Coronet
Endless Variety in Stories and Pictures
February, 1945
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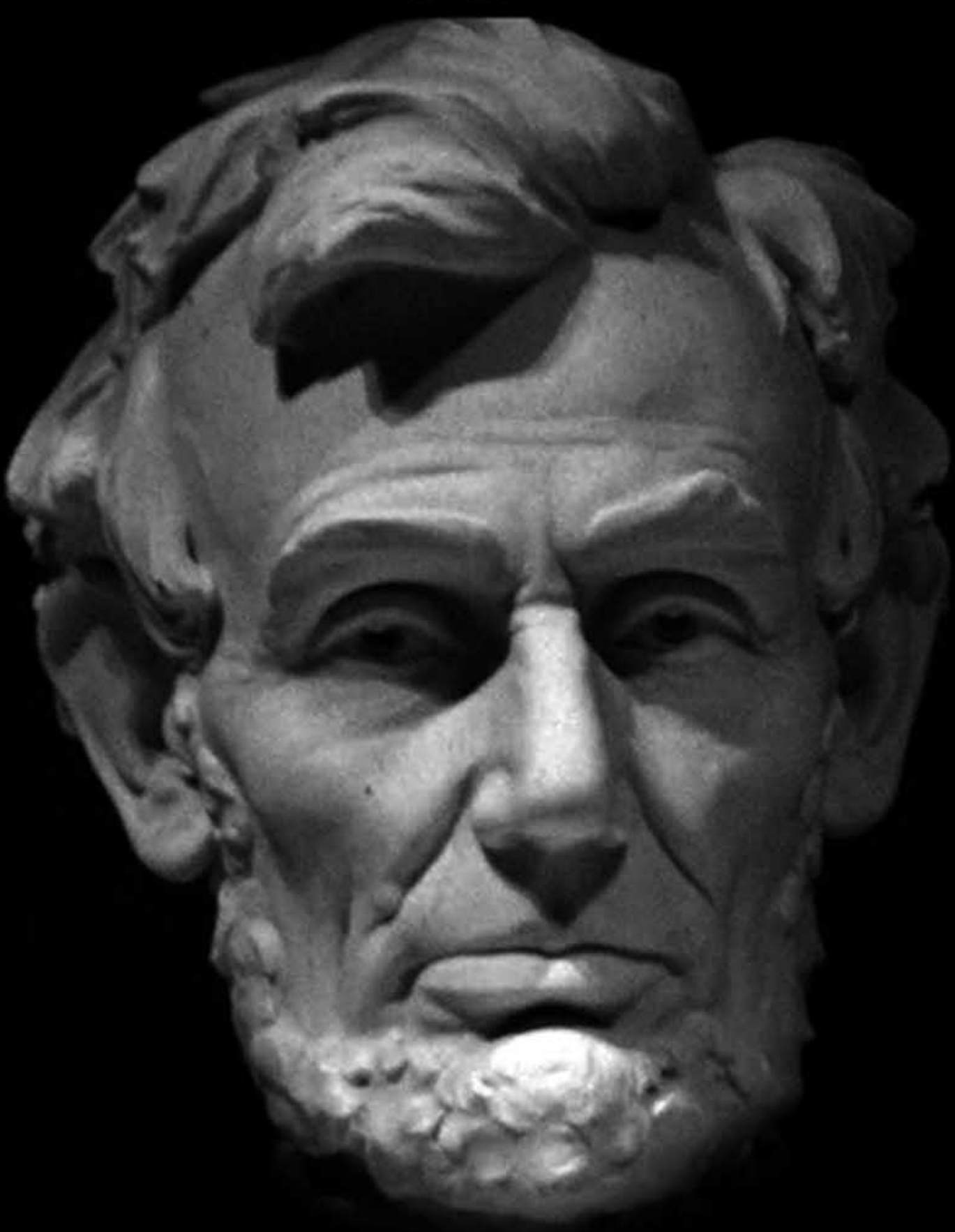

The History of a Face

by STEFAN LORANT

LINCOLN LIKED to quote the ditty: "Mortal man, with face of clay, Here to-morrow, gone to-day." Was he thinking of himself? Was he the mortal man with face of clay? If so, he possessed the most eloquent, the most sensitive, the most expressive face in the world.

"He had a face he could manipulate," wrote Carl Sandburg, his great biographer, "with take-off and put-on of look and tone, shadings in a gamut of the comedy of life. He was a practiced actor and an individual artist in the use of his face, when the going was good, and the time and company proper."

His face was like a mirror. It pictured the sadness of his soul. In the furrows and lines, in the wrinkled brow, in the light and shadow playing on muscle and bone structure, is reflected the story of his life. It is engraved there for everyone to see: the railsplitter of the prairie, the captain of the Black Hawk War, the melancholic lover of Ann Rutledge, the shrewd lawyer of Duff Armstrong, the challenger of Douglas, the contender for the highest office in the land, the leader of the nation in the darkest and most critical days in the Union's history. There in the face are written immortal words for everyone to read, sentences spoken on a cold morning at Gettysburg:

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"That we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom . . ."

1846

The Young Congressman

THE WAR against Mexico was in full swing; Fremont had already moved into California; Kearney had marched through New Mexico; President Polk, dissatisfied with General Zachary Taylor's conduct of the war, had appointed General Scott as Commander-in-Chief.

It was at about this time that this daguerreotype, the first photographic likeness of Lincoln, was taken.

Married four years, father of two boys, Lincoln was 37 years old. He had been elected Illinois Representative to the 30th Congress. Soon he was to leave Springfield and take his seat in Washington. But before he left he visited the studio of a daguerreotypist. The art of photography was still young—Daguerre had revealed his new invention to the French Academy only seven years before. Lincoln watched the picture-taking proceedings with a sad face. His son, Robert, remarked later: "When any attempt was made to photograph father he lapsed into his melancholy mood."

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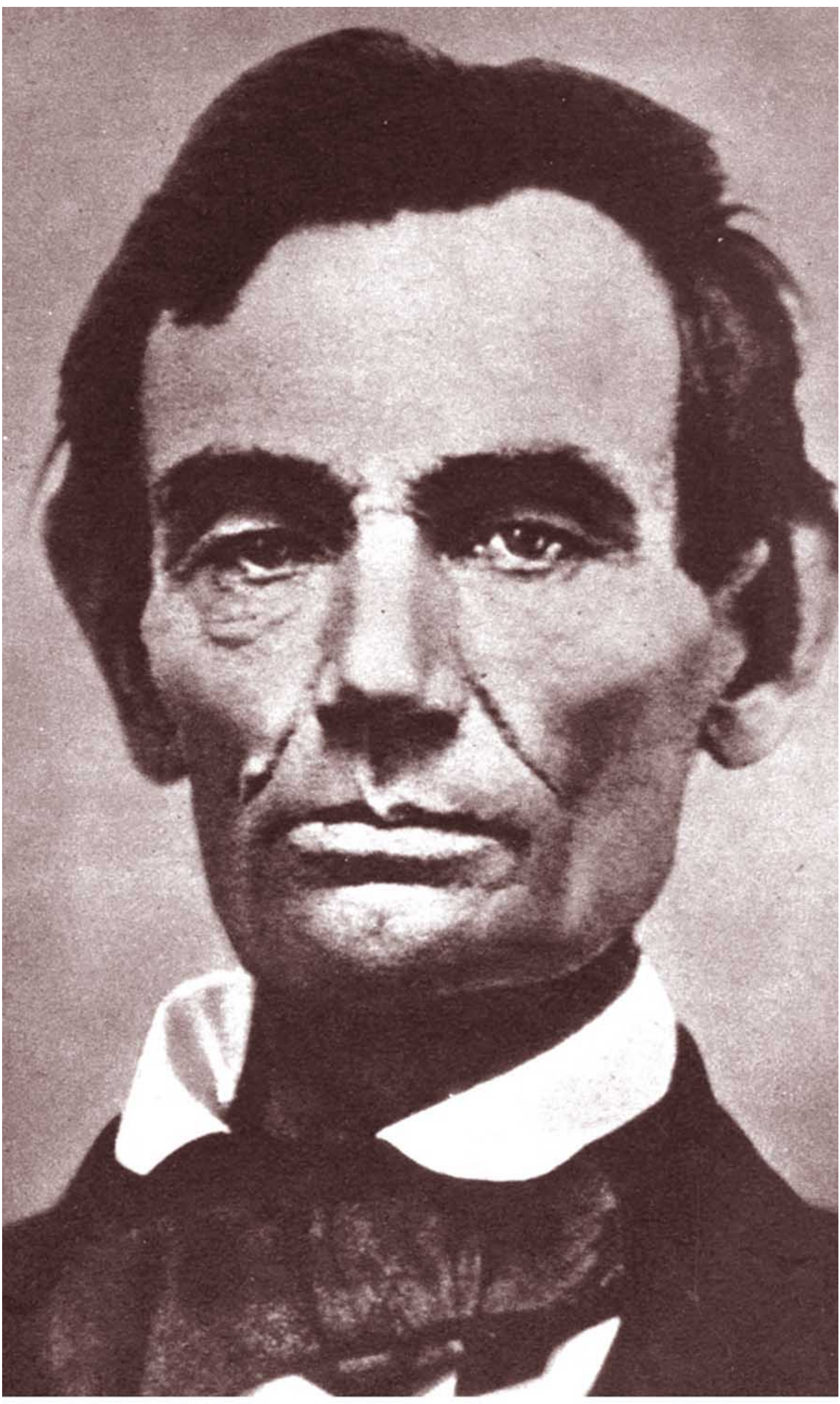

August, 1858

House Divided Against Itself

IN 1858 THE four-year-old Republican Party chose Lincoln to fight Stephen A. Douglas for the Senatorship of Illinois. When Lincoln accepted the nomination he reminded his listeners: "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved. I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other."

During the campaign he challenged Douglas to a series of political debates. In the second of the seven debates, at Freeport, he forced Douglas to the admission that despite the Dred Scott decision, slavery could be excluded from the new territories. Lincoln was unable to win the Senatorial seat, but the debates made his name known throughout the country.

David R. Locke, who under the pen name of Patroleum Vesuvius Nasby was America's best known humorist, met Lincoln about this time.

He wrote: "I never saw a more thoughtful face. I never saw a more dignified face. I never saw so sad a face."

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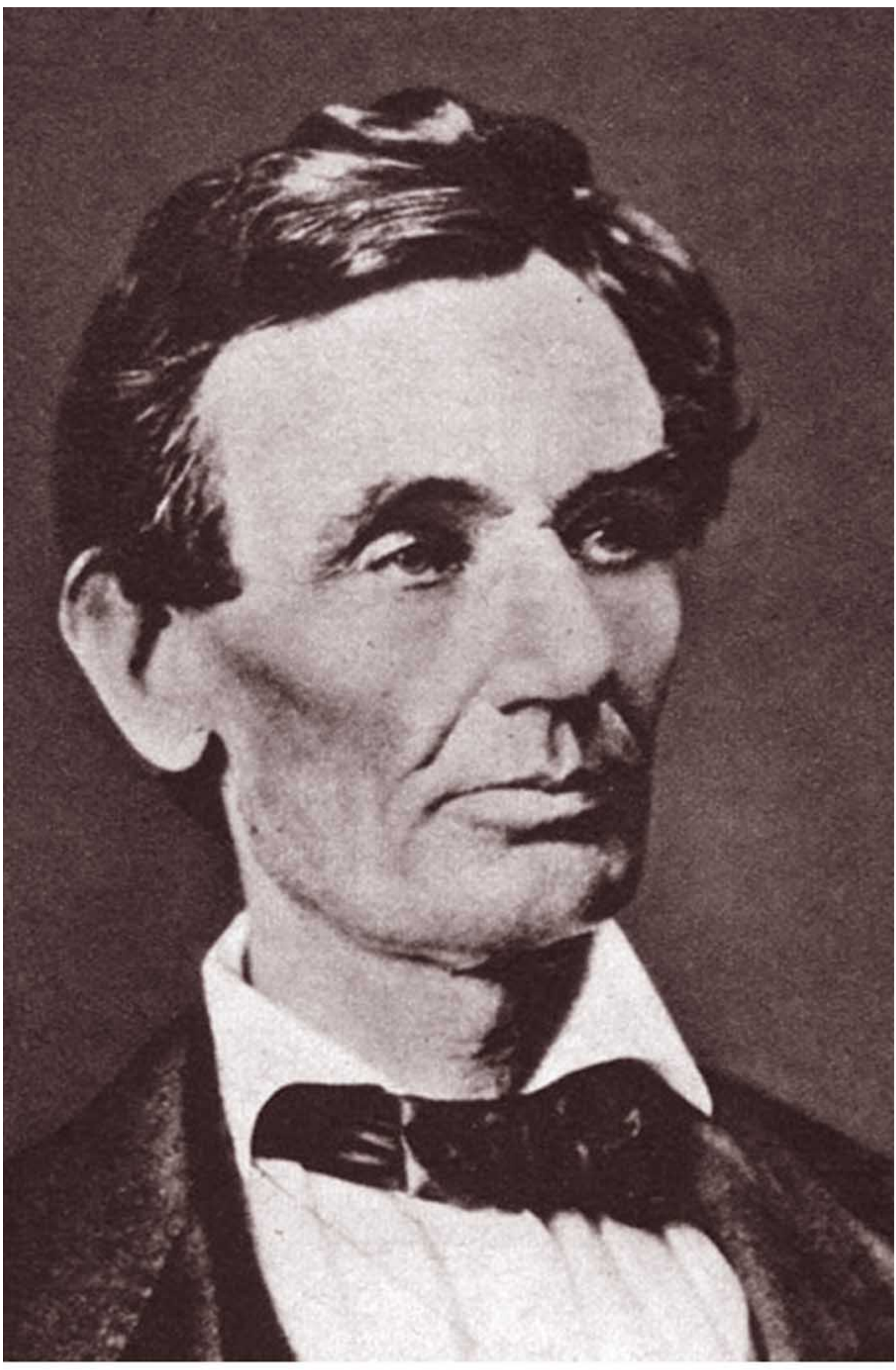

May, 1860

The Republican Candidate

AFTER LINCOLN was nominated by the Republicans in the Chicago Wigwam, the campaign committee was desperate for a good portrait of their candidate. Douglas' photographs showed the Democratic nominee to be a handsome man.

How could a picture of the homely Lincoln, the "long-armed baboon," "the half alligator and half horse," beat him?

An assignment to "do his best" with Lincoln's face was given to the Chicago photographer Alexander Hesler. Hesler wrote to Lincoln and asked him to come to Chicago for the sitting. Lincoln replied that he did not want to leave home during the campaign—but promised that if Hesler would come to Springfield he would get "dressed up." So Hesler traveled to Springfield and on June 3, 1860, took this picture.

At about this time Lincoln sent a short description of himself to be used in a campaign biography. "I am in height six feet four inches, nearly," he wrote, "lean in flesh, weighing, on an average, one hundred and eighty pounds; dark complexion, with coarse black hair and grey eyes."

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November, 1860

The President Elect

HOMELY AS HE considered himself to be, Lincoln was astute enough to take political advantage of his handicap. "Nobody has ever expected me to be President," he said to an Illinois crowd. "In my poor lean, lank face nobody has ever seen that any cabbages were sprouting out." This was part of a charge against his opponent's backers who "have seen in his [Douglas'] round, jolly fruitful face, post-offices, land-offices, marshalships and cabinet-appointments, etc., bursting out in wonderful exuberance, ready to be laid hold of by their greedy hands."

Lincoln was soon thereafter to sprout another kind of "cabbage."

On October 15th with election day not far off, a little girl from Westfield, New York, wrote Lincoln: "All the ladies like whiskers and they would tease their husbands to vote for you and then you would be President." Lincoln demurred in reply that having never worn any, they would be an "affection" now. But not long after his election he was seen with a beard. The whiskers grew fast. By the end of the month they were long enough to allow this picture, the first of him with a beard, to be taken.

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May, 1861

Storm Over the Land

A LITTLE MORE than a month had passed since his inauguration. The differences of North and South could no longer be settled by peaceful means. Fort Sumter had been fired on. The President had already asked for 75,000 volunteers, and now, in May, he was asking for 500,000 more men to fight for the preservation of the Union.

Lincoln's cheeks had grown more cavernous, his brow and eyes more deeply furrowed. A man who saw him at this time, Gustave Koerner, commented: "Something about the man, the face, is unfathomable."

But it was his secretary, John G. Nicolay, who explained most eloquently why Lincoln's hidden face could never be caught: "Graphic art was powerless before a face that moved a thousand delicate gradations of line and contour, light and shade, sparkle of the eye and curve of the lip, in the long gamut of expression from grave to gay, and back again from the rollicking jollity of laughter to that serious, far away look that with prophetic intuition beheld the awful panorama of war, and heard the cry of oppression and suffering. There are many pictures of Lincoln; there is no portrait of him."

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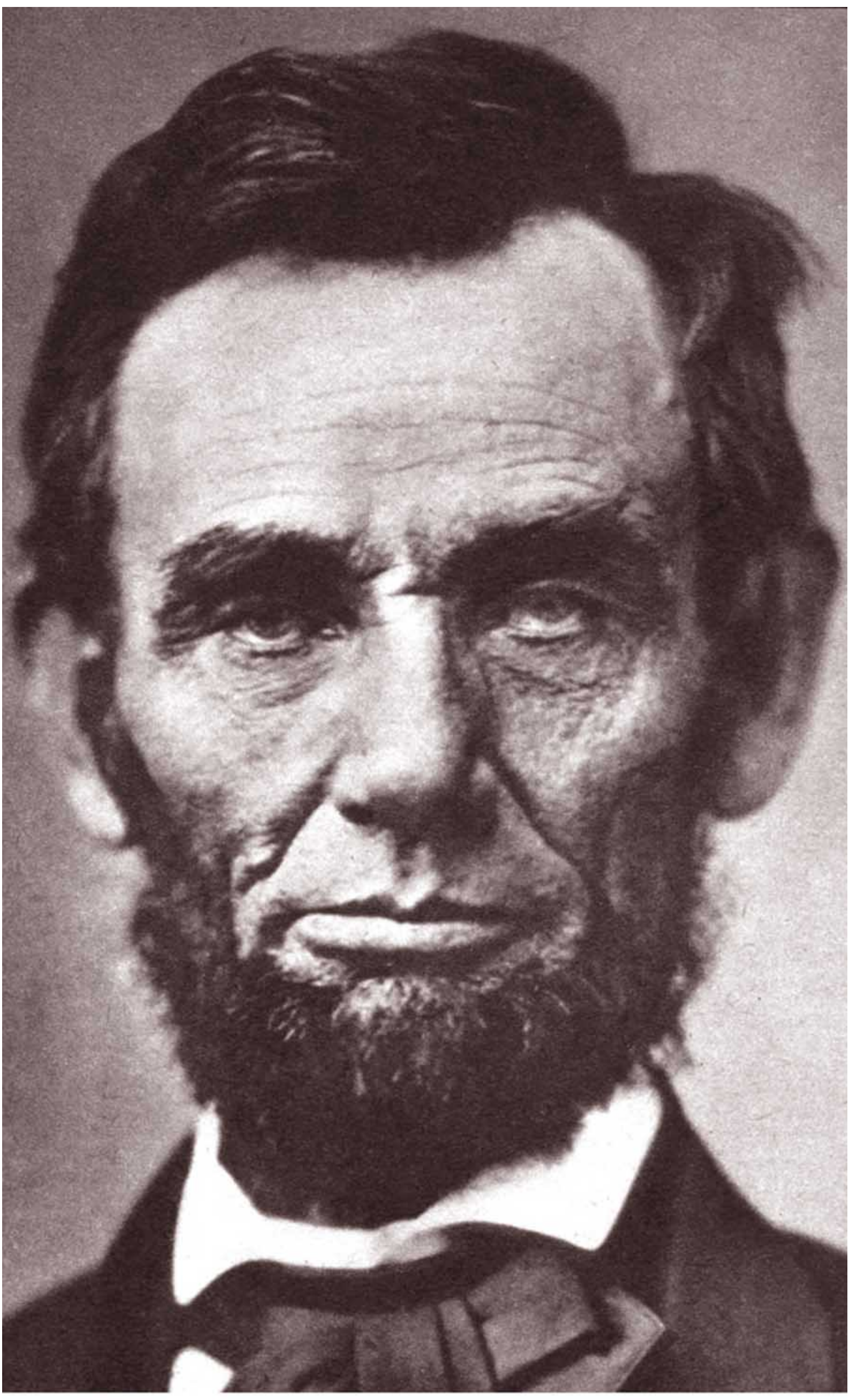

November, 1863

Gettysburg

FOUR DAYS after this picture was taken Lincoln was to say a few words at the dedication of a soldier cemetery at Gettysburg. His speech was short—only 165 words—its delivery took only 135 seconds, but the words will be remembered as long as the English language is spoken on this earth. "It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced . . ."

These were the words. What was the man who spoke them like? William Howard Russell, famous correspondent of the London *Times*, sent this dispatch to his paper: "He was dressed in an ill-fitting, wrinkled suit of black, which put one in mind of an undertaker's uniform at a funeral; round his neck a rope of black silk was knotted in a large bulb, with flying ends projecting beyond the collar of his coat; his turned-down shirt collar disclosed a sinewy muscular yellow neck, and above that, nestling in a great black mass of hair, bristling and compact like a ruff of mourning pine, rose the strange quaint face and head, covered with its thatch of wild republican hair, of President Lincoln."

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1865

With Malice Toward None . . .

On June 7, 1864, Lincoln was renominated. In August his defeat seemed more than probable. Many of his own party tried to force his withdrawal. But in September the good war news and the Republican successes in Vermont and Maine foreshadowed his reelection.

During the campaign the anonymous writer of a mock biography said of Lincoln's looks: "He can hardly be called handsome, though he is certainly much better looking since he had the smallpox." It was crude humor. But Colonel Theodore Lyman, who saw Lincoln on the battlefield early in 1865, wrote to his wife in all earnestness: "The President is, I think, the ugliest man I ever put my eyes on; there is also an expression of plebeian vulgarity in his face."

Political partisanship made people blind even eighty years ago. They even disposed of the second inaugural as "oratory." For Lincoln the words had deep meaning; they came from the depths of his heart: "With malice toward none . . . let us strive on to finish the work we are in . . . to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations." . . .

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April 9, 1865

THE LAST portrait of Lincoln, taken on the day of General Lee's surrender at Appomatox. On this day the war was won, the Union preserved. Six days later Lincoln's dead body lay in a small room at Washington. Someone remarked: "Now he belongs to the ages."

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