“Had Mr. Lincoln lived”: Alternate Histories, Reconstruction, Race, and Memory

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In reflecting on the legacy of the American Civil War, Robert Penn Warren observed that the war “is our only ‘felt’ history—history lived in the national imagination.” The problem, as Warren noted and historians have further explored, is that Americans have never felt the same way about the war. One of the earliest and most enduring aspects of the Civil War’s legacy centers on a question related not to what happened but rather to what might have happened. In his book History That Never Happened, Alexander Demandt argues that “our picture of history will remain incomplete if it is not brought into the framework of unrealized possibilities.” For Demandt, these historical possibilities exist in the “space between the unimaginable and the actual.” While Demandt believes that historians should construct counterfactual or alternate histories to help complete our picture of the past, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln has led not only historians but also politicians, newspaper editors, Civil War veterans, novelists, and those who knew Lincoln personally to imagine a variety of unrealized possibilities ever since that horrible event took place. In the immediate wake of the assassination and the years that followed, the question many have posed is, How would things have turned out if Lincoln had lived to complete his second term as president?

Imagining what might have happened is natural. Social psychologists who study why people engage in counterfactual thinking have concluded that “people evaluate many life events not simply by the reality of what comes to pass but also by thoughts of what might have been.” Counterfactual thinking can therefore serve a variety

of functions. Those who are dissatisfied with a particular situation might engage in counterfactual thinking as a way of “undoing” the outcome. Research indicates that speculating about what might have been gives people a greater feeling of control and a way of coping with traumatic or otherwise negative events. Some historians, such as John Lewis Gaddis, have suggested that counterfactual thinking can also be a means to help explain causality. Occurring at the end of a very costly civil war in which 2 percent of the population perished, Lincoln’s assassination was a traumatic event that profoundly affected many Americans. The bitter contest over Reconstruction that followed left both white southerners and African Americans deeply unsatisfied with the results and wondering how the outcome could have been altered. As President Rutherford B. Hayes withdrew military support from the two remaining Republican governments in the South, the role that Lincoln could have or would have played in determining the course of Reconstruction continued to quicken imaginations.2

Given the highly contested nature of these issues and their ongoing relevance, it is perhaps not surprising that there has been so much speculation on how Reconstruction would have unfolded if Lincoln had not been assassinated. While many have wondered what might have been if Lincoln had lived, no systematic examination of these counterfactual musings has previously been undertaken. As a recent analysis of alternate histories of World War II demonstrates, an examination of counterfactual narratives reveals a great deal about the evolving nature of historical memory. Analyzing how people have speculated on what might have been if Lincoln had lived offers valuable insight regarding the contest over the meaning of the Civil War, the acrimonious disputes over Reconstruction, Lincoln’s place in collective memory, and the interplay between history and memory. Counterfactual narratives of Lincoln living to fulfill his purported vision of a just and lasting peace exercised such a powerful allure that they became a vital component of Lincoln’s legacy and demonstrate the extent to which imagined memories of Reconstruction became firmly entrenched in historical narratives of Reconstruction. By the early twentieth century, the distinction between what happened and

what might have been was often distorted, as counterfactual history became intertwined with contested narratives of Reconstruction.³

Considering the profound differences between Jefferson Davis and Frederick Douglass on numerous fundamental issues, it is difficult to imagine that they had anything in common. Nevertheless, they agreed that Lincoln’s untimely death was a great tragedy. It is not surprising, however, that each man had a different reason for reaching the same conclusion, and their views exemplify the central competing counterfactual narratives of what would have happened if Lincoln had lived. In an 1884 interview, Davis was asked his opinion of Lincoln. Though he characterized Lincoln as a “vulgar joker,” Davis also admitted that Lincoln was a “great” and “wise” man. After a lengthy pause, during which he appeared to be in “deep meditation,” Davis conceded that Lincoln’s assassination was a “great misfortune to the South” because he had understood the region and “would have been of more benefit to her than any other man could possibly have been.”⁴

It did not take Douglass two decades to appreciate the enormity of the country’s loss. Shortly after Lincoln’s death, Douglass began composing a speech on the impact of the assassination. Lincoln, in Douglass’s view, was the first president who “rose above the prejudice of his times.” Douglass believed Lincoln’s views on race had progressed to such an extent that he was both the white man’s and the black man’s president. If Lincoln were alive, Douglass speculated, he would support equal suffrage for African Americans and be on the side of those Republicans in Congress who favored “justice for the oppressed.” Unlike his successor, Andrew Johnson, Lincoln would not have allowed former rebels to retain political power and essentially reconstruct themselves without any influence from the federal government. For these reasons, Douglass concluded Lincoln’s death was “an unspeakable calamity.” Thus, two principal counterfactual narratives emerged. Douglass and proponents of racial equality saw in Lincoln a champion for their cause who would have supported civil rights for former slaves, while Davis and a number of other white people in both the South and the North imagined Lincoln would have made peaceful reunion between the sections his priority and thereby spared

³. Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, The World Hitler Never Made (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). While Merrill Peterson discusses some conflicting opinions during Reconstruction regarding the policy Lincoln would have pursued, he neither analyzes these counterfactual speculations nor makes a connection between them and the shaping of Lincoln’s legacy beyond the 1860s. See Peterson, Lincoln in American Memory (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 38–45.
⁴. “A Talk with Jeff. Davis,” Lynchburg Virginian, May 9, 1884.
the South from the alleged horrors of so-called Radical Reconstruction.5

Frustrated with President Andrew Johnson’s lenient policies toward the defeated rebels, Douglass was convinced that, rather than fulfill Lincoln’s intentions, Johnson’s plan for Reconstruction undermined much of what Lincoln had accomplished. As the conflict over Reconstruction between Johnson and congressional Republicans intensified, the question of what Lincoln would do if he were alive became the subject of much speculation. Clearly, it was imperative to have Lincoln on one’s side in this contentious debate. In addition to Douglass, others claimed to have intimate knowledge of Lincoln and offered their views on the course Reconstruction would have taken had he lived.

Ward Hill Lamon, a former legal associate and friend of Lincoln, had served as U.S. marshal for the District of Columbia during Lincoln’s presidency. Lamon’s actions as marshal were often a source of embarrassment to Lincoln, yet in a public letter to President Johnson, Lamon asserted he had known Lincoln “as well as one man can be known to another.” It was Lamon’s firm belief that, if Lincoln were alive, he would oppose the schemes of Radical Republicans in Congress and restore the rebellious states to the Union as quickly as possible. Either ignorant or conveniently forgetful that Lincoln had signed the bill that created the Freedmen’s Bureau, Lamon claimed Lincoln would have approved Johnson’s veto of the bill to extend the life of the Bureau. In Lamon’s opinion, it was a “foul slander upon his [Lincoln’s] memory” to suggest otherwise.

Lincoln’s cousin Dennis Hanks was another close acquaintance who weighed in on what Lincoln would have done if he had not been assassinated. Hanks had known Lincoln since he was a boy and claimed to have taught young Lincoln to read. In an open letter to President

5. Frederick Douglass’s “The Assassination and Its Lessons” exists in a variety of states. For a newspaper account, see “Fred Douglass on Assassination and Its Lessons,” Milwaukee Daily Sentinel, March 23, 1866. The editors of The Frederick Douglass Papers chose to include a version that Douglass delivered in Washington on February 13, 1866. See John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, eds., The Frederick Douglass Papers, ser.1, vol. 4 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 106–18. See also two drafts of Douglass’s speech that are in The Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress. It is believed that one draft was composed in June 1865 and the other in December. Both drafts are available online at http://lcweb4.loc.gov/ammem/doughtml/doughome.html. Neither draft is included in The Frederick Douglass Papers. Michael Burlingame brought the existence of these drafts to my attention during a conversation several years ago. The drafts have subsequently been analyzed in James Oakes, The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 255–64.
Johnson published in the fall of 1866, Hanks agreed with Lamon’s assessment of his cousin’s intentions regarding Reconstruction. Hanks characterized Lincoln’s presidency as a “continual struggle against the rapacity, the cruelty, and the recklessness of the Radical faction” led by Benjamin Wade and Frederick Douglass. In Hanks’s view, Johnson’s policy was Lincoln’s policy, and if Lincoln had lived, the process of restoring the former rebel states would be speedily completed and the Radicals vanquished. While Lamon and Hanks professed to be motivated solely by a desire to protect Lincoln’s reputation, it seems clear they were both seeking to curry favor with the Johnson administration.6

The Chicago Tribune was certain that Lamon’s motives were base and published an editorial that reminded readers of Lamon’s blunders during his tenure as marshal in Washington. The Tribune concluded that Lamon was nothing more than a “very poor dog with a kind master” who had rewarded him far beyond his merits. Lamon’s letter to Johnson was wildly inaccurate, according to the Tribune, which was convinced Lincoln had favored equal rights for all men. Johnson’s policies were therefore a repudiation of the policy Lincoln would have carried out and Lamon’s letter was nothing more than a “jackal-like, attempt to feed on him after his death.” Indeed, Lamon would later attempt to capitalize on his association with Lincoln by publishing a scurrilous biography.7

Another dissenting view came from Isaac N. Arnold, an Illinois Republican who had served in the U.S. House of Representatives during Lincoln’s presidency. A great admirer of the martyred president, Arnold wrote a biography of Lincoln that was published shortly after the assassination. Arnold’s Lincoln was a man of principle committed to the freedom and equality of African Americans. Echoing Frederick Douglass’s convictions, Arnold characterized Lincoln as “above the prejudice of color.” If Lincoln had lived, Arnold imagined “no humble school house for freedmen’s children would have been burned by mobs of former slaveholders; no churches where colored people assembled to thank God for sending them their great Liberator, Father Abraham, would have been burned by pardoned rebels.” Rather, Arnold was certain Lincoln would not have hesitated to use


federal power, including the military, to protect citizens, regardless of their skin color. In a thinly veiled attack on Johnson and his defenders, Arnold asserted that “those who have broken faith with the negro” should not “insult the memory of Lincoln, by endeavoring to screen such perfidy under his honored name.”

Much of the speculation on what Lincoln would have done if he had lived to finish his second term has focused on his racial views and if he would have supported equal suffrage for African Americans. Frederick Douglass and others who believed Lincoln would have included African American suffrage in his plans for restoring the Union point to a letter Lincoln wrote to Michael Hahn in March 1864. Hahn had just been elected governor of a new, loyal government in Louisiana that Lincoln worked diligently to bring about. In his letter, Lincoln congratulated Hahn on his election and noted that one of the tasks for the upcoming constitutional convention in Louisiana was to determine the qualifications for voting. Lincoln then stated, “I barely suggest for your private consideration, whether some of the colored people may not be let in—as, for instance, the very intelligent, and especially those who have fought gallantly in our ranks. They would probably help, in some trying time to come, to keep the jewel of liberty within the family of freedom. But this is only a suggestion, not to the public, but to you alone.” Although Lincoln had marked the letter as confidential, Hahn showed it to members of the convention. While the convention did not directly enfranchise any African Americans, the new constitution abolished slavery, gave black children access to education, and granted the legislature authority to determine whether black men could vote.

At the urging of Pennsylvania congressman William D. Kelley, Hahn published Lincoln’s letter in June 1865. The publication of the Hahn letter was followed shortly after by the publication of a letter Lincoln allegedly wrote to General James S. Wadsworth, which expressed a similar desire for African American suffrage. The Milwaukee Daily Sentinel editorialized that these letters provided “a very decided indication of the policy which President Lincoln would have pursued if he had lived.” The Chicago Tribune agreed that the Hahn and Wadsworth letters “proved that the extension of the suffrage was a cause dear to

his heart, in advance of any general expression from Republicans in its favor.” When Hahn and Kelley helped form the National Equal Suffrage Association, the preamble of the organization’s constitution paid tribute to the Emancipation Proclamation and asserted, “It is well known that our lamented President Lincoln favored the extension of the privilege to intelligent colored men, and, had he lived, he would doubtless have endeavored to secure its adoption.” Frederick Douglass also cited the Hahn letter as further evidence of Lincoln’s evolving views on racial equality and was persuaded that “[h]ad Mr Lincoln lived, we might have looked for still greater progress. Learning wisdom by war, he would have learned more from Peace.” A statewide convention of African American men was held at Galesburg, Illinois, in the fall of 1866, and the convention’s address to the American people invoked both Lincoln’s memory and the Hahn letter when it asserted, “A voice from the tomb of the martyred Lincoln seems now to reach the national ear, saying, ‘The hour is come in which to enfranchise the colored American people, that they may help you keep the jewel of liberty in the family of freedom.’”

While proponents of equal rights for African Americans appropriated Lincoln’s words and legacy to further their purposes, others disputed Lincoln’s credentials as an advocate for racial equality and doubted he would have supported such a policy. In publishing the Hahn letter, the New Orleans Daily Picayune claimed it contained nothing “in favor of the plan of free negro suffrage.” According to the Daily Picayune’s reading, Lincoln had merely made a suggestion to Hahn and left the final resolution in the hands of state officials. Furthermore, the Picayune pointed to statements that Lincoln had made in his 1858 debates with Stephen A. Douglas as conclusive proof he was against granting equal rights to blacks. In response to a speech by Henry McNeal Turner that advocated political equality for African Americans, the Weekly Georgia Telegraph noted that, while African

Americans like Turner viewed Lincoln as their “illustrious founder and champion,” the fact was Lincoln “never contemplated—much less conceded—the claims to a share in the government of the country now set up by the negroes.” As proof, the Telegraph printed the texts of Lincoln’s August 22, 1862, letter to Horace Greeley and the opening statement from his debate with Douglas at Charleston, Illinois, where he emphatically denied he was in favor of the social and political equality of the races. The Telegraph encouraged readers to clip and save these documents so they could be employed to dispute those who might attempt to enlist Lincoln on the side of racial equality. The Washington Daily National Intelligencer further ridiculed the idea that Lincoln would support the elevation of an “ignorant and degraded race.” The Intelligencer quoted Lincoln’s speech at Charleston and concluded this effectively served as a rebuke from the grave to Radical Republicans who sought to claim him as a supporter of their “revolutionary designs.” If Lincoln had lived, the Intelligencer imagined he “would have been pursued with the same malice and vindictiveness that President Johnson has experienced.”

The Intelligencer’s claim that Lincoln would have faced a bitter conflict with the so-called Radicals in his party has been the subject of much counterfactual speculation, especially from those who have minimized Lincoln’s commitment to racial equality and emphasized the similarities between him and his successor. The New Orleans Times believed Andrew Johnson was merely attempting to carry out Lincoln’s policy of reconstruction and, if Lincoln had lived, “he would have figured in the impeachment trial instead of his successor.” In the years following Johnson’s Senate acquittal, positive comparisons between him and Lincoln continued, which suggest a deeper significance than mere allegiance to Johnson. In the 1870s, former rebel general James Longstreet imagined that if Lincoln had lived to complete his second term, he “would have encountered as great difficulties as President Johnson, and with as little success.”

Gideon Welles, who served in the cabinets of both Lincoln and Johnson as secretary of the Navy, published a series of essays in the Galaxy Magazine during the 1870s, to provide a definitive assessment of how Johnson’s Reconstruction policy compared with what Lincoln


would have done. While Welles was one of Johnson’s most vigorous defenders, he also sought to shape popular memory by establishing a particular image of Lincoln. In Welles’s view, Johnson’s lenient policy toward the defeated rebels was “identical” to what Lincoln had intended. Even though Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton had prepared, at the end of the war, a proposal that included military supervision of the rebel states and the franchise for black men, Welles was convinced that, as a firm supporter of states’ rights who desired sectional reconciliation above all else, Lincoln would not have used federal power to intervene in the South. Both Johnson and Lincoln were committed to upholding the Constitution and white supremacy.

Countering those who shared Frederick Douglass’s view that Lincoln would have pursued racial equality, Welles did not mince words when he asserted that while Lincoln opposed slavery and had reluctantly issued the Emancipation Proclamation, he was adamantly not a “convert to the doctrine of the social and political equality of the races.” In fact, according to Welles, Lincoln never altered his belief that it was most desirable for the races to be separated and would not have coerced states to accept black men as voters. If the Lincoln-Johnson policy had been enacted without Radical Republican interference, the South would not have been subjected to “military domination” and “negro supremacy.”

Others who had worked for Lincoln during the war did not agree with Welles’s assessment that Johnson’s Reconstruction policy was the same as Lincoln’s. William O. Stoddard was one of Lincoln’s White House secretaries until he accepted an 1864 appointment as a U.S. marshal in Arkansas. Following his service, Stoddard published a dual biography of Lincoln and Johnson that contrasted the Reconstruction policies of the two presidents. During a conversation just prior to Stoddard’s departure for Arkansas, Lincoln “urged him to do all in his power to secure for colored men the right to vote.” Stoddard suggested not only that the president thought voting would be the best way for freedmen to protect themselves but also that Lincoln was willing to use “direct and overpowering pressure exercised by the Federal Government” to ensure voting rights were secured. Johnson, on the other hand, “at no time believed that the right of suffrage justly belonged or should in wisdom be given to the colored men.” For this

reason, Stoddard concluded that Johnson’s administration was not “in any degree a continuation of that of Abraham Lincoln.” Stoddard later repeated this story in his published memoir of his time at the Lincoln White House, but he added some details that were becoming vital components of Lincoln’s legacy and heavily influenced how many people imagined what the sixteenth president would have done if he had lived longer. Stoddard recalled that, in addition to urging him to help secure voting rights for freedmen, Lincoln also looked forward to a day not long after the war ended when all troops would be withdrawn from the South. In Stoddard’s view, Lincoln’s eagerness to withdraw the troops made him a great friend to the southern people. Many notable white southerners reiterated this trope of Lincoln as friend of the South, yet unlike Stoddard’s reminiscence, they denied Lincoln would have supported voting rights for African Americans.14

The publication of Stoddard’s memoir coincided with the appearance of a monumental ten-volume life and times of Lincoln by his other White House secretaries, John G. Nicolay and John Hay. Due to their intimate knowledge of Lincoln and the exclusive access Robert Lincoln had given to his father’s papers, Nicolay and Hay’s Abraham Lincoln: A History had an aura of authority. Nicolay and Hay admired the man they had faithfully served, and they believed Lincoln’s intentions regarding Reconstruction were best expressed in what turned out to be his final public speech, on April 11, 1865. In this address, Lincoln urged recognition of the newly restored loyal government in Louisiana and indicated his desire to have at least some black men vote, namely military veterans and those who were “very intelligent.” Lincoln was assassinated just days after making this speech, and Nicolay and Hay noted that, as a consequence, “the subject and experiment of reconstruction were resumed and carried on under widely different conditions and influences, which it is not the province of this work to bring into comment or comparison.” While Nicolay and Hay were not interested in passing judgment on the Reconstruction policies of Lincoln’s successors, they did believe that Lincoln would have “combined justice to the blacks and generosity to the whites of the South with union and liberty for the whole country.” For Nicolay and Hay, as well as Stoddard, Lincoln was a transcendent figure who

rose above party, section, and race, and possessed the statesmanship and moral fortitude to unite the nation and treat all its citizens fairly.\textsuperscript{15}

While Lincoln’s former secretaries hoped the collective memory of the Great Emancipator would inspire both national unity and justice, the bitterness and frustration over Reconstruction created such strong dissatisfaction that many preferred to imagine how Lincoln’s character and political skill would have enabled him to succeed where others had failed. Before being commissioned as a general in the Civil War, Carl Schurz had served as Lincoln’s minister to Spain. During the summer of 1865, Schurz made a fact-finding tour of the South at the behest of President Johnson. It soon became apparent to Schurz that Johnson’s leniency was emboldening southern planters to minimize the impact of emancipation. Schurz was especially chagrined when Johnson ignored his advice and that of the commanding general in Mississippi by allowing Governor William Sharkey to form a state militia for the purpose of maintaining white supremacy and a semblance of slavery. Given his personal acquaintance with both Lincoln and Johnson, Schurz concluded in his memoirs that if Lincoln had lived, he would not have “abandon[ed] those freedmen to the mercies of the master class.” For Schurz, it was nothing less than a “perversion of historic truth” to view Johnson’s reconstruction policy as a continuation of Lincoln’s.\textsuperscript{16}

Edward McPherson, a former Republican congressman and clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives, shared Schurz’s belief that Johnson’s handling of Mississippi was emblematic of a disastrous reconstruction policy that Lincoln would have avoided. In his Political History of the United States of America during the Period of Reconstruction, McPherson published a letter that President Johnson had sent to Governor Sharkey in August 1865, which urged the extension of voting rights to only those African American men who either owned substantial property or were literate. Johnson believed this policy would effectively undermine Republican efforts to grant voting rights to all southern black men. As Johnson stated to Sharkey, the proposal would “completely disarm the adversary” by thwarting those “who are wild upon negro franchise.” As a footnote to the Sharkey document, McPherson published Lincoln’s letter to Governor Hahn. Clearly, McPherson shared Schurz’s convictions and wanted readers


to further comprehend the implications of Lincoln’s death by highlighting the substantial difference between the two presidents on the issue of African American suffrage.\textsuperscript{17}

While Schurz and McPherson believed Lincoln’s commitment to civil rights for African Americans would have necessitated a firm hand in dealing with white southerners, others imagined a restoration of national unity largely devoid of conflict and acrimony. On the tenth anniversary of the assassination, the \textit{Hartford Courant} averred that Johnson had attempted to carry out Lincoln’s “forgiving” plan for restoring the Union but was unsuccessful because he became consumed with his own personal ambition. Lincoln’s death was therefore a greater blow to the South than it was to the North. If Lincoln had lived, the \textit{Courant} imagined, his “great good sense and his utter lack of selfish motives” would have resulted in national harmony. When President Hayes decided to withdraw military support from the two remaining Republican-controlled Southern states in 1877, some hailed this return to “Home Rule” in the South as a policy that finally accorded with Lincoln’s. In a speech at Cincinnati that launched a southern tour to promote his policy, President Hayes claimed his decision to withdraw the troops was in “fulfillment of his [Lincoln’s] aspirations.” In praising the withdrawal of troops, a West Virginia newspaper claimed Hayes’s policy was indeed Lincoln’s policy and if Lincoln had lived, his “statesmanlike conciliation” would have succeeded in securing white southern support for the Republican Party. The \textit{Christian Union} editorialized that Hayes was finally putting the country back on the course first plotted by Lincoln. According to the \textit{Christian Union}, Radicals such as Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner had made a grave error by creating a “Negro party” in the South and coercing white citizens to accept black suffrage. Unlike the Radicals, Lincoln possessed the wisdom to realize peaceful cooperation was the best method of reuniting the country. Lincoln would not have used “Federal bayonets” to force black suffrage on the defeated rebels and instead would have trusted white southerners to gradually accept former slaves as their political equals. The \textit{Christian Union} was confident that such faith in human nature would be rewarded.\textsuperscript{18}


The hopes of President Hayes and predictions of southern racial harmony soon proved naively optimistic when terrorism effectively suppressed much of the African American vote in subsequent elections. While many viewed Hayes’s withdrawal of military support from Republican governments in the South as the end of Reconstruction, disputes over the relationship between the national government and former rebel states continued. The unrealized possibilities of what Lincoln would have done had he lived continued to excite imaginations and played an important role in these debates. When Francis Carpenter’s painting of Lincoln’s first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation was presented to Congress on Lincoln’s birthday in 1878, the infirm former rebel vice president, Alexander Stephens, delivered some well-received remarks on the occasion. No stranger to postwar revisionism, Stephens preferred not to dwell on the recent past of Reconstruction and instead took the opportunity to appeal for national unity and sectional reconciliation. Though Stephens admitted slavery was “the leading cause” of the war, he claimed Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation as a war measure and not out of any humanitarian concern for the enslaved. Stephens also pointed out that the Thirteenth Amendment, not the Emancipation Proclamation, ultimately secured freedom for all slaves. Furthermore, it was “the former governing white race” in the South that voted to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment before the “upturning” of their society by the Reconstruction Acts. Stephens was clearly hoping to disabuse people of the notion that Lincoln should be remembered as a radical Great Emancipator, and though he did not advocate a return of the peculiar institution, Stephens claimed it “was not an unmitigated evil” and wondered whether freedom would be a “boon or a curse” for former slaves. Referring to Lincoln’s call for “malice toward none,” Stephens imagined Lincoln’s magnanimity would have guided his policy after the war. The assassination was therefore a tragedy for the South that Stephens described as “the spring from which came afterward ‘unnumbered woes.’” Thus, in a clever oratorical maneuver, Stephens both praised Lincoln’s legacy and undermined the revolutionary impact of the Emancipation Proclamation by appropriating Lincoln’s memory as an appeal to end “sectional passions” and racial conflict.19

The argument over Lincoln’s legacy and its meaning for racial and sectional harmony continued the following year, when the U.S. Senate debated whether federal troops should be used at polling places

to ensure fair elections. David Davis had been a close friend, legal associate, and political adviser to Lincoln. He was rewarded with an appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court but later resigned and served as a senator from Illinois. During the debate, Davis asserted, “No man loved Mr. Lincoln better or honors his memory more than I do, nor had any one greater opportunity to learn the constitution of his mind and character and his habits of thought.” On the basis of his intimate knowledge of Lincoln, Davis concluded that, had Lincoln lived, “we would have been spared much of the strife of these latter days.” Regarding the controversy of using troops to supervise elections, Davis had no doubt his friend “would never have willingly intrusted power to any one, unless war was flagrant, to send troops to oversee an election.” A Georgia newspaper praised Davis’s speech and claimed that, had Lincoln lived, “the passions of the war would have been quieted and extinguished many years ago, instead of surviving to this late period.” Republican senator James G. Blaine, however, took issue with Davis’s characterization of Lincoln and claimed that, under Lincoln, “some things might have happened and other things might not have happened.” Nevertheless, Blaine was certain that Davis had “no right, with the record of the great man of these last ten centuries . . . to drag him into the mire of the party to which, in all the mutations of American politics, Abraham Lincoln was opposed to the death.”

Imagining what Lincoln would have done also played a vital part in the 1890 debate over a proposed measure to provide for the appointment of commissioners to observe federal elections. Republican representative Julius C. Burrows of Michigan made a passionate speech for the so-called Lodge Bill in which he detailed how the Republican vote had dramatically decreased in the solidly Democratic South during the preceding decade. This suppression of Republican voters, Burrows argued, made a mockery of republicanism. Burrows concluded that it would have been better to allow the Union to break apart rather than preserve it with a costly civil war only to witness it being undermined by voting fraud in the South. For Burrows, a law that protected the integrity of ballots cast by legal voters was a fulfillment of the principles over which the war was fought and in accordance with the wishes of Lincoln. Burrows closed his remarks by quoting the Gettysburg Address and received loud applause from the Republican side of the aisle.

As part of a successful effort to defeat the Lodge Bill and further discourage such federal meddling, a group of southern congressmen published a collection of essays titled *Why the Solid South? Or, Reconstruction and Its Results*. Dedicated to the businessmen of the North, the essays made clear that the history of Reconstruction demonstrated the folly of “interference in the domestic affairs of certain states.” Alabama congressman Hilary Herbert began his essay with the claim that the “death of Abraham Lincoln was an appalling calamity—especially to the South.” Herbert and other contributors to the volume believed Lincoln would have spared the South from the evils of Radical Reconstruction. Contrary to those who saw Lincoln as a champion of racial equality, Herbert interpreted Lincoln’s letter to Governor Hahn as a clear indication of his belief that suffrage was strictly a state matter. Lincoln therefore never would have permitted Congress to dictate this policy to the states. For Herbert, the “political earthquake” of Reconstruction had “left great fissures, some of which are not yet closed.” Enfranchising African Americans had been a grave error that resulted in “ruin,” and “degradation.” Agitation from outsiders and racial conflict were bad for business, and the essayists directly appealed to what one called the “tender patriot heart of Lincoln” to convince readers that the mistakes of Reconstruction should not be repeated and were certainly not errors Lincoln would have made if he had lived.22

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the counterfactual narrative of Lincoln’s Reconstruction policy expressed in *Why the Solid South?* was becoming commonplace. It is particularly notable that not only white southerners but also northerners were imagining Lincoln as a friend of the South. Such a counterfactual narrative served those seeking to heal the wounds of war and foster unity. Counterfactual history was in essence becoming counterfactual memory, as Lincoln became remembered for not just what he did but what he would have done. The counterfactual memory of Lincoln as friend of the defeated rebels and the possessor of an almost supernatural power to bind the wounds of civil war would prove a valuable means of shaping opinion on the legacy of the war and Reconstruction. Near the anniversary of Lincoln’s assassination in 1895, the *Idaho Statesman* argued Lincoln’s generous vision for reunion made his death “more disastrous” to the South than “all the slaughter and destruction of the war.” On the centennial of Lincoln’s birth in 1909, the *Portland

Oregonian claimed the assassination prevented sectional reconciliation, made race the “foremost element in our politics,” and “subjected the South to dangers from which it took years to obtain deliverance.” A North Dakota newspaper editorialized on the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination that the South “had no better friend than Lincoln,” and if he had lived to complete his second term as president, “the nation would have avoided some costly mistakes,” the most prominent being the “wholesale political enfranchisement of a child-like and unprepared people.”

Willingness on the part of northerners to admit Republican Reconstruction policy had been a tragic error, especially the enfranchisement of black men, contributed a great deal to the growing feelings of reconciliation between North and South. The emerging dominant counterfactual narrative of the role Lincoln would have played dovetailed with this consensus that white southerners had been the real victims of Reconstruction. Lincoln was imagined as a friend of the South who would have treated the defeated rebels with kindness and understanding, and by extension he also would have successfully resisted the Radical Republican plan of vengeance and racial equality. Such a counterfactual memory was useful in attempting to efface memories of Lincoln as an emancipator and place the blame for any contemporary racial problems on misguided Republican Reconstruction policies.

Gathering at reunions, shaking hands, and reflecting on their shared valor as common soldiers who fought and made sacrifices for noble causes were all ways veterans of the Blue and the Gray further contributed to reconciliation between former foes. Veterans also reflected on the unrealized possibilities of Lincoln’s second term and agreed Lincoln was a great man who would have spared the South from the cataclysm of Reconstruction. In 1904 a North Carolina newspaper reported a conversation between two aging Confederate veterans. Though one had been a Whig and the other a disciple of John C. Calhoun, they both looked forward to the “elimination of the negro


from the polling booths” and concurred that the “errors and corruption of the reconstruction era” could have been avoided if Lincoln had lived. While Lincoln and Johnson were of the “same poor white extraction,” Reconstruction under Lincoln would have turned out far better because he did not share Johnson’s prejudice against southerners. Lincoln would have led the nation to a peaceful, harmonious reunion and his loss was so great that one of the veterans concluded his assassination was nothing less than “another Gettysburg to the South.”

Speaking at a Grand Army of the Republic celebration commemorating the centennial of Lincoln’s birth, John W. Frazier, a Pennsylvania Civil War veteran, agreed with the assessment of his former foes from North Carolina and asserted Booth’s bullet “brought more distress, disaster and dishonor upon the South than all the bullets fired by the two million Union soldiers during the entire period of the Civil War.” Instead of a peace influenced by the generous sentiments Lincoln expressed in his Second Inaugural Address, the defeated South was subjected to “degradation” and “social ruin” under corrupt governments aligned with “the lowest and most ignorant, and most brutal negroes.” Frazier imagined if the “great-hearted” Lincoln had lived, his conciliatory policy would have “ripened into full Fraternity” and uplifted the entire nation instead of throwing “the white men of the South prone upon their backs.” He rejoiced that “those frightful ‘Reconstruction’ times” had “forever ended.”

Several former Confederate soldiers expressed similar views in a piece the Chicago Tribune published to help mark the centennial of Lincoln’s birth. After canvassing numerous ex-rebels, the Tribune marveled at how “time brings wonderful changes in the way of sentiment and feeling.” It had been only forty-four years since the war ended, yet the Tribune reported men who had once fought against Lincoln now appreciated his greatness and viewed his untimely death as a tragedy. One Alabama veteran spoke for many when he stated, “All true lovers of our fair southland have long since recognized that the blow of the assassin which deprived Abraham Lincoln of life struck a death blow to our beloved South, and deprived her people of the protecting influence of her best friend.” A veteran who had ridden

26. John W. Frazier, “If Lincoln had Lived” Address delivered by John W. Frazier, of the California Regiment, the 71st of the Pennsylvania Line, before Col. W. L. Curry Post, no. 18, Department of Penna., Grand Army of the Republic, Thursday Evening, February 11, 1909 (1909), 6, 12, 15.
with the notorious Nathan Bedford Forrest also believed Lincoln was “the friend of the South” and if he had lived, “we would not have had the horrors of reconstruction.” A Virginia veteran considered Lincoln to be the equal of George Washington and expressed a desire to see a “fitting monument” erected to honor him. Lincoln had undergone a remarkable transformation from despised enemy to great friend and would-be protector, and the Tribune concluded that only in America could the wounds of a civil war heal so quickly. While the wounds of the war might have been mending, the way in which Frazier and the Confederate veterans remembered Lincoln and imagined what he would have done indicates the wounds of Reconstruction were deep and far from being healed.27

For many white southerners, the deepest of Reconstruction’s wounds was how they had been coerced into accepting former slaves as political equals. By the centennial of Lincoln’s birth, the effort to reverse this revolution was well under way, as former Confederate states systematically disfranchised African American voters, instituted a rigid system of racial segregation, and used lynching to enforce this new social order. While the rebel veterans who offered their views on Lincoln to the Chicago Tribune said very little regarding racial issues, the counterfactual narrative of Lincoln as a true friend of white southerners was embraced and adapted by some of the most unapologetic racists of the era.

While Thomas Dixon is best known for his novel The Clansman, which served in part as the basis for D. W. Griffith’s notorious film The Birth of A Nation, Dixon was an admirer of Lincoln. In his novel The Southerner: A Romance of the Real Lincoln, Dixon depicted Lincoln as a sincere friend of the South whose main objectives for his second term were to “heal the bitterness of the war and remove the negro race from physical contact with the white.” Dixon’s Lincoln realized the folly of the Radical Republican plan for a biracial democracy and instead would have used African American military veterans to dig the Panama Canal and deported the rest of the black population to Africa or some other territory.28

Governor Edwin Warfield of Maryland delivered Lincoln Day addresses to appreciative northern audiences, claiming that, had Lincoln lived, he “would never have sanctioned the indiscriminate

enfranchisement of the negro, nor approved of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments, nor have tolerated the plundering and outrages of the reconstruction period.” Raising an “ignorant, shiftless, inexperienced, dependent race” to a position of political equality was, in Warfield’s opinion, “the greatest political blunder in the history of the world,” and Lincoln would have not have allowed it. In an address entirely devoted to the subject of the reconstruction policy Lincoln would have pursued, southern attorney George G. Battle imagined that, as someone who valued state sovereignty, Lincoln “would not have endeavored to force the Southern States to submit to the rule of slaves totally unfamiliar with the use of the ballot.” Such a wise and humane policy would have “prevented the horrors and the humiliations of reconstruction.”29

Mississippi Senator James K. Vardaman not only joined Governor Warfield and George Battle in deploring the “savage” rule that white southerners had endured during Reconstruction but also had a plan to right past wrongs. In driving corrupt Republicans from power and disfranchising black voters, Vardaman admitted southern states had violated the Fifteenth Amendment, so he reasoned it was in the best interests of all parties concerned, including African Americans, to avoid further “side-stepping” and simply repeal the amendment. Vardaman urged the Senate to approve this measure and made his case by invoking the memory of the “patient, patriotic, loving, forgiving” Lincoln. Quoting at length from Lincoln’s debate with Douglas at Charleston, where Lincoln emphatically denied being in favor of the political and social equality of the races, Vardaman reasoned Lincoln shared his desire for white supremacy and, if he had lived, he would not have supported black suffrage or any other schemes that sought racial equality.30

During a long career in the U.S. House of Representatives and later the Senate, J. Thomas “Cotton Tom” Heflin of Alabama rivaled Vardaman as one of the era’s most vehement advocates of white supremacy. Like Vardaman, Heflin cited Lincoln’s statement at Charleston as evidence the sixteenth president desired the races to be separate and concluded that Lincoln would have endorsed his tireless efforts to segregate streetcars in Washington, D.C. For Heflin, Lincoln’s death

was the “most unfortunate thing that ever happened, not only to the whole country but to the South in particular.” Lincoln, according to Heflin, was a native southerner who understood the South and would have done more in one year to quell “the bitterness and prejudice born of war” than was accomplished in the thirty years following his death.31

This increasingly dominant counterfactual narrative of Lincoln as a friend of white Southerners who would have saved the nation from the alleged catastrophe of Reconstruction was met with resistance from African Americans and their white allies, who argued disfranchisement and segregation were policies Lincoln would have opposed. The Baltimore Afro-American condemned the disfranchisement of black voters as an effort to undo Lincoln’s work, while an African American orator celebrated Lincoln’s birthday in 1906 by noting that the descendants of the people whom Lincoln freed would be treated equally under the law if Lincoln’s “ideas were lived up to.”32

Instead of merely speculating on what Lincoln would have done during his second term, some preferred to envision a world in which Lincoln still lived. Commemorating the centennial of Lincoln’s birth, William Pickens imagined that if Lincoln were alive in 1909, he would fully support equal rights. In an address marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, William H. Lewis described Lincoln as such a “living, vital force” that it was almost possible to “see him in the flesh and blood.” Like Pickens, Lewis believed one needed only to consult the Great Emancipator, for he “speaks to us at this hour and furnishes the solution for all our race problems.” In an address at Howard University to observe the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, Albert E. Pillsbury, a white civil rights activist, condemned the way many were minimizing the importance of emancipation to further the “interest of national harmony.” For Pillsbury, this “political perversion of history” paved the way for white supremacists to “justify the new bondage of the oppressed race.” The Chicago Defender denounced Senator Vardaman’s appropriation of Lincoln’s words by pointing to Lincoln’s final public speech advocating limited black suffrage, while the Afro-American cited the Gettysburg Address and lamented that Lincoln’s government “by the people” had been transformed into a government “by the white people.” According to the Afro-American, the “words of the immortal

31. Ibid., 60 Cong., 1 Sess., 2349; Ibid., 70 Cong., 1 Sess., 2882.
“Lincoln” were of such power they could be used to regain the victory that had been lost after Lincoln’s death.\textsuperscript{33}

Despite these efforts, the belief that Reconstruction was a horrific tragedy for white southerners became the dominant interpretation within the American historical profession until after World War II. During the first decade of the twentieth century, Columbia University professor William A. Dunning and his disciples shaped an interpretation of Reconstruction that viewed the era as tragic because Radical Republicans seized control from the heroic Andrew Johnson and foisted inept, dishonest governments on the South. According to the Dunningite interpretation, nefarious carpetbaggers, scalawag traitors, and ignorant African Americans misruled the South until its redemption by white Democrats. Historians also embraced the view of Lincoln as a friend of the South who, if he had lived, would have clashed with Radical Republicans over how the defeated rebels should be treated. In this respect popular memory of an imagined, counterfactual past became historical orthodoxy. Southern historian J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton believed Lincoln’s “tenderness of heart,” his “belief in the natural inferiority of the negro,” and his commitment to democracy and justice would have saved the South from the “dark night of Reconstruction.” One of the twentieth century’s foremost authorities on Lincoln and the Civil War era, University of Illinois history professor James G. Randall contended Lincoln was “molded by Southern influences.” As a consequence, Lincoln understood the South, sympathized with white Southerners, and envisioned a very lenient policy of Reconstruction. Randall concluded that when it came to postwar affairs, Lincoln had more in common with Democrats than he did with the Radicals in his own party and therefore would have opposed the Republican approach to Reconstruction.\textsuperscript{34}

Another prominent Civil War historian, Allan Nevins, believed Lincoln had intended to treat the defeated rebels mercifully so that


fraternal goodwill between North and South could be restored. Unlike the Radicals, Lincoln was not vindictive, and Nevins imagined Lincoln would have opposed any attempt to force former rebels into accepting black people as their equals. In a book-length study of Lincoln’s relationship with the Radical Republicans, T. Harry Williams argued the differences between Lincoln and the “Jacobins” were vast. Lincoln’s generous plan for restoring the rebel states was irreconcilably opposed to the Radicals’ plan that was motivated by vengeance and a desire to force the South to accept black suffrage. According to Williams, the “policy of mercy” died with Lincoln and the Radicals rejoiced when they learned of his assassination. In speculating on what might have been if Lincoln had lived, Lloyd Lewis answered this question in the mid-1930s by claiming Lincoln’s political skill would have thwarted Radical Republican designs and forged an alliance between the South and the West that would have resulted in a “peaceable, friendly Reconstruction” and perhaps even avoided the Great Depression. Lincoln biographer Emanuel Hertz imagined that if Lincoln had lived, he would have healed “the nation’s wounds by charity, by tolerance, by divine forgiveness,” and the result would have been “no deep, generation-long division between the two peoples, North and South.”

W. E. B. Du Bois was among the few historians who challenged the Dunningite interpretation prior to the Second World War. For Du Bois, Dunning and his followers had eschewed historical truth in favor of a propagandized version of Reconstruction that reduced white Southerners to victims and African Americans to rapacious villains. Though Lincoln’s policies at the beginning of the Civil War left much to be desired, Du Bois praised the Emancipation Proclamation, enlistment of black soldiers, and the Hahn letter as evidence Lincoln’s position on race evolved. Given Lincoln’s strong commitment to freedom and his recognition of African American manhood, Du Bois was confident that, had Lincoln lived, he would not have pursued the same policy as Johnson, yet he probably would not have been able to complete the work of emancipation and black citizenship.

Following World War II, as the Civil Rights Movement made progress, a new generation of historians produced works that offered a


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revisionist interpretation of the first Reconstruction that eventually supplanted the Dunningite view. While these revisionist historians agreed the Dunningite interpretation was seriously flawed, there was no consensus on what Lincoln would have done if he had lived. Rather than interpret Reconstruction from the perspective of aggrieved white southerners, revisionists rejected the racist caricature of Reconstruction. Instead, Reconstruction was a tragedy because the federal government ultimately abandoned African Americans and enabled white supremacists to reverse much of the progress that had been achieved. In imagining what Lincoln would have done, revisionist historians naturally placed a great deal of emphasis on his racial attitudes. Like Du Bois, John Hope Franklin perceived a significant contrast between Lincoln and Johnson on the subjects of racial equality and Reconstruction. Kenneth Stampp, on the other hand, was not persuaded that Lincoln’s views on race had dramatically changed since the 1850s and argued Lincoln was more concerned with formulating a lenient Reconstruction policy that would attract former southern Whigs to the Republican Party. In *The Radical Republicans: Lincoln’s Vanguard for Racial Justice*, Hans Trefousse asserted that, contrary to the views of scholars such as T. Harry Williams, Lincoln and the so-called Radicals actually had much more in common than previously assumed. According to Trefousse, Lincoln and the Radicals agreed on fundamental issues such as the necessity of emancipation, and while there were some disagreements over Reconstruction, Lincoln was moving toward the acceptance of black suffrage at the time of his assassination. Given Lincoln’s flexibility and willingness to change, Trefousse believed a compromise between Lincoln and the Radicals was highly likely and the postwar years would have unfolded much differently if Lincoln had lived.37 Several new biographies and specific studies of Lincoln and Reconstruction have been published since the historiographical revolution of the 1960s. While scholars agree Johnson’s Reconstruction policy should not be viewed as simply the policy Lincoln would have pursued, counterfactual speculations on what Lincoln would have done reflect a wide array of possibilities. In a monograph devoted to Lincoln’s Reconstruction efforts in Louisiana, Peyton McCrary determined that, by the end of the war, Lincoln understood “there was nowhere to go but left,” as he realized black suffrage and perhaps military force

would be necessary in the South. In Lincoln and Black Freedom, LaWanda Cox devoted an entire chapter to what Lincoln might have achieved had he lived. According to Cox, Lincoln was committed to fulfilling the promise of equality contained in the Declaration of Independence. Given Lincoln’s ideological convictions and his ability as a statesman, Cox posited Lincoln “might have succeeded in making a policy of basic citizenship rights for blacks” an accomplishment of his second term. Notwithstanding Cox’s belief that Lincoln’s expansive vision of equality included both political rights and economic independence for freed persons, Eric Foner, Brooks Simpson, Michael Fitzgerald, and John C. Rodrigue concluded that, while the Emancipation Proclamation radically transformed the purpose and meaning of the war, Lincoln’s vision of the postwar nation and the place of African Americans in it was more modest. Though Lincoln had come to recognize African Americans as citizens and at least some of them as potential voters, Foner believed Lincoln did not envision Reconstruction as a “sweeping political and social revolution.” If Lincoln had lived, Rodrigue imagined, his Reconstruction program would have “foundered not on race but on economics” because he did not favor widespread confiscation of rebel property or envision a redistribution of wealth to former slaves that would have given them some economic power.38

In the most thorough and detailed analysis of Lincoln and Reconstruction, William C. Harris took issue with those who believed Lincoln either grew or experienced a profound transformation during the war. Instead, Lincoln’s approach to restoring the Union was consistently conservative. Harris could not imagine Lincoln would have acted as Johnson did, yet like Johnson, Lincoln believed the former rebel states should have a great deal of autonomy over the restoration process. For Harris, restoring the Union and maintaining federalism were Lincoln’s priorities and he would have been unwilling to force southern states to accept black suffrage. In his recent multivolume biography of Lincoln, Michael Burlingame portrayed Lincoln as seeking to balance leniency toward the defeated rebels with justice

for African Americans. Burlingame interpreted Lincoln’s final public address on April 11, 1865, as evidence he had moved closer to the Radicals. While it is easy to be dismissive of Lincoln’s advocacy for limited black suffrage, Burlingame noted that, within the context of 1865, supporting even limited voting rights for newly freed slaves was a forward-thinking position that raised the possibility for further advances toward racial equality.39

While historians and Lincoln biographers speculated on what might have been if Lincoln had lived, fiction writers also engaged in the “what if” game by producing works that offer vividly imagined scenarios of how Lincoln’s second term would have unfolded. Like historical interpretations, these efforts to envision what might have been were products of their time and place and reflected the prevalent counterfactual memory of Lincoln as friend to the South. First published in 1930, Milton Waldman’s “If Booth Had Missed Lincoln” has Lincoln commuting Booth’s sentence to confinement in an insane asylum after his derringer misfired on the night on April 14, 1865. Lincoln then proceeds to engage in a bitter dispute with Thaddeus Stevens, Benjamin Wade, and other radicals that unfolds in much the same way as Johnson’s conflict with Republicans did in reality. Congress is able to override Lincoln’s vetoes of bills designed to punish the South, and prior to the midterm elections of 1866, Lincoln undertakes a speaking tour that is depicted as an amalgam of Johnson’s own notorious “swing around the circle” and Woodrow Wilson’s ill-fated 1919 tour to garner public support for the League of Nations. Like Wilson, Lincoln suffers a debilitating stroke near the end of his tour. Poor health leads Lincoln to relinquish the presidency to Johnson, and he spends his remaining days in a small Washington, D.C., home composing bad poetry until his death on March 4, 1867.40

In Arthur Goodman’s 1932 stage play, *If Booth Had Missed: A Drama of the Reconstruction Period*, an African American character, creatively named Sambo, saves Lincoln’s life at Ford’s Theater. Lincoln rewards Sambo with a job at the White House as his personal servant, yet Lincoln is more concerned with reuniting the country than improving the lives of African Americans. The events of Reconstruction proceed much as they actually did under Johnson. Lincoln’s charitable treatment of former rebels conflicts with the villainous radicals who

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impeach him when he attempts to remove Secretary of War Stanton from the cabinet. Following a stirring closing argument in his own defense at his Senate trial, Lincoln is acquitted by one vote but is then assassinated by a vindictive radical editor.41

In Oscar Lewis’s 1951 short story “The Lost Years,” Lincoln survives the assassination attempt and completes his second term, but he leaves office a very unpopular man due to his generous policy toward the defeated South. During an extended visit to California, Lincoln befriends a young girl who is the daughter of a Confederate veteran. Because of her father’s previous affiliation with the Confederacy, Radical Republicans prohibit her from participating in the Fourth of July parade. When Lincoln learns of this exclusion, he attends the parade with the girl and they proceed together in their own float. This small act becomes a major national news story and transforms public opinion regarding Lincoln and sectional reconciliation. Inspired by Lincoln’s action, the country seeks a “return of peace and tranquility” and Lincoln enjoys immense popularity prior to his death in 1869.

Imagining what Lincoln would have done if he had lived has continued to intrigue writers, as the topic has even been the subject of a children’s book and a recent novel featuring Lincoln’s impeachment trial for alleged violations of the Constitution.42

Thinking about what Lincoln would have done if he had lived to complete his second term has been the focus of intense speculation that suggests an ongoing, visceral struggle over unresolved issues from the Civil War. For many, the war’s legacy remained unfulfilled and incomplete as a result of what Hilary Herbert characterized as the “great fissures” left by Reconstruction. Americans have attempted to fill some of these chasms by imagining what would have happened if Lincoln had not been assassinated. Both supporters of the Lost Cause and proponents of racial equality envisioned Lincoln as a would-be savior. This enduring appeal stems from the possibilities raised by his sudden death at the culmination of a destructive civil war and from what David Donald termed Lincoln’s “essential ambiguity.” By the late nineteenth century, Jefferson Davis and other white Southerners were willing to recognize Lincoln’s greatness in exchange for noninterference in their domestic affairs and an acknowledgment that Lincoln was great largely because


he would have spared the South from what Senator Byron Harrison of Mississippi called the “nightmare” of Reconstruction.43

Because many white northerners accepted this counterfactual memory of Lincoln as a friend of the white South, it served as an important conduit to sectional reconciliation. Senator Harrison even indicated he was proud to have voted for the appropriation to fund the Lincoln Memorial in Washington because he believed that the nightmare of Reconstruction could have been avoided if Lincoln had lived during the postwar period. Former president William Howard Taft agreed and informed the segregated audience at the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial that the monument represented “the restoration of brotherly love of the two sections.” Lincoln was a figure that all Americans could revere, yet Taft noted the “Southerner knows that the greatest misfortune in all the trials of that section was the death of Lincoln.”44

Just as the Lincoln Memorial was intended as a symbol of national reunion that avoided direct references to emancipation for fear of raising questions about contemporary racial issues, the dominant counterfactual memory of Lincoln that emerged by the early twentieth century served a similar purpose. What Lincoln would have done became a vital component of popular memory as well as history, for the distinction between what he did and what he would have done was often blurred in a mixture of commemoration, scholarship, and wishful thinking. Reconstruction and its aftermath proved to be a nightmare for African Americans and some dreamed of an alternate reality where Lincoln lived and rescued them from their fate. Imagining what Lincoln would have done has therefore been a way to figuratively alter the past in order to cope with the present and perhaps control the future. Kelly Miller, an African American professor at Howard University, recognized the powerful influence such counterfactual memories could wield. In praising the Emancipation Proclamation as the “the greatest charter of human liberty ever penned by the hand of man,” Miller dismissed speculation regarding what Lincoln would have done if he had lived and asserted: “We know what he did, and that is enough.”45