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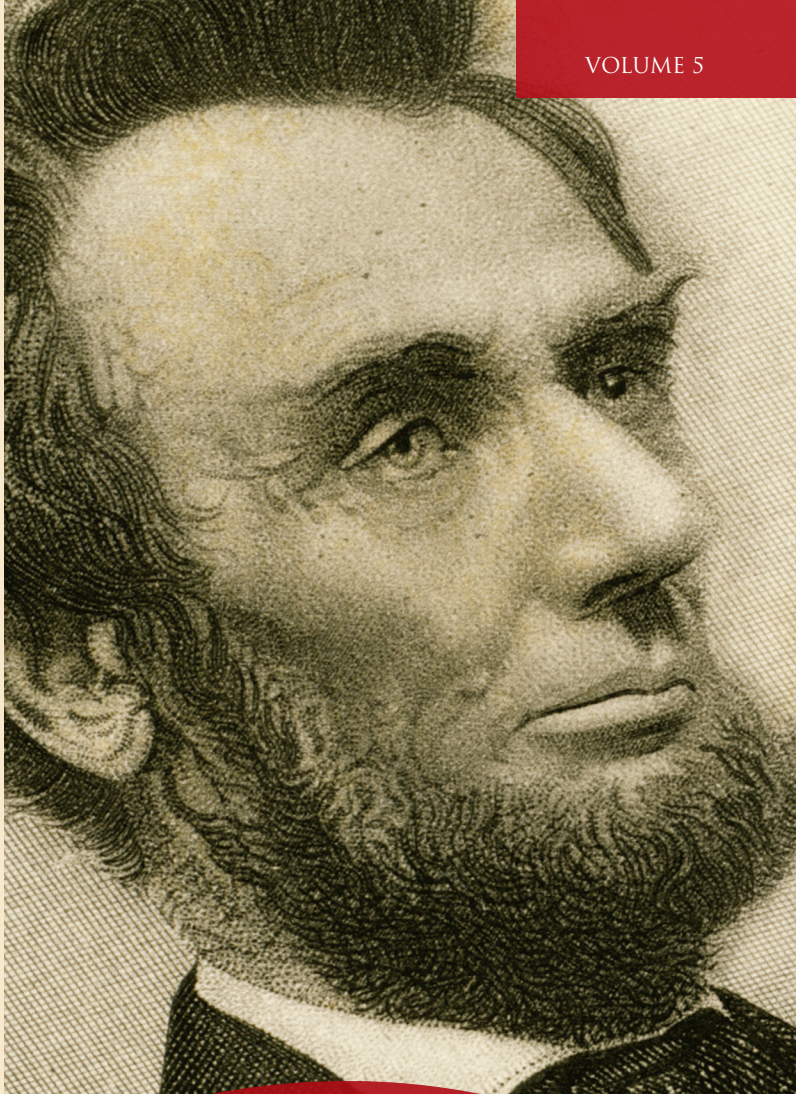

CRITICAL ISSUES OF OUR TIME

WHY LINCOLN MATTERS TO AMERICAN PRESIDENTS

HAROLD HOLZER

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FOUR SCORE AND SEVEN YEARS AGO...

WHY LINCOLN MATTERS TO AMERICAN PRESIDENTS, FROM THEODORE ROOSEVELT TO BARACK OBAMA?[1]

Harold Holzer

In the summer of 1992, Republicans gathered for their quadrennial National Convention in Houston, Texas, to re-nominate President George H. W. Bush for a second term. The odds against victory that Fall were growing wider, but the future must have seemed bright on the evening the much-loved former president, Ronald Reagan, arrived at the speaker's rostrum to rouse the faithful to a renewed dedication to modern Republican ideals.

He did so by invoking the name of Lincoln—by reminding the delegates of a set of principles Reagan declared had been "eloquently stated" by Lincoln generations earlier. The fortieth president went on to quote what he described as the sixteenth president's most enduring maxims. Here was a hallowed set of principles, said Reagan, that had stood the test of time and deserved to be recalled and repeated to fortify America against a resurgent liberalism—in the person of another unknown, dark-horse Southerner who had just unexpectedly won his own party's nomination: Bill Clinton.

Reagan summoned all of his considerable rhetorical gifts to remind the hundreds of delegates packing the convention hall and the tens of millions more watching on television that Abraham Lincoln had once wisely offered the following timeless truths about class warfare:

> *You cannot bring about prosperity by discouraging thrift.*
>
> *You cannot help small men by tearing down big men.*

You cannot strengthen the weak by weakening the strong.

You cannot help the wage earner by pulling down the wage payer.

You cannot help the poor man by destroying the rich.

You cannot further the brotherhood of man by inciting class hatred.

You cannot build character and courage by taking away men's initiative and independence.

You cannot help men permanently by doing for them what they could and should do for themselves.[1]

To no one's surprise, the convention floor erupted in delirium. Television cameras captured the faces of emotional delegates, some in tears. Lincoln obviously still mattered—especially as channeled by Reagan. The former President had brilliantly resurrected a canonical tablet of political commandments more prescient and eloquent than any arid party platform or windy acceptance speech. No one had ever said it better than the Great Emancipator as revivified by the Great Communicator—a truly magical combination. As politics and performance, even liberal Democrats admitted that it was good.

As it turned out, it was actually too good to be true. The fact is, Lincoln had never uttered a word of it. The lines turned out to be the work of an obscure German-born minister from Brooklyn named William John Henry Boetcker, and they dated back to only 1916—fifty-one long years after Lincoln's death. That year, Boetcker published a tract entitled *The New Decalog, or Lincoln on Private Property*. The pamphlet featured a unique format: the true words of Lincoln on one page followed by interpretive quotations from Boetcker on the next. The featured ideas quickly found an appreciative audience among conservatives. Republican clubs clamored for copies, and the booklet went into new editions in 1917, 1938, and 1945.

The problem was that in each subsequent reprint, Boetcker receded progressively—no pun intended—into the background until Lincoln was receiving sole and undeserved credit for aphorisms he had never uttered. One later edition boasted that the words were Lincoln's exclusively, and were published merely at the "inspiration of Boetcker." In 1949, a Republican Congressman from Ohio named Frances P. Bolton even read the alleged Lincoln maxims into the Congressional Record under the title, "Ten Cannots." His error inspired a furious response from journalists, including a *Time Magazine* rebuttal called "Dishonest Abes."[2] By the time Ronald Reagan got around to quoting these lines, the true source of the spurious tenets had again faded into the shadows, their persistent and convincing debunking forgotten.

> Lincoln had been mocked, scorned, and ridiculed by much of the nation until he was lifted above the clamor by his martyrdom. Gone now was the derision.

When the truth re-surfaced, a Reagan spokesman, scrambling for an explanation, pointed out that the former president had done all his own research. As sole author of the speech, he had innocently found the so-called "Lincoln" quotations in a book called *The Toastmaster's Treasure Chest* by one Herbert V. Prochnow. Reagan's gaffe was passed off as a forgivable mistake. Of course, few of the millions who heard Reagan that summer night ever read the explanations or the corrections published in newspapers during the days following his remarks. Nor did they learn that Reagan had omitted two of those spurious Boetcker-authored "quotations"—the two that did not seem to fit his call for fealty to Republican principles, 1992-style. After all, how could a chief executive who had presided over the accumulation of the largest federal deficit in the nation's history possibly say:

You cannot keep out of trouble spending more than your income.

You cannot establish security on borrowed money.[3]

Ronald Reagan deleted those potentially disobliging phrases from his recitation. But he had said enough to lay indelible, if dubious, claim to Lincoln's political blessings. It took a veteran *New York Times* writer who also happened to be a respected Lincoln scholar—Herbert Mitgang—to burst the balloon the following day. Yet corrections seldom reach as many readers as presidential performances. Three full years after Mitgang had indisputably discredited Reagan's Lincoln references, the most widely read newspaper columnist in the entire nation blithely reprinted the Boetcker quotes

once again, and attributed them to Abraham Lincoln. The words Reagan had quoted still seemed genuine—at least to Ann Landers.[4]

In all fairness, claiming the mantle of Lincoln began long before President Reagan's massive faux pas in Houston. And that is the subject of this study: Lincoln as an ever-adaptable touchstone of American memory: not the bottom-up memory expressed by poets and artists, but the top-down battle for memory, still raging, among politicians who continue to quest for the mantle of Lincoln to bless policies and highlight issues that Lincoln himself could never have even imagined.

Fighting over Lincoln has been part of the fabric of political discourse practically from the moment he was assassinated on Good Friday, 1865, barely a week after restoring peace to a country riven by Civil War. In eulogies delivered at churches throughout the north that Easter Sunday, and at Jewish Passover services at the same time, Lincoln was confirmed as a secular saint: a second-coming Messiah who had died for his people's sins, or a latter-day Moses who had proclaimed liberty but had not lived to see the promised land, a life that seemed to come right out of the Book of Leviticus.

It constituted a miraculous elevation for one who was among the most severely criticized of all of our presidents: Lincoln had been mocked, scorned, and ridiculed by much of the nation until he was lifted above the clamor by his martyrdom. Gone now was the derision.[5] Before long, politicians took up where preachers had left off. In the furious debate over postwar Reconstruction, conservatives and so-called radicals alike both claimed they were pursuing the path to reconciliation and reunification that Lincoln himself had charted, waging a rather *un*-civil war over his mantle. For the first two score years after his death, however, Lincoln's memory remained the exclusive property of the Republican Party that he had helped to found, and the GOP chief executives who followed him to the White House. Always a politician first, Lincoln, would probably have appreciated the tributes from his own party. With Democrats controlling a reunited, solid white South, the only way for Republicans to retain power was through votes from Northerners, black and white alike, united in the Lincoln tradition. Thus it was no surprise when, after Rutherford B. Hayes won the GOP nomination in the centennial year of American independence, the *New York Times*, long a pro-Republican newspaper, declared: "In 1876 as in 1860 the Republican Party found its Lincoln to lead it on to victory." Hayes, of course, was no Lincoln. Perhaps his only resemblance to the first Republican President was that his election was bitterly contested—and in that way, he was much more like yet another Republican, George W. Bush, than Lincoln. What is probably more instructive is that by this time, Hayes himself had come to the conclusion that Lincoln now overshadowed even George Washington in reputation and emotional impact. In this regard, the otherwise undistinguished Lincoln successor was remarkably incisive.[6]

At the dawn of the twentieth century, however, something remarkable happened to further expand Lincoln's influence on both politics and politicians. Democrats like William Jennings Bryan began suggesting that they, too, might be entitled to claim a portion of Lincoln's legacy. Not everyone in the establishment agreed with this bi-partisan claim. One angry *New York Times* article complained that "every word of that noble man ought to be a rebuke" to such Democratic presumption.[7] But press indignation did little to inhibit the Democrats' pursuit of Lincoln, buoyed by the 1909 centennial observances of his birth that transformed the onetime controversial Great Emancipator into a rather more benign and universal nationalist. In this atmosphere, competition to claim Lincoln for inspiration and advantage came to embrace all political faiths. It would have been unnatural for Democrats *not* to try boarding the bandwagon.

Theodore Roosevelt, who as a little boy had viewed Lincoln's funeral procession in New York City, was one Republican who fought back. He proudly confided to White House correspondents that he kept a portrait of Lincoln behind his presidential desk. "When I am confronted with a great problem," he explained. "I look up to that picture, and I do as I believe Lincoln would have done." He also kept a lock of Lincoln's hair in his ring—a precious relic given him by his Secretary of State, John M. Hay, a direct link to the cherished past who had once served as assistant private secretary to Lincoln himself. No wonder Roosevelt confidently expressed himself as comfortable pursuing what he called a "Jackson- Lincoln theory of the presidency," meaning that he would be an active executive prepared to do even what Congress was reluctant to approve—because Lincoln had done the same. Lincoln, he argued, had practiced what he called "tempered radicalism," and so would he.[8]

Roosevelt prepared to yield the Presidency in 1909, but only three weeks before his retirement—a retirement that proved temporary—he went off to visit Lincoln's log cabin birthplace in Kentucky, trumping his successor,

William Howard Taft. Roosevelt was not going to cede the Lincoln centennial to anyone. On February 12, he stood at the marble-enshrouded Lincoln log cabin in Hodgenville, Kentucky, to laud a Lincoln who sounded as much like the orator as the honoree: "He had in him all the lift toward greatness of the visionary, without any of the visionary's fanaticism or egotism, without any of the visionary's narrow jealousy of the practical man and inability to strive in practical fashion for the realization of the ideal." Then, practically transforming Lincoln into a 20th century trust buster, Roosevelt concluded: "Yet perhaps the most wonderful thing of all, and, from the standpoint of the America of today and of the future, the most vitally important, was the extraordinary way in which Lincoln could fight valiantly against what he deemed wrong and yet preserve undiminished his love and respect for the brother from whom he differed." Lincoln was quite simply "the mightiest of the mighty men who mastered the mighty days."[9]

Roosevelt invited further comparisons when attacked during the presidential campaign by a gun-toting assassin.

By the time the 1912 election rolled around, highlighted by Theodore Roosevelt's comeback attempt as a Progressive Bull Moose, President Taft and his onetime mentor competed for the symbolic Excalibur endorsement of the immortal Lincoln. But so did Democratic candidate Woodrow Wilson who, though Southern-born and unsympathetic with black rights, felt compelled to establish an association of his own with the great man. Explaining that he was in search of the unique inspiration Lincoln could provide, the Democratic nominee made his own pilgrimage to the sacred and hitherto exclusively Republican Mecca of Springfield, Illinois, Lincoln's hometown. Taft meanwhile sped off to Vermont, to receive the endorsement of Lincoln's son Robert. To seal the blessing, they played golf! Roosevelt fought back by declaring that "the progressive platform of today is but an application of Lincoln's," dismissing his rich son as incapable of understanding such things.[10]

Roosevelt invited further comparisons when attacked during the presidential campaign by a gun-toting assassin. Ironically, the former president survived because he had folded the long, *un*-Lincolnian speech he prepared for that day's event, and bunched it inside his breast pocket. The bullet lodged within the thick manuscript, which acted like armor, saving his life. One only wonders what might have happened had Roosevelt been prone to making brief speeches like the Gettysburg Address, instead of stem-winders whose manuscripts were bulky enough to absorb bullets. In the end, Roosevelt finished second that year, and the total Republican vote far exceeded that of the Democrats, but benefiting from the split opposition, Wilson prevailed—just as Lincoln had in 1860 against a divided *Democratic* opposition.

Yet as President, Wilson sought to keep his own connection to Lincoln alive. In his first year as President, he presided over the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg—giving a Gettysburg Address of his own that suggested that Union and Confederate veterans both deserved tribute and honor—making no mention at all of slavery, "unfinished work," or the new birth of freedom to which Lincoln had dedicated his speech and the Union sacrifice at the continent's greatest battle. Instead he preached an anodyne vision of sectional reconciliation that ironically excluded African Americans. "We have found one another again as brothers and comrades in arms," he told the celebrants, "enemies no longer, generous friends rather, our battles long past, the quarrel forgotten."[11]

Wilson also formally accepted Lincoln's log cabin birthplace on behalf of the federal government in 1916, declaring Lincoln a "typical" American yet a singularly "great" leader. As a historian, the young Wilson had complained that Lincoln had "made the presidency his government." But once he assumed the presidency himself, he suddenly confessed he felt what he called "the closest kinship" to Lincoln "in principle and political" lineage—a pretty remarkable transformation. During World War I, Wilson encouraged the use of Lincoln's image on War Bond and recruitment posters, quoting him to justify American involvement in a foreign conflict. What seems to have eluded Wilson was the irony of his quoting the Great Emancipator while re-segregating the federal bureaucracy. It comes as no surprise that Wilson never mentioned freedom or equality in any of his airy tributes to his suddenly useful predecessor. He was also a great admirer of *Birth of a Nation*, the technically innovative movie he called "history by lightning"—either because he believed in its pro-Ku Klux Klan bias, or was loyal to his old college friend Thomas Dixon, the unrepentant Lost Cause enthusiast who wrote the book *The Klansman* on

which the film was based. By the Wilson era it was clear that American Presidents would take from Lincoln what they were comfortable with, and exclude or discard the rest. After extolling Lincoln as a kind of Wilsonian man of mystery (citing his "lonely search of the spirit for the right") Wilson told a crowd at Hodgenville just seven years after Theodore Roosevelt's centennial visit "We are not worthy to stand here unless we ourselves be in deed and in truth real democrats and servants of mankind." His written copy did not capitalize the word "democrat." But what must his listeners have thought when they heard the word that September day?[12]

In the end, the "Large-D" Democrat who, until the 21st century, worked most assiduously to seize the Lincoln legacy from the Republicans was Franklin Delano Roosevelt. As governor of New York, Roosevelt once bluntly confided to a journalist that one of his goals was for "us Democrats to claim Lincoln as one of our own." He proceeded to do just that. In 1932, he attempted what no member of his party had done since the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment had given African Americans the franchise—he competed successfully for the black vote, which had always been rock solid for the party of Lincoln. By 1936, after a campaign in which he quoted Lincoln's "good definition of the word liberty" speech at various stops, the African-American majority was his, and has remained firmly in the Democratic fold ever since. Like Lincoln, implied FDR in campaigning for a second term, he was "counselor for the under-privileged." Two years later, he declared America to be close to winning an economic war no less daunting than the Civil War Lincoln had faced. "We are near to winning this battle," he said in 1938. "In this winning and through the years may we live by the wisdom and humanity of the heart of Abraham Lincoln."[13]

Once in the White House, FDR freely quoted Lincoln to justify New Deal initiatives. And when World War II loomed, he hired Robert E. Sherwood, the man who had written the play "Abe Lincoln in Illinois"—a drama about a man initially reluctant to face his responsibilities—and made him his speechwriter. Soon Roosevelt's own remarks boasted references to what Lincoln would and would not do in the face of the Nazi threat. FDR suddenly positioned himself much like the hero of Sherwood's drama—inclined by nature not to fight, but ready to do battle once sufficiently riled. Even the play and film's iconic star, Raymond Massey, had observed "If you substitute the word dictatorship for the word slavery throughout Sherwood's script, it becomes electric for our time."[14]

Like Wilson before him, FDR stepped further back into time and myth by traveling to Lincoln's log cabin birthplace in Kentucky. Before long, the Democrat Roosevelt had convinced Americans that no politician had more in common with the onetime impoverished prairie rail-splitter than the wealthy, to-the-manor-born squire of Hyde Park. By the dawn of World War II, most Americans had come to believe that Roosevelt and Lincoln, as one observer put it, "represented a prominent line of continuity in American leadership."[15]

Ever since World War II, FDR's real and would-be successors, regardless of party or philosophy, have sought the same brass ring. The eagerness of our leaders to seek Lincoln's guidance and blessing has continued unabated. In the 1950s, it was Illinois Democrat Adlai E. Stevenson who leaned most heavily on Lincoln. In Stevenson's view, Lincoln, much like Stevenson himself, would have advocated strong and impassioned American leadership around the globe. The two-time Democratic nominee suggested that Lincoln's words offered "a call to a new battle—a battle which rages around us now in every part of the world in this new time of testing." No one ever expressed Lincoln's modern relevance more beautifully, or received less credit for the seriousness with which he regarded the subject. In 1962, Stevenson actually delivered an oration on the "unfinished work of Emancipation" at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. It was almost immediately overshadowed by Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech from the same spot only months later, and has remained mired in undeserved obscurity ever since. But then, much as he admired Lincoln, Stevenson never got to be President.[16]

Instead, it was his more prosaic-sounding opponent, Dwight Eisenhower, who held the office during Lincoln's 150th anniversary in 1959. Eisenhower appointed the Lincoln sesquicentennial commission, and authorized a Lincoln's Birthday joint session of Congress that featured a tribute speech by poet and biographer Carl Sandburg and a recitation of the Gettysburg Address by actor Fredric March. The following year, John Fitzgerald Kennedy campaigned to succeed Eisenhower in part on the incumbent's failure to stem the rise of Communism overseas. The question, insisted JFK, paraphrasing Lincoln, was "whether the world will exist half slave and half free." [17] Kennedy's televised debates with Richard Nixon that year became the most famous of such political encounters since the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858. And Kennedy's narrow victory, just one hundred years after Lincoln's own minority election, followed by his tragic assassination a few years later, sent many

Americans to citing comparative trivia about the two martyrs, including such irrelevant but irresistible tidbits that both men had been succeeded by Vice Presidents named Johnson, or that Lincoln had been killed in Ford's Theatre, while Kennedy had been shot while riding in a Lincoln—a car manufactured by Ford.[18]

As presidents in their own right, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon both aggressively identified themselves with Lincoln doctrine, especially in wartime. Besieged by critics, they took to likening their unpopularity and isolation to Lincoln's, convincing themselves (but not their critics) that they were heirs to his legacy of hunkering down and fighting on, even in the wake of dwindling support at home and declining fortunes on the battlefields of Vietnam. Nixon even contrived to be photographed once inside the White House "relaxing"—that is, sitting in an easy chair wearing a fully-buttoned black suit—beneath a comforting lithograph of Lincoln and his family.[19] The scene was later re-created, with unsurprising artistic license, in Oliver Stone's film, *Nixon*.

In the 1990s, Republicans like Jack Kemp weighed in, seeking to associate supply-side economics with the political philosophy of the sixteenth president. The late Mr. Kemp became a valued supporter of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, serving as the co-chairman of its foundation. His view of Lincoln made him sound much like Jack Kemp: an unapologetic economic conservative at heart. Meanwhile his fellow New Yorker (and, full disclosure, my own former boss and longtime friend, Governor Mario M. Cuomo) countered that by arguing for "all the government we need for people who cannot do things at all or so well for themselves"—another Lincoln paraphrase—Lincoln seemed much more like what Cuomo called "a progressive pragmatist" than a conservative. Did Cuomo sound like Lincoln or did Lincoln sound like Cuomo? Modern leaders often think there is little difference between these two points of reference, association, and memory. "I've always admired Lincoln because he's reassuring to politicians like me," Cuomo joked in 1990. "He was himself a big, homely-looking politician from a poor family who started off by losing a few elections, yet in the end succeeded brilliantly." He was not unlike Cuomo, who lost for Mayor of New York City in 1977, but then won (against the man who had defeated him) for Governor of the state five years later. But in a more serious vein, Cuomo lauded him as a "model of active presidential leadership."[20]

George Herbert Walker Bush professed admiration for Lincoln as well. After winning the Gulf War, he proposed that his official portrait show him standing before *The Peacemakers* by G. P. A. Healy, a White House painting that shows Lincoln with his military chiefs at their final council of war, complete with a symbolic rainbow breaking out on the horizon to presage the return to peace. Bush apparently embraced the image of a warrior who prefers peace. More importantly, Bush confided, the Healy picture showed how much presidents age under the strain of wartime leadership. Bush posed so that his own face discreetly covered Lincoln's. The unspoken identification with Lincoln was hard to overlook.[21]

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Later, ex-President Bush was kind enough to invite Sam Waterston and this writer to deliver a lecture in Houston called *Lincoln Seen and Heard*—a sound-and-light show of period pictures set against Lincoln's greatest words. It is impossible to forget President Bush telling us after the performance that the Lincoln speech that affected him most that day was, of all things, his farewell address to Springfield—particularly the moment when Lincoln told his neighbors "here my children have been born, and one is buried."[22] You can never imagine, Bush confided, tears filling his eyes, what it is like going off to Washington to assume the Presidency and leaving a child buried back at home. "Barbara and I did exactly the same thing." It remains equally difficult to predict what part of the Lincoln story will move a President; only that something invariably will.

President Bill Clinton, in turn, worked assiduously to take Lincoln back to where Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt had envisioned him—to provide historical validation for strong executive leadership and populist progressivism. Clinton kept a very visible Lincoln bust behind his Oval Office desk, where it was always prominent during televised White House addresses. On a nearby table stood a small statuette of Lincoln and Douglas in debate. A larger Lincoln bust dominated the walkway that leads to the Rose Garden. Clinton read new Lincoln books

voraciously, quoted him often, and enthusiastically assembled a White House collection of original period editions of every book Lincoln ever read as a youth.

He created the U. S. Lincoln Bicentennial Commission before his term ended in 2001, and (again with full disclosure in mind) generously appointed this writer to that body, which I co-chaired until 2010. Clinton also had a special affection for the Lincoln bedroom, even after its accessibility to big donors was embarrassingly exposed and mocked during the early years of his administration. He loved giving people tours of the room, showing and discussing its historic furnishings and its painting of Mary Lincoln (whom he defended as an unfairly maligned First Lady), reveling in his knowledge that Lincoln had never slept in the room's famous bed.

Clinton particularly loved pointing out the engraving of Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation here (and reminding visitors that this room served in fact not as Lincoln's bedroom, but his office). Then the President would excitedly usher visitors to the window to see the precious White House handwritten copy of the Gettysburg Address. Bill Clinton also loved relating the story of one old, lifelong Southern Democrat whom he invited to spend the night there—and who shocked the President by telling him he would not sleep in Lincoln's bed. Clinton told him it wasn't really Lincoln's bed, or even his bedroom, and besides, wasn't Lincoln the greatest President in history? Yes, the old gentleman conceded, he certainly was—for a Republican. But put me up somewhere else. As an ex-president, Clinton gave a well-received commencement address at New York's Cooper Union, site of the 1860 oration that helped catapult Lincoln toward the presidency, and repeated and expanded on those themes for a speech that opened the exhibition *Lincoln and New York* at the New-York Historical Society in 2009. Few presidents in American history have more passionately studied, or authoritatively discussed, his Civil War predecessor.

As we know, Bill Clinton never lacked for opposition—even where Lincoln was concerned. On Lincoln's birthday 1998, Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, himself a serious Lincoln student who also writes engaging historical novels about the Civil War, suggested in a widely reported speech that any student of Lincoln would conclude that America must bomb Iraq immediately. "To do less," Gingrich declared, "would be to betray the very cause of freedom that was at the heart of Lincoln."[23] Clinton declined to follow the Speaker's advice at the time, but years later, in 2008, in a unique public event, Gingrich joined Mario Cuomo on the stage of Cooper Union for a debate on that year's presidential race. During that discussion, they frequently made reference to the man who had used that same platform as a launching pad for his own White House candidacy 148 years earlier. The second President Bush also counted himself as an admirer of Lincoln. "I've got Lincoln's picture on the wall here," he told a journalist in 2003, "because I am reminded that I must work to unite the country, which Lincoln understood, to achieve great goals." This idea was no doubt very much on his mind when he decided to welcome home veterans of the Iraq war by landing a jet bomber on the flight deck of the aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln*.[24] It took an old Democratic warhorse, Senator Robert C. Byrd, to promptly denounce the event, noting "As I watched the president's fighter jet swoop down onto the deck . . . I could not help but contrast the reported simple dignity of President Lincoln at Gettysburg with the flamboyant showmanship of President Bush aboard the USS *Abraham Lincoln*."[25]

It did not help Bush, of course, that as it turned out, notwithstanding the infamous "Mission Accomplished" sign unfurled above the carrier's broad deck for that day's photo opportunity, the mission was not accomplished after all. Yet Bush remained a well-read Lincoln devotee, inviting historians to deliver scholarly lectures to his staff, and invoking Lincoln to rebut criticism that he was abusing power, noting that Lincoln, too, had used executive authority when he judged it was necessary to save the country. And besides, Bush once joked to this writer—at least I think he was joking—that while Lincoln shut down opposition newspapers during the Civil War, he had never done likewise. Imagine what people would say, he continued with a smile, if *I* tried that, winking and adding, "much as I may be tempted—particularly with the *New York Times*!"

Lincoln actually emerged as an issue during Bush's campaign for a second term. One of his early Democratic rivals was asked if he believed "God [was] on America's side" in the war on terrorism, as Bush had recently suggested. John Edwards responded with what he described as "a wonderful story about Abraham Lincoln during the middle of the Civil War, bringing in a group of leaders, and at the end of the meeting one of the leaders said, 'Mr. President, can we please join in prayer that God is on our side?' And Abraham Lincoln's response was, 'I won't join you in that prayer, but I'll join you in a prayer that we're on God's side.'" The man who defeated him for the nomination that year, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, was as tall and rugged as Lincoln, and perhaps sensing

the similarities, made a major campaign speech of his own at Cooper Union, reminding supporters throughout his ill-fated general election campaign that Lincoln always believed that America—to quote his 1862 Message to Congress—was "the last best hope of earth."[26]

And that brings the story to Barack Obama. It is fair to say that in the entire history of presidential politics, and the almost mystical associations between past, present, and future that define national memory, no president has ever labored as relentlessly or resourcefully to summon Abraham Lincoln as Barack Obama—or been rewarded more often with flattering comparisons to his hero. Nor has any President ever had a more legitimate claim to his legacy.

Before considering this phenomenon, however, it is important to understand that while Lincoln's reputation has remained high among white Americans for a century and a half, the parallel evolution of Lincoln's reputation among African-Americans has changed. In death, even shortly before his assassination and martyrdom—when he was exuberantly welcomed by ex-slaves to Richmond in April 1865—Lincoln was revered by African Americans as the Great Emancipator. Frederick Douglass praised him as the "first great man that I talked with in the United States freely, who in no single instance reminded me of the difference of color."[27] But in 1876, in giving the dedicatory address at the unveiling of a statue of Lincoln as emancipator in Washington—a commission paid for entirely by African Americans—Douglass reversed course and described Lincoln as "preeminently the white man's president,"[28] who had moved too slowly toward freedom and equality. The address greatly influenced future black leaders like W. E. B. Du Bois to acknowledge Lincoln's imperfections along with his vision: he was, Du Bois said, "a man—a big, inconsistent, brave man."[29]

In 1908, a conference on Lincoln evolved into the formation of the N.A.A.C.P., but the uneasy relationship of black America to Lincoln's unfinished work was reflected in the fact that the founding group had convened on the site of a vicious race riot. The site was not Alabama or South Carolina: it was Lincoln's own hometown, Springfield, Illinois.

White Lincoln memory was meanwhile evolving, too—at least in nuance—away from the unfulfilled nineteenth-century emphasis on Lincoln as a liberator. De-emphasizing Lincoln's promise of a "new birth of freedom" in the 1860s seemed to make the disappointments of the 1960s easier to digest—at least for whites. But the more that white leaders massaged Lincoln into the universal man of the people, rather than the friend of freedom and equality, the less he seemed to matter to black Americans (or to change the attitudes of white ones).

In 1922, Robert Russa Moton, Booker T. Washington's successor as principal of the Tuskegee Institute, was given the honor of speaking "for his race" at the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial. The monument featured, etched in marble, the words of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural—not the Emancipation Proclamation, even though Lincoln had said in signing it "If my name ever goes into history, it will be for this act."

Dr. Moton decided to stress not only Lincoln's work for freedom, but also the unfinished work that was now modern America's responsibility to complete. "So long as any group within our nation is denied the full protection of the law," he wrote in the draft manuscript for his speech that day, "that task is still unfinished…"So long as any group within the nation is denied an equal opportunity for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness…that task for which the immortal Lincoln have the last full measure of devotion—that task is still unfinished."

But Moton never got to speak those words. When President Warren Harding, a Lincoln admirer in his own fashion, was alerted to the text, he insisted that it be censored. Chief Justice (and former President) Taft bloviated that day about how "appropriate" it was that the Memorial had risen on the Potomac, which he called "the boundary between the sections." But he ignored the chasm that still existed between the races. Lincoln's sole surviving son was in attendance, but Robert T. Lincoln offered no words of dissent. As for the black spectators who came to the dedication, they were herded by mounted soldiers to the back of what turned out, in the bitterest of ironies, to be a segregated crowd. Moton went on to deliver his truncated address. Not until May of 2009, four score and seven years later to the day, did Americans get to hear those words read aloud from the Lincoln Memorial at a Lincoln Bicentennial Commission rededication ceremony.[30] Of course it was another Civil Rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., who reminded the 1963 March on Washington that Lincoln indeed deserved the mantle of Great Emancipator, after all—as long as Americans understood that Lincoln's dream had too long remained unfulfilled.

And then in 2007, another improbable candidate for the Presidency, another inexperienced, lanky, big-eared Illinoisan, declared his candidacy for President

in front of the State House where Lincoln had once argued in the courts, voted in the legislature, delivered the House Divided Address, kept his headquarters after his nomination and election, and later, lay in state. "By ourselves," Barack Obama said that day, "…change will not happen. Divided, we are bound to fail. But the life of a tall, gangly, self-made Springfield lawyer tells us that a different future is possible. He tells us that there is power in words. He tells us that there is power in conviction. That beneath all the differences of race and region, faith and station, we are one people. He tells us that there is power in hope.… Together, standing today, let us finish the work that needs to be done, and usher in a new birth of freedom on this earth."[31]

The message resonated. The following year, President-elect Obama quoted Lincoln in his victory speech in Chicago—declaring that in a far worse crisis than what Americans know, Lincoln had insisted, "passion may have strained, but must not break our bonds of affection." Obama went on to replicate Lincoln's train journey from Baltimore to Washington for his own inaugural, and read Lincoln books in preparation for his swearing-in. And then the forty-fourth president dedicated his entire inauguration to the sixteenth president. Organizers called the event "the new birth of freedom" inaugural. And Obama even swore his oath on the very bible Lincoln had used at the same ceremony nearly a century and a half before.

The press—and, for a time, the new president himself—had a field day making comparisons. Both men had defeated the overwhelming favorites for their party's nomination, in each case, the senator from New York (William H. Seward and Hillary Clinton, respectively). Both men revered former presidents regardless of party: Lincoln treasured Washington and Jefferson; Obama, FDR, and of course Lincoln. Both Lincoln and Obama had drifted from their churches, and both endured political controversies regarding church attendance: Lincoln for breaking his affiliation, Obama for refusing for a time to leave his Chicago church when his minister's allegedly racist sermons became a campaign issue.

There was more. Both had earned reputations as inspiring orators. Both published best-selling books before they ran for president: Obama, the deservedly well-received *Dreams of My Father*, and Lincoln, less well known today, an edited book-length version of his 1858 senatorial debates with Stephen A. Douglas. And once elected, both men took pains to visit the women who had raised them—in neither case their natural mother—to say an affectionate farewell. Before leaving for his inauguration, for example, Lincoln had traveled in the bitter winter cold to his stepmother's prairie home to say goodbye. It was said the old woman thought she would never see her famous stepson again—telling him bluntly that she feared he would be killed. With eerie similarity, candidate Obama interrupted his 2008 campaign for president to fly to Hawaii for a final visit to his grandmother, who had raised and encouraged him in his mother's absence just as Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln had encouraged young Abraham. Obama's beloved stand-in parent died only a few hours before he won the 2008 election.

Both Lincoln and Obama paid non-partisan visits to their predecessors before taking office, and both incumbents, James Buchanan and George W. Bush, stayed silent during their successors' administrations. And both Lincoln and Obama tapped their onetime chief rivals for the nomination as secretary of state. The election of each man was questioned: Lincoln by dissidents who conspired to subvert or sabotage the electoral vote, Obama by the persistent so-called "birthers" who questioned his American citizenship. Both men had financial panics with which to deal as soon as they took office. And both men faced enormous challenges during the off-year elections that followed their first two years in office. In 1862, Lincoln's Republican Party lost 31 seats in Congress (not counting the Southern senators and representatives who had resigned to join the Confederacy the year before). In 2010, Mr. Obama's Democrats lost Ted Kennedy**.** Of course, blue state-red state differences are not as fatal as blue state-grey state differences. But as events unfolded, they seemed astonishingly similar.

Still early in the Obama era, after marking the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth, it is clear that above all, Lincoln still matters—to ordinary people who flocked to events celebrating the bicentennial, to the readers of the 250 Lincoln books that appeared in 2008 and 2009, even to moviemaker Stephen Spielberg, who is planning a film biography. Nor has President Obama forgotten his hero, although his mentions have declined; he even quoted Lincoln when signing his health care reform bill.

Over time, Lincoln memory has expanded exponentially: now the hero of Democrats, Republicans, blacks and whites, writers and readers, Lincoln is to be found where he does the most good, if not always in the eyes of beholders, then certainly in the debates and debaters of all political stripes who quote him as scripture to defend their own causes. Lincoln is still capable of inspiring as long as his example is not misused; capable of guidance

through what he variously called "a vast future also"—for "all time to come."

It should certainly not be lost on us that on any evening in America, two little girls, both the descendants through their mother of African slaves—Sasha and Malia Obama—can play at will in the room where Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. What better evidence do we have that the unfinished work Lincoln invoked at Gettysburg, and which leaders have been reminding us about ever since, albeit through the alembic of their own unique visions of the future, might be closer to completion than even Lincoln could ever have dreamed.

In January of 2010—eight score and seven years after America's sixteenth president issued the Emancipation Proclamation—America's forty-fourth President proudly placed a rare, autographed copy of it on display in the very same building where it was first composed and made official: the White House. On Martin Luther King Day, no less, Barack Obama ordered that the relic be hung directly above the bust of Dr. King that occupies a permanent place of honor in the Oval Office.
To mark the occasion, President Obama held a widely reported meeting with Civil Rights elders, many of them survivors of the freedom movements of the 1960s, and then ushered them into the West Wing to inspect this newly installed souvenir from the 1860s. Among the visitors to the Oval on Martin Luther King Day was a 101-year-old lady named Mabel Harvey, who confided to the President in words that neatly summed up the nation's, not to mention the document's transfiguration: "This must be the Lord's doing, because we've come a mighty long way."[32]

Whether or not Lincoln remains a talismanic figure for American leaders is impossible to predict. But perhaps his enduring place in American memory and mythology was best expressed not by a president, but by a person whose name we do not even know: an anonymous poet from Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal era—in words that seem as relevant today as they were then, and powerfully suggest that Lincoln will remain a permanent touchstone for everyone who occupies the presidential chair:

> Consider the land of thine and freedom's birth—
> Cry out: it shall not perish from the earth!
> Engrave upon our hearts that holy vow.
> Spirit of Lincoln, thy country needs thee now.

End Notes

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7 Ibid., 158.
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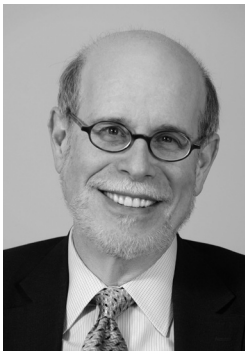
About the author



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His most recent books are *Lincoln President-Elect: Abraham Lincoln and the Great Secession Winter 1860-1861* (2008), which won the Barondess/Lincoln Award and the Award of Achievement of the Lincoln Group of New York; *The Lincoln Anthology* (2009), a Library of America collection featuring 150 years of great writers on the subject of Abraham Lincoln; *In Lincoln's Hand* (2009), featuring Lincoln's original manuscripts with commentary by distinguished Americans; *Lincoln in New York*, the catalogue of a 2009-10 New-York Historical Society exhibition for which he served as chief historian; and *The Lincoln Assassination,* a collection of essays from The Lincoln Forum, which Holzer serves as founding vice-chairman. His newest book is *The New York Times Complete Civil War*, co-edited with Craig L. Symonds.

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