

Lincoln's Last Speech

By Vernon Burton

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On April 11, 1865, just two days after Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant, Lincoln addressed a gathering crowd from the White House balcony.

Lincoln knew that Reconstruction would not confront one single, unified South, but rather “disorganized and discordant elements.” Nevertheless, he hoped and expected that a majority of white southerners would support efforts to reunify the country.

Presidential and Congressional Reconstruction became fighting points in the years ahead, but during this speech, Lincoln discussed the need for cooperation between the executive and legislative branches of the government.

More important, just as Lincoln had done with the Emancipation Proclamation and his answer to Horace Greeley's plea of 20 million, he was once again preparing the nation to accept African American citizenship. Lincoln concluded this speech by telling the gathered crowd to expect a further announcement.

One man in the audience understood perfectly what Lincoln intimated. John Wilkes Booth told his companion, “That means n----- citizenship. Now, by God, I'll put him through. That is the last speech he will ever make.”

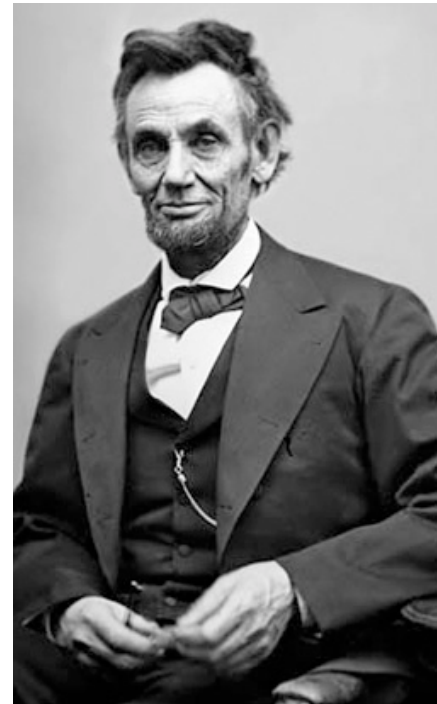


Photo by Alexander Gardner
February 5, 1865