

“Columbia’s Noblest Sons”: George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, 1865

Introduction

Abraham Lincoln’s death on April 14, 1865, stunned the nation. He was the first US president to be assassinated and the third to die in office. As Americans mourned, they also began to see him as a martyr and the savior of the Union.¹ In eulogies and engravings, Lincoln was compared to George Washington. Printed in 1865, *Columbia’s Noblest Sons* features imagery that draws parallels between Washington and Lincoln.

- Columbia is crowning Washington and Lincoln with laurel wreaths, which were traditionally given to people who had won victories.
- Columbia was considered the female symbol of the United States until she was replaced by the Statue of Liberty. She represented the ideals and spirit of the country.
- Columbia is wearing a classical robe, which gives her the appearance of a goddess, and a Phrygian cap, which is a symbol of liberty.
- The Declaration of Independence is below Washington’s portrait.
- The Emancipation Proclamation is below Lincoln’s portrait.
- Columbia stands on the head of a lion, which symbolizes Washington’s defeat over England.
- Broken shackles near Columbia’s feet symbolize Lincoln’s defeat of slavery.
- On the left are scenes from the American Revolution: the Boston Tea Party, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and the British surrender at Yorktown.
- On the right are scenes from the Civil War: the bombardment of Fort Sumter, an encounter between an ironclad and two wooden ships, and Lincoln’s triumphant arrival in Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederacy.

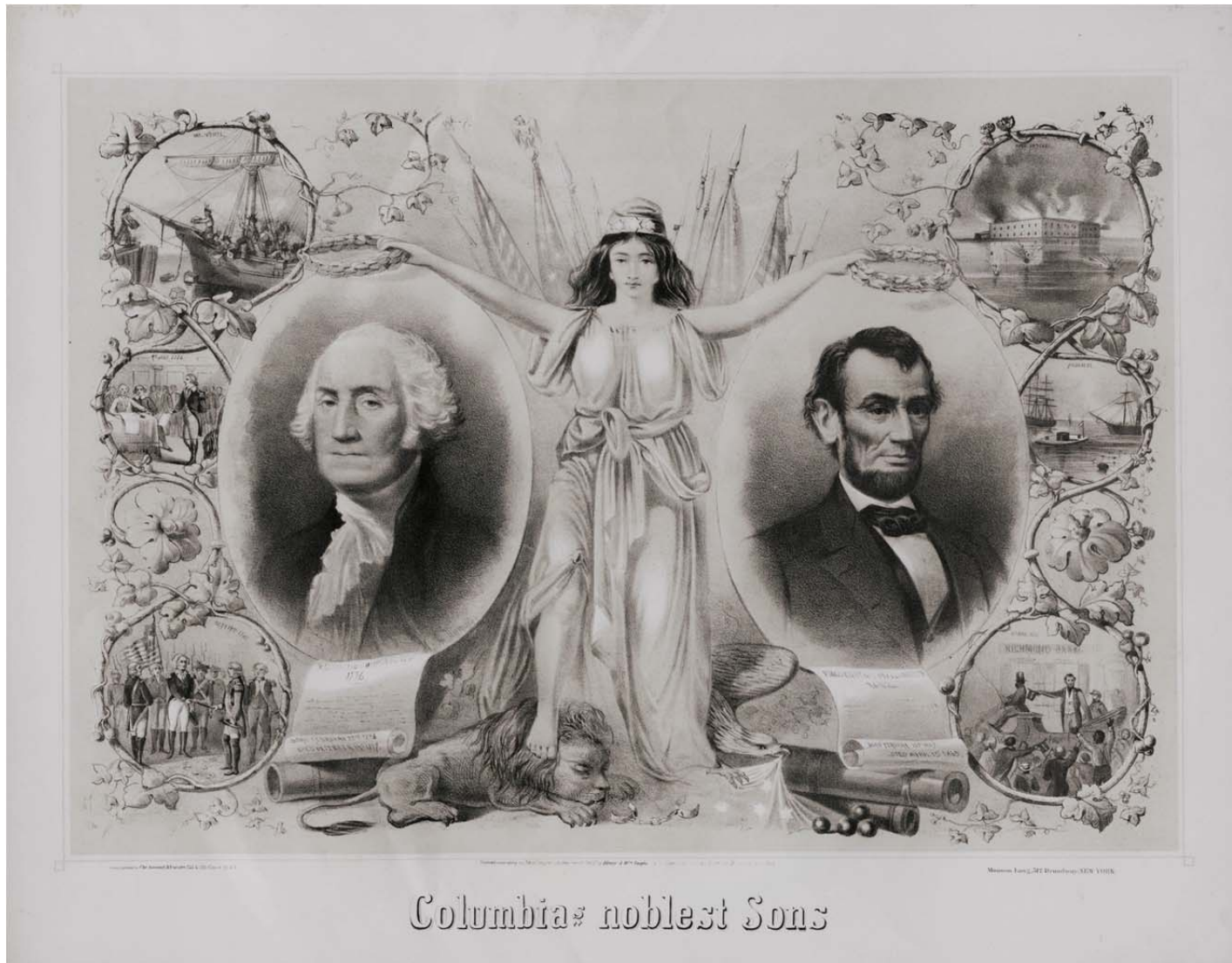
Washington had long been viewed as “first in the hearts of his countrymen.” Engravings such as this one elevated Lincoln to the same status as Washington in the hearts and minds of Americans.

Questions for Discussion

1. Who is the most important figure in the engraving? Why?
2. What connection might the artist be making with the use of the vignettes?
3. Why does “Columbia” crown both Washington and Lincoln with laurel wreaths?
4. What is the significance of the title of the engraving?

¹ Harold Holzer, “‘Columbia’s Noblest Sons’: Washington and Lincoln in Popular Prints,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 15, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 23–69, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.2629860.0015.104>.

Images



Columbia's Noblest Sons, printed by Kimmel and Forster, New York, 1865 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC02597)

