

1. Why do you think the film opens with the themes of the Gettysburg Address?

Movie Analysis Questions

2. What obstacles does Lincoln face in passing an amendment to end slavery? How does his cabinet feel on the issue? How does Mary Todd offer counsel?

3. Who are the “Radical Republicans” and why do they distrust Lincoln? What do they want?

4. Why are Secretary Seward’s lobbyists having difficulty gaining support for the amendment?

5. Why are Democrats so oppossed to abolition? What rhetoric do they use in the film?

6. How does the film depict 19th century politics? How is it similar or different to today’s politics?

7. How does Lincoln respond to Petersburg? What does his discussion with Ulysses Grant entail?

8. Does Lincoln’s death connect with the 13th Amendment? What does Lincoln’s speech at the end of the movie advocate?

9. How is Lincoln portrayed in the film? How might it be different from how Lincoln is typically presented in popular culture?

10. What is your general opinion of the movie? Did you discover anything inaccurate or surprising?


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Accompanying primary sources:

*On January 13, 1865, Congressman Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, a radical Republican who was born in Danville, Vermont and who was one of the most powerful men in Congress, spoke in support of the amendment. He answered those Congressmen who asserted—sincerely or not—that the proposed amendment would be unconstitutional:*

“. . . When fifteen years ago, I was honored with a seat in this body, it was dangerous to talk against this institution [slavery], a danger which gentlemen now here will never be able to appreciate . . .

“Mr. Speaker, while I thus denounced it and uttered my sentiments in favor of universal freedom everywhere, I found in the Constitution of my country what I construed, whatever others may think, as a prohibition from touching slavery where it existed; and through all my course I recognized and bowed to a provision in that Constitution which I always regarded as its only blot. . . .

“. . . Ingenious gentlemen argue, and many honest men will delude their consciences in voting, in favor of still sustaining the institution [of slavery] on the ground that the Constitution does not allow an amendment on this point. They go on the ground that the subject of slavery has not been entrusted to us by the States, and that therefore it is reserved. Now, as the Constitution stands, that is true. But we are not now inquiring whether we have jurisdiction over slavery. We are inquiring whether the States have granted to us the power of amendment. This is the subject—not the subject of slavery, not the subject of religion, not the subject of anything else—but, have the States yielded to Congress the right to amend? If they have, then the whole question is answered. Not only have they granted that power, but wherever they intended to except anything from the power of amendment, they have said so.

“. . . I will be satisfied if my epitaph shall be written thus: ‘Here lies one who never rose to any eminence, and who only courted the low ambition to have it said that he had striven to ameliorate the condition of the poor, the lowly, the downtrodden of every race and language and color.”

*On March 4, 1865, only 41 days before his assassination, President Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office for the second time. Lincoln's second inaugural address previewed his plans for healing a once-divided nation. The speech is engraved on the north interior wall of the Lincoln Memorial.*

"Fellow countrymen: at this second appearing to take the oath of the presidential office there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then a statement somewhat in detail of a course to be pursued seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the attention and engrosses the energies of the nation little that is new could be presented. The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends is as well known to the public as to myself and it is I trust reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

"On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it ~ all sought to avert it. While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place devoted altogether to saving the Union without war insurgent agents were in the city seeking to destroy it without war ~ seeking to dissolve the Union and divide effects by negotiation. Both parties deprecated war but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came.

"One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves not distributed generally over the union but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. 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 while the government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it. Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered ~ that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses for it must needs be that offenses come but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which in the providence of God must needs come but which having continued through His appointed time He now wills to remove and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him. Fondly do we hope ~ fervently do we pray ~ that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword as was said three thousand years ago so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'

"With malice toward none with charity for all with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right let us strive on to finish the work we are in to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan ~ to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."