Lincoln's last year

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In August 1864, as the Civil War ground on with no end in sight, Abraham Lincoln concluded that he would not be re-elected president of the United States. He asked members of his Cabinet to endorse a sealed document (which they had not read) that affirmed his duty to try to save the Union before the inauguration because his successor "will have secured his election on such ground that he can not possibly save it afterwards."

Lincoln then drafted a letter to Jefferson Davis proposing that if the Confederate States stopped fighting, "all remaining questions," including slavery, would be "left for adjustment by peaceful means."

On September 3, however, Gen. William T. Sherman sent a telegram announcing "Atlanta is ours and fairly well." A few weeks later Gen. Philip Sheridan shattered the rebel army in the Shenandoah Valley. Suddenly, Lincoln's supporters looked to the election — with confidence.

Flood, a freelance writer, tells the dramatic, oft-told story of Lincoln's last full year in office. Flood's Lincoln is a familiar figure, pragmatic, tenacious, compassionate, and wise, perhaps unique in his capacity to overcome the challenges confronting the nation in that watershed year.

Flood's Lincoln is a tactician who knew that river boat captains — and presidents — can set the course of a boat no farther than they can see. Convinced that blacks had suffered "the greatest wrong inflicted on any people," he saw no solution of the problem of race on American soil, and never quite abandoned his interest in colonization of emancipated slaves.

Lincoln was, by turns, ambitious, self-confident and humble. "Being only mortal," he told a friend, "I should have been a little mortified if I had been beaten in a canvass before the people." Especially given his commitment to the errand entrusted to him, the preservation of the Union.

Nonetheless, he looked forward to life after the "great trouble ended." His wife, he knew, wanted a six month sabbatical in Europe. After that, he thought he might return to Springfield to resume his law practice. Or he might begin anew in California, with its beautiful climate and opportunities for his two boys.

It was not to be, of course. Lincoln celebrated Lee's surrender at Appomattox, sat in Jeff Davis' chair at the Confederate White House, and delivered his (now much celebrated) Second Inaugural Address. And then, on April 14, 1865, Good Friday, John Wilkes Booth killed him.

To mark the two hundredth anniversary of his birth, a C-SPAN poll of professional historians pronounced him the greatest president in American history.

Abe Lincoln would be pleased — and maybe not surprised.

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1864: LINCOLN AT THE GATES OF HISTORY
Charles Bracelen Flood
Simon & Schuster, $30

Associate Images:
President Abraham Lincoln has been labeled the nation's greatest president by the American people, according to a recent poll. MATHEW BRADY/Associated Press