

Hist. 75200 - Abraham Lincoln and His Era

GC: Wednesdays, 2-4 pm, 3 credits, Prof. David Reynolds

This course explores the historical and cultural contexts of Abraham Lincoln, who is widely recognized as America's greatest president and its central historical figure. Lincoln provides a unique inroad into understanding the United States, since he led the nation at the time of its greatest crisis and he absorbed social and cultural phenomena that had defined the nation from its inception. In Ralph Waldo Emerson's words, "He is the true history of the American people in his time..., the true representative of this continent..., [with] the pulse of twenty millions throbbing in his heart, the thought of their minds articulated by his tongue." We shall consider Lincoln as politician, commander in chief, orator, and popular icon. We will read a broad array of his writings—speeches, debates, poems, letters—as well as contemporary observations of him by a variety of figures, including Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Karl Marx, and Victor Hugo. We will delve into the controversy over slavery waged by abolitionists, proslavery southerners, ethnographic scientists, and politicians and clergymen on both sides. Examining Lincoln and his contexts is an instructive exercise in cultural history, since he responded to a range of cultural currents and inspired revelatory commentary by an array of authors. The course also considers the perspectives of recent commentators on the Civil War era.