order to defeat the rebellious South?

Abraham Lincoln can be considered one of the best leaders the United States of America has ever seen. Lincoln was an intelligent leader who understood what it would take to win the Civil War. As a general rule, mothers do not wish to send their children off to die in a war that is believed to be about a nation’s finances, sectional rivalries, or other government issues. The United States, in 1861, was experiencing the great movement of public opinion that resulted from newspapers and other methods of information transfer (such as the telegraph and trains). It is important to remember just how important public opinion is in warfare. Just five years earlier, public opinion in Britain during the Crimean War led to the fall of the Aberdeen Ministry. The United States was not far behind – in fact, public opinion can be considered one of the reasons that the Southern states seceded from the rest of the Union. Lincoln, between 1861 and 1863, had turned the Civil War into a moral question. Slavery was evil, and Lincoln would argue that the North was sent by God to deliver the southern slaves to freedom. By 1863, Lincoln called for a “new birth of freedom” for a nation that was “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” In 1865, Lincoln moves further, turning the Civil War almost into the epic good versus evil battle described by the Bible. God had willed that slavery would end, and to achieve that purpose he sent Abraham Lincoln and the other men of the Union to implement his will upon the South. Lincoln, in his 1865 Inaugural Address, basically argues that although the South and North both pray for the same God, the South does not understand what God wills. The South, stuck in its ignorant ways, has perverted the word of God to allow for the enforcement of slavery. Lincoln argues that it is the duty of the North to stand “with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right” and to always move forward.

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1 Works used to develop the following ideas are contained in the works cited that follows this paper.
2 Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, 19 November 1863. “Gettysburg Address”
searching, praying, and looking for God to guide them in the right direction. If they are in fact following God’s path, Lincoln believes that they will succeed. However, if the Union is misguided in its attempt to decipher God’s will then it must lose.\(^3\)

Understanding Lincoln’s rhetoric throughout the years of the Civil War is very important. In 1861, he is not anti-slavery, stating: "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so."\(^4\) By 1865, however, he is anti-slavery, declaring that “One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves… localized in the Southern part [of the United States]… All knew that this interest was somehow, the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union, even by war.”\(^5\) Did Lincoln have a change of heart, or was this change due to a calculated decision to make the war into a moral question? This answer cannot be sought clearly in many sources. Scholars, historians and philosophers can spend much time arguing over the validity of either assumption. However, I believe that Abraham Lincoln did not change his mindset because of the Civil War, but rather changed his rhetoric to match both the will of the people and to bend the will of the people to what was best for the nation.

Why did Lincoln change his rhetoric? Lincoln, as a leader, can be considered to be single-minded. His main concern was maintaining the Union. That task proved to be impossible in 1861. Lincoln tried as hard as he could to convince the Democratic South that he would not end slavery in the region. However, he never truly succeeded. Southern Democrats thought that Lincoln would eliminate slavery as soon as he could. Other, more moderate Southerners felt that by restricting slavery to where it had traditionally been located, and not allowing it to spread into the Western territories, Lincoln would slowly strangle the institution to death. This is a plausible action, but in all probability Lincoln, if he succeeded, would have faced a rough Presidency. The nation would have continued to remain fractured. Lincoln, in all his greatness, could only have managed a holding action against the forces of sectionalism.

However, his attempt to corral the South and retain them in the nation failed and he was forced to fight a Civil War. In this war, Lincoln showed what kind of man he truly was. He kept his eye on his goal – that of a unified Union. He attempted to do this logically immediately after the separation. In his First Inaugural, Lincoln calls upon the South to consider the legality of secession. He argues that no government can logically prepare for its own demise. That “the Union will endure forever… except by some action not provided for in the instrument itself” was apparent to Lincoln.\(^6\) He did not take into consideration, however, the fact that not eighty-five years ago the United States had done much the same thing to England.

Lincoln would view the Revolution and the secession of the Southern states in different lights, but Southerners failed to capture his imagery. Although the Southern states did have

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3 Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, 4 March 1865. “Second Inaugural”
4 Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address, 4 March 1861. “First Inaugural”
5 Second Inaugural
6 First Inaugural
representative rights (something the founding fathers lacked in 1776), they would argue that their rights were beginning to be infringed by the Northern states and that the Constitution was, at its base, an agreement between states. To this Lincoln argues, again employing logic, that the Union predates the Constitution (a weak argument, for the Article of Confederation were considered a legal agreement between sovereign states – therefore, must not the Constitution be the same?). Additionally, Lincoln states that even if the Constitution was a contract between states that the Southern states would have broken the contract by seceding from the Union (again, Southerners could take issue with this by pointing out that the North had first broken the Constitution by failing to uphold the portion of Article 4 Section II that was eliminated by the 13th Amendment in December 1865). All in all, the Southern viewpoints on the secession from the Union make sense. Southerners can view their rights as having been violated by the North by the refusal of some states or citizens of those states to uphold their constitution (not moral7) duty to return escaped slaves. The Constitution can be considered an agreement between states and not of the people, as evidenced by the restrictions placed upon both the national government and state governments in relationship to each other. Although the Constitution does specifically mention the “People,” in most cases it refers to the people of the “several states.”8 The people, therefore, can be considered citizens of the state first and the United States second.

Lincoln’s first attempt to keep the South from seceding lay in convincing them via logic. Once that failed, war was inevitable. The Civil War which resulted was a brutal and terrifying event. However, Lincoln’s behavior in the war is interesting enough. His suspension of habeas corpus during the Civil War is certainly eye-raising. How did Lincoln, who in 1861 promised to uphold the Constitution, go completely against this document? Simple – he felt that it was in the best interest of this nation. It was not conceivable for the founding fathers to put into place any way for men to be held in prison without proper and relevant charges. However, Lincoln allowed this because he felt it was necessary and that that his executive privilege would allow him to get away with it. He was correct – Lincoln today is remembered as a great man, and perhaps one of the greatest Presidents in the history of the United States. In truth, this could be a correct statement. Lincoln was a great man and was a great President of the United States. He accomplished the singular task that enveloped his career as President – he preserved the Union. However, the methods that Lincoln used are not as pristine as his reputation. However, in looking at the question central to this paper, Lincoln is a central figure in the new liberalism in post-Civil War America.

It can be argued that liberal ideals were finally met with the end of the American Civil War. Scholars such as Carl N. Degler have argued that the American Civil War is actually the end of what started with the War of Independence. Lincoln’s Union, after the defeat of the South, allowed for one unified nation instead of many disjointed states. This is an interesting concept to examine. Was the United States fully whole before the Civil War? Of course it was. A “new America,” however, can definitely be seen after 1865.

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7 It is here were Lincoln can be confusing. He understands his Constitutional duty and promises to do it, although he finds ways to excuse others from fulfilling their own duty as citizens to either support the constitution or amend it.
8 United States Constitution.
Before the Civil War, sectionalism was rampant throughout America (specifically in the American South). Although George Washington warned against this growing threat in his Farewell Address, the growth of these sectional rivalries did not stop. Uncontrolled, they spun the United States into a war wherein brother fought brother, and father fought son. Therefore, Lincoln’s actions in demanding that the Union function as a union and not as a confederation of states significantly changed the American experience. The issues which America confronted in the 1860’s were serious enough that they would have to have been met at some point. Indeed, Lincoln seemed tentative in his first Inaugural Address and almost seemed to wish that they were delayed until after his Presidency. However, he will forever be remembered for the heroic way in which he defended the union. Without the strong leadership of President Lincoln, the Civil War probably would have lasted much longer and the South might have even won. By turning the Civil War into a moral battlefield, Lincoln received support for a much longer period of time than he would have otherwise. This additional time allowed the North to win the war and to preserve the union of the United States of America. Lincoln’s Administration brought the young American nation out of its infancy and into the spring of adolescence. By unifying the nation under similar ideals (that the nation was a single unit that could not be separated and that we were Americans first and then citizens of states), Lincoln established the new American nation. By freeing the slaves and introducing morality into the war, Lincoln allowed himself the chance for victory as well as fulfilling the ideals of the Declaration of Independence, who declared “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”9 The Declaration did not specify differences between free men and slaves. By helping to bring the nation and the Constitution in line with the liberalism expounded in the Declaration, Lincoln can be said to have re-invigorated American liberalism as well. Therefore, Lincoln’s greatness rests not upon his Emancipation proclamation, or among his winning the war. Instead, the importance of Lincoln lies in his ability to allow the nation to mature and to grow under his Presidency into roughly the same contiguous nation that exists to this date. Abraham Lincoln, then, can truly be called a great leader and President.

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9 Declaration of Independence. 4 July 1776.
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