

Lincoln: The Constitution and the Civil War **Overview of Exhibition Themes**

- 1. The Civil War as a Constitutional Crisis:** In 1861 the issue of slavery precipitated a national crisis framed largely in terms of constitutional issues. The framers of the Constitution had left unanswered some basic questions about the nature of the federal Union they had created: Was the United States truly one nation, or was it a confederacy of sovereign and separate states? How could a country founded on the belief that “all men are created equal” tolerate slavery? In a national crisis, would civil liberties be secure? By 1860, these unresolved questions had become ticking time bombs, ready to explode. Abraham Lincoln’s election as the nation’s first anti-slavery president brought the nation to the brink of war. Lincoln used the tools the Constitution gave him to confront three intertwined issues of the Civil War—the secession of Southern states, slavery and wartime civil liberties.
- 2. Secession:** By the time Lincoln took the constitutional oath of office as president, seven states had already seceded from the Union. Four more soon followed. Southern secessionists believed that they had the right to withdraw their states’ ratification of the Constitution and dissolve their connection to the Union. Northerners, however, rejected this idea of “state sovereignty.” They believed that when the Constitution was ratified, a united people had established an indivisible nation. Lincoln believed that state secession was unconstitutional and undemocratic. At Lincoln’s inauguration, he promised that the government would not attack the South if the Union was not attacked. But he also warned that had taken a solemn oath to “preserve, protect and defend” the Constitution. What Southerners heard that day were not words of moderation but a declaration of war.
- 3. Slavery:** Lincoln is widely acknowledged as one of America’s greatest presidents, but he was a controversial figure in his day and his historical reputation is contested today. Lincoln believed that slavery was immoral, but he shared many of the racial prejudices of his day. His policy preferences about slavery and abolition evolved over time. For much of his political career he favored gradual, compensated abolition of slavery and the colonization of freed slaves in South America or Africa. In the crucible of the Civil War, he came to believe that for the nation to survive, slavery had to end. The signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 served to abolish slavery in the United States.

4. **Civil Liberties:** Lincoln claimed extraordinary powers in order to control the chaos of dissent during the Civil War. He suspended the writ of habeas corpus—the provision in the Constitution that protects citizens against arbitrary arrests. By 1863, thousands of civilians had been detained, mostly suspected draft dodgers and deserters and Confederate sympathizers in the Border States and the South. For these actions, Lincoln was denounced as a tyrant by his political foes. He struggled throughout the war to find the appropriate balance between national security and individual rights.

5. **Legacy:** Lincoln's fight to save the Union transformed the nation and the Constitution. Lincoln's presidency left a legacy of ideals for our nation to live up to—equality, freedom and democracy. The powerful words of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address sought to transmit these ideals into future generations. The exhibition ends by asking visitors whether we as a nation have been faithful to this legacy.