Reflections

How do images like this differ from modern wartime photography?

What kind of person do you think Abraham Lincoln was from this photograph?

How do you think the public responded to seeing photographs of the war as well as reading about it?

Why do you think someone who has taken pictures of very important people and had such a high profile job would change career to work in insurance?

Photographer: Alexander Gardner
Born 1821

Photograph: Abraham Lincoln, Allan Pinkerton and John Alexander McClernand
Antietam Battlefield, USA
1862

Contextual information

Alexander Gardner could be considered as one of the earliest war photographers, being known largely for his documentation of the American Civil War between 1861 and 1865. He was a Scottish photographer, born in the 1820s, but who moved to America in the 1850s.

His interest in photography was sparked by the work of American photographer Mathew Brady, who exhibited at the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, and indeed Gardner worked with Brady to start with when he went to live in the United States. It was through this relationship that he was able to first get involved in shooting the war, and during the four years of conflict, he photographed president Abraham Lincoln on a number of occasions.

He photographed the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863, and also took a portrait shot of Lincoln two weeks before his famous Gettysburg address. In 1865, he took what is considered to be the final portrait taken of Lincoln before his assassination in that year.

Following the war, he photographed Native Americans who came to Washington to discuss treaties, and also photographed the proposed route of the Kansas Pacific Railroad, which was due to provide a rail route to the Pacific Ocean, but his interest in photography died out in the early 1870s when he changed profession and started his own insurance company.