Social Studies 8 Mrs. Ingold

Topic: Lincoln’s Last Days/Synopsis Name:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**The Impact of the Death of a President: *Lincoln’s Last Days***

How would Lincoln have dealt with the difficult business of reconstruction that faced the nation in the aftermath of the Civil War? Based on the few public remarks that Lincoln made on the subject in the months before his death, one can make a reasonable guess as to his opening game, but anything beyond this is mere speculation. It is safe to say that Lincoln remained much more moderate than the bulk of so-called **Radical Republicans** in Congress, who favored a harsh, r*etributive* (punishment) plan of reconstruction.

As early as December of 1863, Lincoln had come forward with a generous plan of reconstruction, providing for the readmission of former Confederate states to the Union upon an **oath of loyalty** by *one-tenth* of the electorate. Radical Republicans reacted with distaste at what they found to be an all too lenient plan, and proposed instead the **Wade-Davis Bill**, which demanded a majority of citizens to swear loyalty before readmission would be considered. Lincoln pocket-vetoed this measure after it passed through Congress on July 4, 1864, raising an eyebrow by those who found his executive objection excessive. It was a bold move that nearly cost him re-election.

At his **Second Inaugural Address**, Lincoln had announced the important duty of the American people to proceed *"with malice toward none; with charity toward all...to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds."* Such a stance continued to draw criticism, with many still finding Lincoln to be overly soft in his plans for the rebels. Lincoln himself recognized the question of reconstruction to be "*fraught with great difficulty."* For example, should a former Confederate state be allowed the right of self-government? Lincoln's position was to allow such a transitional arrangement in more moderate states, like North Carolina and Virginia, while granting the federal government a larger degree of control further to the south.

#### Lincoln’s Last Days Assessed: 1865 and Beyond From Triumph to Tragedy

In his final public address, concerning the question of Louisiana's re-admission to the Union, Lincoln explained that the **goal of reconstruction** was to restore the seceded states back into their *"proper practical relation"* with the federal government. To Lincoln, this did not mean federal domination in the form of *confiscation* (taking away) and *occupation* (ownership). He had repeatedly voiced his objections to **carpetbaggers,** although he was unable to develop a clear alternative for truly effective and lasting reform. What exactly was the *"proper practical relation"* of the states to the federal government? No such balance had ever truly been struck, and the Civil War did more to confuse rather than to resolve this complicated issue, which continues to persist even today.

Unfortunately, Lincoln did not survive to face the challenges of reconstruction, which were every bit as great as the Civil War itself. The task of rebuilding the nation was left to Lincoln's ***bewildered (confused)*** vice president, Andrew Johnson, who had assumed the nation's second office just forty days before. A Tennessee native who had remained loyal to the Union, Johnson found himself in a *precarious* ( no win) position, trapped between his compassion for the south and his need to placate the harsher wishes of the Radical Republicans in Congress.

Three major amendments to the Constitution were passed in the first years of reconstruction: the **13th**, which abolished slavery; the **14th** extending citizenship to blacks; and the **15th,** extending the right of *suffrage* (voting rights) to black males. Additionally, the **Civil Rights Act of 1866** made extensive provisions in order to improve the lot of former slaves from the southern states. A **Freedman's Bureau** was established to ease the transition of former slaves into free society. 4,000 free schools were established for blacks, and as a result 250,000 black children began learning to read and write English.

In order to enforce such *radical* (extreme changes) legislation against the hostility of a defeated South, the federal government created five military districts to enforce principles

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Polling places were placed under special controls, and as a result sixteen blacks were elected to Congress in the 1870s. By the **Civil Rights Act of 1875**, all hotels, restaurants and theaters were officially ***integrated***, although this particular law proved particularly difficult to enforce, and was later declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1883 on the premise of ***states' rights***.

Heavy federal restrictions on southern***sovereignty*** (people’s right to vote) naturally created a backlash. The **Ku Klux Klan** was founded in Pulaski, Tennessee in 1866, later enjoying a strong following in states such as Indiana, Oklahoma and Texas after its early twentieth-century revival. As the southern states slowly reacquired the power to determine their own affairs, they instituted a series of **black codes** to limit the rights that had been extended to blacks by the federal government.

Johnson recognized the potentially damaging and *mean-spirited nature of many reconstruction policies*, and **vetoed** several bills in an effort to heal the still festering regional fracture. But time and again his vetoes were overridden*. Would Lincoln have allowed such domination by the Radical Republicans?* **It is a question for all time**.

Succeeding Johnson as President in 1868, **Ulysses S. Grant** spent two unremarkable terms dodging scandal and allowing reconstruction to be directed by an increasingly powerful Congress. True to his military background, Grant reinforced the decrees of reconstruction by **imposing (forcing) a fierce brand of martial law** where needed and ordering several arrests in places where federal civil rights laws were not adhered to.

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Finally, in the scandalous presidential *election of 1876*, **Rutherford B. Hayes** narrowly defeated Samuel Tilden after an ***inconclusiv*e** ( no clear winner) election was decided by a Congressional committee. When the southern states indignantly threatened to secede yet again, Hayes capitulated with the **Compromise of 1877**, which allowed him **to gain the presidency in exchange for an effective end to reconstruction** with the *withdrawal of all federal troops from the southern states*. And with this, after almost two decades of violent bloodshed and rhetoric, civil rights reform would remain dormant as an issue of national importance for the next eighty years.

No one knew better than Lincoln that a Civil War fought to preserve the Union, if successful, could only end with a return to division. As he remarked in his First Inaugural Address:

*"Suppose you go to war, you cannot fight always; and when, after much loss on both sides, and no gain on either, you cease fighting, the identical old questions, as to terms of intercourse, are again upon you."*

Somehow, over the fiercest opposition, slavery was in fact abolished, but the rights of blacks were slow in coming. Temporary reforms could only last for as long as the federal government was willing to commit forces to the southern states. With the end of reconstruction, southerners **quickly reverted to the local rule of law**, which equaled terror for many blacks during the decades to come.

Nevertheless, for a brief moment then, and increasingly today, a spirit of reform moved the

United States closer to its founding principle that ***"all men are created equal.***

***"*** No single man was more responsible for such progress in the nineteenth century than Abraham Lincoln. This fact has been well-remembered in the 135 years since his death.