



President Abraham Lincoln and Humor

Abraham Lincoln was a successful lawyer for the railroads, a detail that is often left out of the history of our 16th president. *Honest Abe* or *rail splitter* are terms we most use today in classrooms when we talk of this president's history.

John Wilkes Booth changed the popular image of President Lincoln. Before Abraham Lincoln became president, he would move around the country collecting stories, many that were too off-color for mixed company. He was a popular speaker at the boarding lodges.

President Lincoln's humor was never just to tell a dirty joke. He told the story to make a point, to deflate, or to make a parable. He had a quick wit and could be self-deprecating. For example, when an individual yelled out during a speech that Lincoln was two-faced, Lincoln replied that if he had two faces, "do you think I would wear this one?"

Many of the anti-Lincoln cartoons of the time referred to Lincoln's dirty jokes and storytelling. Lincoln would often begin with "That reminds me of a story..." The English magazine *Punch* called Lincoln the National Joker. Carl Sandburg used many of the cartoons from *Punch* in his fourth volume of his six-volume history of Lincoln. Stephen Douglas said that he did not worry about debating Lincoln on the facts. However, it was when Lincoln began telling a story that he felt nervous.

The Democratic Party inserted into every campaign something about candidate Lincoln's dirty jokes. Even after he was president, the Democratic Party spread rumors about President Lincoln singing dirty songs on the tour of the Antietam battlefield. Cartoons of Lincoln as an ape or sitting up in a tree were very common. The false rumors and attacks on President Lincoln stopped with his assassination. His popularity went global.

When President Theodore Roosevelt was visiting with a nomadic tribe with a chief present, he was introduced as the recent president of the United States. The chief was unimpressed. Then he was told, "The land of Lincoln," and the chief's face lit up with the mention of President Lincoln, who freed the slaves.

Today, President Lincoln is known for his Gettysburg Address and leading the nation through the Civil War with the emancipation and freedom of the slaves in North America. Little is mention of his earthy jokes and his unpresidential behavior that were a constant attack on his character before his death.

President Lincoln was a student of the United States Constitution and our history. The Gettysburg Address connected the Declaration of Independence to the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, changing the country from a group of states into a nation. The jokes and stories had a purpose that allowed a gifted leader to guide the nation during a time of crisis.

Two books that will give details of President Lincoln's fabled sense of humor:

Lincoln's Sense Of Humor, Richard Carwardine, 2017

Abe Lincoln's Legacy of Laughter, Paul M. Zall, ed., 2007

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