

Historic Southern Indiana

Lincoln Bicentennial Planning, June 13, 2001

Lincoln: What We Know, What We Try To Know and Why

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Opening: As I was finishing this talk I thought that some local reference would be appropriate--ingratiating myself with the people who were nice enough to invite me here to talk.

But as I looked at Lincoln and Indiana materials it struck me that a talk might be built around that interconnection and something more than a casual reference might emerge.

Now it is pretty well known that Lincoln wrote gloomy, brooding, almost morose poetry after visiting his Indiana home. Visits to old friends and places inspired him to report that "every sound appears a knell and every spot a grave. . . I range the fields with pensive tread and pace the hollow rooms and feel (companion of the dead) I'm living in the tombs." Back home again in Indiana indeed!

But those feeling were what Lincoln reported when he was 35. His debt to Indiana was more than melancholy. If we start with the idea that the child is the father of the man, we recognize that Lincoln learned how to be a man in Indiana. He lived here from 1816 to 1830, from the time he was 7 until he was 21. And experiences here clearly were reflected in the ways he lived his life. A talk at least would arise from that knowledge--taking the historical facts and viewing them in light of what we know about the psychology of childhood and adolescence there would be much to talk about.

I'm not going to provide that talk today. But I do want to put in your minds some Indiana seeds that we may see blooming in some issues I do want to raise. Consider the things Lincoln learned here: As we will see he learned to fear madness here. When he was 16 a companion, bright, engaging promising Matthew Gentry, at 19 a model for Lincoln's emerging manhood, went insane. What impact did that have on his commitment to order, reason, law? I will discuss this later.

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Lincoln also learned hard work here, very hard work. His father was an especially hard taskmaster who kept after his son to work clearing land, chopping down trees, plowing fields. Thomas Lincoln kept his son so hard at work that at least one historian had suggested that the future president learned to hate not only farm work itself, but also he hated uncompensated labor--he learned here to hate slavery.¹

Lincoln also learned love here. His mother who died when he was 9 seems to have been a very loving person. Lincoln was blessed again when his father married Sarah Bush Johnson. She was only Lincoln's stepmother, he was only her stepchild, but she gave Abraham enough love that some people said she preferred him to her own children. Is this a source of Lincoln's later empathy for other, even others not in the nation's immediate citizenship family? Hopefully these are interesting speculations that suggest the importance to Lincoln of his time in these parts.

But I don't have the time to explore these ideas further. I want to talk rather about several points in the Lincoln story that establish our current understanding of the man and his contributions to the nation and the world. New Lincoln books appear almost every day and articles outnumber the books. It is difficult to keep up with this eruption of scholarship and it isn't only scholarship where Lincoln appears.

He is part of our culture, an icon used to advertise everything from life insurance to hamburgers. Lincoln is a cultural force outside the literate or educated world. Harry T's a bar in Lawrence Kansas includes in its ads for lunch specials a picture of Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial, reminding us that not all lunch specials are created equal.

On a more sinister vein, my aunt in California recently sent me something called "Abraham Lincoln's Warning." It quotes Lincoln as an anti-Catholic bigot warning against Catholics who want to "destroy our (public) schools and prepare a reign of anarchy here as they have done in Ireland, in Spain and wherever there are people that want to be free."²

Now of course Lincoln never said this. In fact he was angry at the anti Catholic bigotry of his age, which manifested itself in the Know Nothing movement. He told his friend Joshua Speed "I am not a Know Nothing. That is certain. How could I be? How can any one who abhors the oppression of negroes, be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation we began by declaring that "*all men are created equal.*" *We now practically read it "all men are created equal, except negroes.*" When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty--to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy."³

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But Lincoln is not only part of the general public's discussion. Scholars are always engaging Lincoln's thought, his vision of the nation and the ideals it stands for.

Lincoln and the Greeley Letter: If there is one document that is more often quoted than any other in the argument, debate, or conversation about Lincoln it is the letter that Lincoln wrote on August 22, 1862 to Horace Greeley editor of the New York Tribune--the most widely read newspaper in the nation. On August 19 Greeley wrote an editorial addressed to Lincoln urging the President to emancipate the slaves. The editorial began with several accusations that the president was paying too much attention to "certain fossil politicians hailing from the border states" in not freeing the slaves for fear of losing border state support. "On the face on this wide earth, Mr. President, there is not one disinterested, determined, intelligent champion of the Union cause who does not feel that all attempts to put down the rebellion and at the same time uphold its inciting cause are preposterous and futile. . . what an immense majority of the Loyal Millions of your countrymen require of you is a frank, declared, unqualified, ungrudging execution of the laws of the land"--that meant to Greeley that Lincoln free the slaves.

Lincoln's reply was this:

Executive Mansion, Washington, August 22, 1862. To: Horace Greeley. Dear Sir. I have just read yours of the 19th addressed to myself through the New-York Tribune. If there be in it any statements, or assumptions of fact, which I may know to be erroneous, I do not, now and here, controvert them. If there be in it any inferences which I may believe to be falsely drawn, I do not now and here, argue against them. If there be perceptible in it an impatient and dictatorial tone, I waive it in deference to an old friend. whose heart I have always supposed to be right.

As to the policy I "seem to be pursuing" as you say, I have not meant to leave any one in doubt.

I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution. The sooner the national authority can be restored, the nearer the Union will be "the union as it was." If there be those who would not save the Union, unless they could at the same time *save* slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time *destroy* slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object in this struggle *is* to save the Union, and *is not* either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do *not* believe it should help to save the Union. I shall do

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less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do *more* whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause. I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors: and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views.

I have here stated my purpose according to my view of *official* duty; and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed *personal* wish that all men every where could be free. Yours, A. Lincoln

Scholars and many members of the general public see in Lincoln's answer a commitment to saving the Union that overcomes Lincoln's emancipation instincts. They translate the words to mean that the president was not firmly committed to ending slavery and that he did so, ultimately, only because he had to. It is part of a general view that sees Lincoln as the "reluctant Emancipator" to envision an environment in which "It was evidently in an unhappy frame of mind in which Lincoln resorted to the Emancipation Proclamation," as influential Richard Hofstadter put it. Hofstadter also remarked that the Emancipation Proclamation once issued on January 1, 1863 had "all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading."

But Lincoln was not a reluctant emancipator. He was a cautious emancipator, cautious because he knew that he had to have popular support for any act he took against slavery. But he was moving toward emancipation quite aggressively. His answer to Greeley needs to be seen in the light of certain facts.

1. Lincoln had decided to emancipate the slaves almost a month before he answered Greeley. He had decided to do so around July 20, 1862 and told his cabinet of his decision on the 22nd.

2. Lincoln knew very well that his answer would appear in the widely circulated Tribune, and would be picked up and reprinted in newspapers throughout the nation. He knew that the letter was a chance to persuade as well as explain. There were several audiences out there. First of all he was careful not to insult the editor of the nation's most widely read newspaper--Greeley had attacked him pretty aggressively but Lincoln was not defensive. He referred to the editor as "an old friend, whose heart I have always supposed to be right." He knew that Democrats as well as Republicans were watching--he used a slogan of the Democratic party to reach out to them. They claimed to be for "the Union as it was." Lincoln told them that "the Union as it was" would benefit from his policy. Lincoln also knew that the society he led had few people who favored racial equality. It was a racist world. The same people who picked up the Tribune in New York went off to see the minstrel shows that were the most popular form of entertainment in the country. These shows (whose actors were always whites in blackface) degraded and insulted Black Americans to amuse their audiences. Lincoln

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knew that to advocate emancipation on grounds that helped blacks more than whites made him vulnerable to the race card--a ducat played consistently by the Democrats of his age. (I think it is Jim McPherson who notes that so long as the slavery question was about slavery the Republicans had an advantage; but if the issue became race the Democrats forged ahead.) Lincoln needed to place the emancipation of blacks within a package that whites would accept. The Union was the almost universal ideal of northerners, everything that anyone did in the course of fighting the war was of course going to be to save the Union. Lincoln was preaching to the choir here, but it was a big choir and he had to rally and reassure them that the very dramatic act of freeing other people's slaves would be in service of the very conservative goals of saving their union.

The conservative view of the Greeley letter also fumbles in contrasting the ideals of saving the Union with emancipating the slaves, in placing saving the union and freeing the slaves as alternatives. But the two goals were intimately connected. Lincoln wanted to save the Union and to free the slaves. When he spoke of saving the Union he was talking about a certain kind of union--a union where slavery was not safe. Lincoln's union, seen in its most conservative sense, was one where Congress could outlaw slavery in the territories, where free states would emerge from those free territories and send to Congress representatives and senators who were hostile to slavery. These congressmen would create an environment of freedom that could draw border slave states into a free soil orbit-- as white southerners feared was happening to Kentucky-- and persuade slaveowners to sell their slaves into the deeper South, expanding the arena of free soil, linking slave border states into the free labor, free soil, free men environment of the north. Runaway slaves would feel an even stronger magnet pull and that would destabilize stay-at-home slaves and the economy and the world they created.⁷

All of this was possible in Lincoln's union, without any direct attack on slavery in the slave states. And of course the White Deep South and parts of upper Dixie saw this nightmare coming to life. That is why they seceded. If Lincoln and his soldiers held the Union together slavery was imperiled. If Lincoln saved the Union without directly freeing a single slave he would still threaten slavery. He would place slavery in the course of ultimate extinction, as he said.

I think Lincoln would have been happiest if emancipation had come over the long course of ultimate extinction. As late as December 1862, with the emancipation clock already ticking (he had issued the preliminary proclamation in September 1862) Lincoln proposed an emancipation plan that would have allowed states to be compensated for the slaves they surrendered, and would have allowed states to take until 1900 to do so. He would also have encouraged, though not compelled, emancipated blacks to leave the country. And he argued passionately for this plan of his.

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In our modern environment of "Freedom Now" this proposal had angered some writers as it angered abolitionist of the time. But Lincoln felt the upheaval that emancipation would bring, knew the awesome and complex power of slavery in the South and in the nation. He knew that freedom was a beginning, that it would operate in an environment where whites held much power. Learning to live together in freedom required more than freedom now and devil take the hindmost. Once emancipation began he spoke of letting blacks and whites "live themselves into new relations with each other." Lincoln understood that changing the nation's race relations would take a long, long time. He may have let this understanding slow down his move toward emancipation but when he acted, less than a month after offering this gradual plan he did act aggressively and sweepingly, issuing the proclamation he had threatened in September.

But even here, as Lincoln emancipates some writers diminish Lincoln's contribution to emancipation. The proclamation freed only slaves in areas still in rebellion as of January 1, 1863. And as recently as 2000 a collection of essays on the war repeated a common canard that the proclamation "freed only those slaves over whom the proclamation could have no immediate influence."⁸ This repeated a slap of the London Times which scolded Lincoln for freeing the slaves he could not touch while leaving in chains those within his hands.

This ignores Lincoln's commitment to the Constitution and his sensitivity to the constitutional limitation of his office (note that his letter to Greeley expressed his "view of official duty" in contrast to his "oft-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere could be free.")

Lincoln freed the slaves in the only place he could legally touch them--in areas subject to his power as commander in chief of the armed forces. He could not free slaves in loyal slave states; the Constitution didn't allow that. Neither Congress nor the president had constitutional authority to attack slaves directly in the loyal states. Lincoln could act only under his war powers, as commander in chief in time of war and in places at war against the government.. Congress acted against slavery also only where its legal mandate reached, the territories, and the District of Columbia, and the making of rules for the military especially. And lawmakers were sufficiently respectful of constitutional limitations that they refused to turn the rebel states into territories and so expand their authority over them.

In short, it is not true that Lincoln freed the slaves only where he could not touch them. Lincoln had taken what he called "the most solemn oath" to "faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States." He freed the slaves in the

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only place that his oath of office to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States allowed him to free them.

A significant inference of the argument that Lincoln freed slaves were he couldn't reach them is that few slaves were freed by the proclamation. That inference is wrong (I'm almost tempted to say it is goofy). How many slaves did the proclamation free? I estimate that as of January 1, 1863--the day the proclamation became official 2.9 million of the approximately 4 million slaves in the South would be free--82% of the slaves in the Confederacy, 74% of the slaves in the nation. And that was just a beginning. The proclamation was part of a wider antislavery offensive. Lincoln was also contemplating a constitutional amendment freeing all the slaves and asking at the same time that border slave states free their own slaves, and be compensated for it.

Furthermore Lincoln was supporting a less obvious revolution that was going on in besieged Dixie. Various generals--John Phelps in Louisiana, David Hunter in Southern Carolina, Jim Lane in Kansas were enlisting blacks to perform labor around their encampments but also were teaching them military skills. Hunter's activities are especially illuminating. As early as April 1862 Hunter wrote to Secretary of War Stanton requesting 50,000 muskets and 50,000 pairs of scarlet pantaloons with the goal of arming "such loyal men as I can find in the country." Hunter's next move has obscured the importance of those muskets. On May 9, 1862 he publicly announced that he was freeing all the slaves in the Sea Island of South Carolina. Famously, Lincoln countermanded that announcement. But significantly he did nothing to stop Hunter from recruiting black allies. Lincoln allowed generals to enlist black soldiers even as he stopped generals from freeing black slaves. In late August 1862, even as he was explaining to Greeley the need to go slow the president let Secretary of War Stanton authorize General Rufus Saxton to arm and equip 5000 black soldiers in South Carolina. It was the beginning of a process that would display black manhood and create powerful claims of equal citizenship for approximately 200,000 black sailors and soldiers.

As war rolled on black soldiers joined Union ranks. The Emancipation Proclamation of January '63 called for former slaves to join the army. By January 1863 therefore Lincoln was at the center of emancipation on several fronts--constitutional amendment, military service, pushing loyal slave states to free their slaves, and general emancipation by proclamation. This doesn't seem like reluctance to emancipate to me.

Yes, of course the Emancipation Proclamation only proclaimed emancipation. But the Declaration of Independence only declared independence. Both documents were promises, pledges. They would have to be kept. But if the declarers and the proclaimers won their wars the United States would be an independent nation and it

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would be inescapably "dedicated to the proposition that all men [all people], are created equal." And almost the instant it was announced the proclamation unleashed emancipation. Restive slaves heard the proclamation and kept escaping to Union lines even as Union soldiers marching south expanded freedoms domain with every step.

Propaganda: Lincoln Style: The Greeley letter was essentially a piece of propaganda--an exercise in persuasion. Lincoln did speak of his personal wish that every man be free but he was not only telling the public what his personal feelings were. The Greeley letter was not a statement of philosophy that reflected only Lincoln's personal private feelings. Lincoln knew he wrote for an audience and he emphasized those parts of his personal philosophy which he thought would bring the most northerners to his cause.

Lincoln consciously shaped public opinion. He was intently aware that the public was watching him and listening to what he said. He believed, as he said, that "public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed."⁹ For an allegedly modest man Lincoln spent a huge amount of time in front of cameras--being painted, having life masks made. He let the painter, Francis Carpenter, stay in the White House for five months while Carpenter painted a picture of the first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation. When finished, the portrait was not hidden away by a private collector. It traveled throughout the North and showed to an eager and fascinated public a noble portrait of a great event led by the Great Emancipator. Lincoln was serving more than art when he let Carpenter produce that portrait. The President was constantly alert to chances to shape the public mind.

Predominantly, of course, Lincoln used the written word as his main instrument of persuasion. Other than his inaugural speeches he did not give any major speeches while in the White House, (he did give nearly 100 short public talks, and did write 4 annual messages) but the President wrote several letters that were designed and carefully crafted to mold the public mind. The President wrote these letters with the intention that they have the best possible impact when they were read, as most of them were designed to be, to larger audiences. Invited to address Republicans in Springfield in late summer 1863 Lincoln declined making the trip but he told his secretary John Hay that he would write a letter, and "it will be a rather good letter." When he sent the letter to his friend James Conkling he sent along these instructions, "You are one of the best public readers. I have but one suggestion. Read it very slowly." Conkling did so and the letter was picked up in the northern press and spread widely. One observer noted "It will be on the lips and hearts of hundreds of thousands this day." When the President wrote a letter in June 1863 defending his suspensions of habeas corpus he had that letter printed and then sent it out on the frank of a private secretary, made sure that a copy got sent to the Loyal Publication society which would then reprint 10,000

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copies. Ultimately nearly 1/2 million copies of the letter were circulated. Lincoln's letters didn't just go into some private mailbox.

But as suggested Lincoln did not speak alone. HE mobilized the northern institutions in behalf of his goals. He helped to found and organize the Union League--a propaganda organization that sent millions of copies of proUnion--Republican party--pamphlets throughout the north. His friends like Conkling were officers in state branches--his personal secretary William Stoddard was the corresponding secretary for the organizing DC branch of the league. Lincoln cultivated religious organizations so effectively that Methodists, for one, became almost synonymous with loyalty.¹⁰

Lincoln was a propagandist--using that word keeps us alert to the role of the president in shaping, not just responding to, public opinion. But we need to make a very important distinction between positive and negative propaganda. Negative propaganda calls upon people's fears and hatreds. And when it does so it has a, little considered, but vitally important result. When leaders call on our dark side they legitimate it, they affirm it. They say in effect that we are a people whose fears and hatreds should be appealed to. Our leaders tell us who they think we are by the way they speak to us. They thus help create their society and their nations. Whenever a politician or any other communicator speaks to us we must always ask--"Who do you think I am?" In advertising the answer is usually, a 14 year old with money. In politics the answer should be someone better. The health of the polity probably demands that it be someone better.

President Lincoln practiced positive propaganda, appealed to the nation's better angels. He never called the Confederacy or Jeff Davis the enemy. He never played a race card. He reached out to political enemies and adversaries. He did not make politics personal; for Lincoln the political was not the personal. He admonished politician "You have more of that feeling of personal resentment than I. Perhaps I have too little of it; but I never thought it paid. A man has no time to spend half his life in quarrels. If any man ceases to attack me I never remember the past against him."¹¹

The best known example perhaps of this tolerance is the case of Senator Charles Sumner, who helped to stop Lincoln's reconstruction program in Louisiana. But Lincoln chose Sumner to escort Mary Lincoln into the inaugural ball in March 1865. His favorite saying according to John Hay was "I believe in short statutes of limitation in politics." His speeches assumed an audience capable of reason, commitment and sacrifice in reaching the best goals of the nation--the Gettysburg Address is perhaps the best example of this trait, but other speeches reflect similar values. An 1840s Whig newspaper described the kind of speaking I am talking about:

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"Put the case that the same multitude were addressed by two orators, and on the same question and occasion; that the first of these orators considered in his mind that the people he addressed were to be controlled by several passions. . .--the orator may be fairly said to have no faith in the people; he rather believes that they are creatures of passion, and subject to none but base and selfish impulses. But now a second orator arises, a Chatham, a Webster, a Pericles, a Clay; his generous spirit expands itself through the vast auditory, and he believes that he is addressing a company of high spirited men, citizens---When he said 'fellow citizens', they believe him, and at once, from a tumultuous herd they are converted into men---their thoughts and feeling rise to an heroic heights, beyond that of common men or common times. The second orator 'had faith in the people'; he addressed the better part of each man's nature, supposing it to be in him--and it was in him."¹²

Lincoln's essentially non partisan style was sound politics. It enabled him to build a coalition together to fight the war, a coalition that included War Democrats, conservative and radical Republicans. It allowed him to negotiate with Congress on Reconstruction and kept him open to the need to make changes in his cabinet that would appeal to more radical opponents--he fired his postmaster general, Montgomery Blair, to appease radicals in the 1864 election. He put the most radical of his cabinet members, Salmon Chase, on the Supreme Court in 1864 in another move that pleased them. Despite sharp contrast that endured over Reconstruction policy, Lincoln kept the lines of negotiation open. There is reason to believe that Lincoln was moving in a more radical direction when he died, though that point is debatable. But whichever way he was moving Lincoln's effectiveness is best revealed by what happened when his successor, Andrew Johnson took over the presidency. Johnson took politics personally, publicly called congressmen names, refused to compromise on Reconstruction measures, and became the first president to be impeached.

Lincoln the Dictator: Lincoln has also been accused of being a dictator. In fact in 1979 Don Fehrenbacher observed that Lincoln had been described as a dictator by more historians than any other president. Some authors have condemned Lincoln for this outreach of authority. Political Scientist Dwight Anderson says that Lincoln "arrogated to himself virtually dictatorial power." The two authors of the popular novels about Lincoln, Gore Vidal and William Safire both agree on Lincoln's dictatorial power. Vidal has Secretary of State Seward musing that Lincoln "had been able to make himself absolute dictator without letting anyone suspect that he was anything more than a joking, timid backwoods lawyer."

Mark Neely's Pulitzer Prize book The Fate of Liberty has done much to discredit that idea. Lincoln arrested precious few people for dissent, most arrestees were taken as the army advanced into enemy territory, especially in border states. And in his overall

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record there is little to choose between Jefferson Davis and Lincoln--a point proven in another Neely book, Southern Rights.¹³

But if criticizing Lincoln as a violator of the constitution has lost momentum, a new book sees Lincoln's allegedly extralegal acts as positive--freeing the nation from a dead hand of conservative constitutionalism, moving the nation to equality. A recent book by law professor George Fletcher insists that Lincoln's suspension of the writ shows that he sought to be free of a constitutional system under which equality had been denied. "Lincoln's posture toward the 1787 Constitution was less reverent," Fletcher says. He accepts Chief Justice Roger Taney's argument that Lincoln's suspension defied the constitutional requirement that only Congress had the power to suspend. The president exercised "extraconstitutional executive power" Fletcher says, in suspending the writ. As is the case with many other authors Fletcher then quotes Lincoln himself apparently casting off constitutional anchors. In his July 4, 1861 address Lincoln asks "are all the laws but one to go unexecuted, and the government itself go to pieces lest that one be violated?" The inference is clear, Lincoln violated one law in order to save the government, and confessed to doing so. But like other authors Fletcher omits the rest of Lincoln's argument: "But it was not believed that any law was violated," the president says and then goes on to argue that since the Constitution doesn't say which branch of government has power to suspend, that the president has constitutional authority to suspend the writ "when in cases of invasion or rebellion the public safety may require it."¹⁴ But Fletcher ignores this point. He leaps from Lincoln's admission to make the astonishing claim that "The constitution of 1787 lay suspended in the fires of battle." Fletcher's goal is admirable: to persuade readers that the Civil War created what he calls "Our Secret Constitution." That constitution empowers the national government to protect equality and expand democracy. But Fletcher's Lincoln is a Lincoln that never was.

Lincoln throughout his life was a respecter of the Constitution and of the rule of law. These feelings were deep within him. When Lincoln was sixteen, and living near here, a companion, Matthew Gentry, went insane and the experience provoked a poem which began:

"But here's an object more of dread
Than ought the grave contains--
A human form with reason fled,
While wretched life remains."

And the poem went on through 12 stanzas describing Gentry as "Once of genius bright,-- a fortune favored child now locked in mental night. . . maiming himself, trying to kill his mother. . a howling crazy man. .shrieking and writhing. .with burning eyeballs and manic

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laughter. . begging swearing weeping praying." More ominous is the fact that Lincoln is drawn to Gentry, stealing away at night to listen to the plaintive mournful songs of the madman, staying out until sunrise, hovering nearby, nearby the madness.

Douglas Wilson has recently observed that fear of madness lead Lincoln to cultivate passionately reason and mental discipline. David Donald notes that "one of Lincoln's deepest concerns was the overthrow of reason."¹⁵ I couldn't agree more. This fear, in a man conscious that he was subject to the power of fate worked its way into his political philosophy.

The first major address that we have of Lincoln's, "The Lyceum Address," is a paean to having "respect for the laws. . .become the political religion of the nation." His temperance address extols a "Happy day when. .mind, all conquering mind, shall live and move the monarch of the world." His chosen profession was law. For a quarter of a century Lincoln practiced law. As the "Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln" DVD materials demonstrate so well, he spent more hours of his life practicing law than he did any other thing. HE tried over 5000 cases, made his fortune (such as it was) and created much of his vision of society and community in the company of lawyers.¹⁶

His debates with Douglas predominantly concerned constitutional questions and argument over the intentions of the framers of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. His First Inaugural and especially his July 4, 1861 speech were, to a large degree, constitutional arguments. His justifications for emancipation were replete with arguments about the constitutionality of his actions, and the limitations of his ideals that the Constitution dictated.

This picture of Lincoln the constitutionalist provides a necessary balance to a widespread idea that Lincoln was more dedicated to the egalitarian ideas of the Declaration than to the constitutional system. Indeed, in the hands of Garry Wills the Declaration becomes the eternal light that guided Lincoln to the abiding truth. Wills has Lincoln use the Gettysburg Address as a means to transform the nations understanding of equality and the national obligation to preserve it.

In an age of "Freedom Now" the temptation to play the Lincoln card in behalf of equality is understandable--predictable--perhaps instinctive. And as I've argued above, Lincoln served the cause of equality, no doubt about that. But the crucial question with Lincoln is almost always a process question--how did he achieve his goals? How did he want the nation to achieve its goals? Lincoln achieved equality not by ignoring or casting aside the Constitution. Rather he served equality by linking it to the constitutional system as a whole, by using his people's passionate devotion to the Constitution to inspire them to accept equality.

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The Gettysburg Address shows how he connected the Declaration's ideals of equality with the Constitution. The address opens by noting that the new nation was created in 1776 dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. But how are we to achieve that ideal? Lincoln's last line tells us--"government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth." The constitution, the foundation of our government, is the means to achieve the Declaration's equality ideal.

Why is this point important? Is it just a scholar's point? Well we do have to be careful about scholars. As Mark Twain warns us "The work of many scholars has already thrown much darkness on this subject and it is likely if they keep working we shall soon know nothing at all." But the interconnection between the Constitution and the Declaration is important to the nation as a whole, to its self understanding and its aspirations. The Constitution provides our respect for the rule of law, the process by which we achieve our goals, our ideals. If we just insist on our goals, our ideals, we may lose faith in our means. People have attacked the Constitution as a proslavery document, have seen it as part of "institutional racism." Some insist that we must strike for our ideals and see institutions as the enemy. "Be a rebel" a hundred ads and movies tell us. "Question authority", ten thousand bumper stickers echo. Surely a little rebellion is in the American soul. But also resting there, and more in the spirit of Lincoln is respect for law, for it is our law, made at its best to secure equality. In this nation, as Senator Christopher Dodd, among others has observed, our means are our ends. Respect for our rule of law is fundamental to maintaining respect for orderly change. Lincoln's major contribution was to show that the Constitution was an antislavery document, that the Dred Scott decision was bad constitutional law, that popular sovereignty without respect for equality was a snare and a delusion, that the rule of law was the basis for equal justice. The government created by the Constitution was the means to securing a nation where all people were equal. That was the message of the Gettysburg Address, it is a message from Lincoln we need to keep in mind, part of his positive propaganda, I might say, or if you prefer his friendly persuasion.

I think we can summarize this Lincoln by seeing him as the great African American reformer Frederick Douglass saw him.

People who note Lincoln's caution in emancipating often speak of him as "the White Man's President." That is the message of Lerone Bennett's attack on Lincoln. The view appears to be substantiated by an 1876 address by Douglass--blacks were "only his stepchildren" the ex slave said. Lincoln was "emphatically the white man's president." That judgment satisfies the Lerone Bennetts of the nation.

But what isn't considered as carefully as it might be is that the only hope for the slaves, for black America was for Lincoln to be the "White Man's President." Imagine the

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political consequences if Lincoln had run as William Lloyd Garrison, or Frederick Douglass for that matter he would never have been President Lincoln, or congressman Lincoln, or assemblyman Lincoln, or dog catcher Lincoln for that matter.

Douglass recognized Lincoln's role. He was being descriptive, not scolding. Douglass in fact had given two speeches within six months of the assassination in which he referred to Lincoln as "emphatically the BLACK MAN'S president." But when Douglass spoke in 1876 he was not bitter at Lincoln for failing to be the exemplar of equality for blacks. Douglass was arguing that even a white man, enmeshed in his duties as president of a predominantly white nation, could reach out and make black people his stepchildren, could include them in the family that was the nation. Recall that Lincoln himself had been a stepchild and as such was treated with such love that he always spoke lovingly of his stepmother. Whether Lincoln's commitment to the former slaves rested on a picture in his mind of that relationship is speculative. But we do know that Douglass and Sojourner Truth both remarked on the kindness and respect with which Lincoln treated them. Truth wrote in November 1864 "I was never treated with more kindness and cordiality than I was by the great and good man Abraham Lincoln." Douglass said "In all my interviews with Mr. Lincoln I was impressed with his entire freedom from popular prejudice against the colored race. He was the first great man that I talked with in the United States freely, who in no single instance reminded me of the difference between himself and myself, of the difference of color."¹⁷

Lucas Morel has pointed out that Douglass give his 1876 speech from a platform that included President Grant and other major white leaders. He was not only trying to assess Lincoln's role in posterity. Douglas was trying to show these powerful white leaders that even though their main constituency was white they could, like Lincoln, reach out and protect black Americans as stepchildren at least. Given the fact that an election was under way in which southern black voters were being shot, hanged, and mutilated and otherwise terrorized most black Americans would have been delighted to gain the protection as the stepchildren that Douglass spoke of. And Douglass provided an assessment of Lincoln's action that rings true. Lincoln had to have the support of the majority white population Douglass emphasized and "Had he put the abolition of slavery before the salvation of the Union he would have inevitable driven from him a powerful class of the American people and rendered resistance to rebellion impossible. Viewed from the genuine abolition ground, "Douglass proclaimed, "Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull and indifferent, but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical and determined."¹⁸

That statement wraps up the message of Lincoln's letter to Greeley, his role as emancipator, his role as a positive propagandist. It is the best way to remember him, I

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think, operating within the political constitutional system, proving that that system could bring forth the equality promised in 1776, and calling on the people to live up to the better angels of their nature. We need to remember that things like that are within us, the people whose government this is.

ENDNOTES

¹ Michael Burlingame, The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln (Urbana, U of Illinois, 1994), Chapters 2-3, esp pages 39-42.

² "Abraham Lincoln's Warning" one page sheet said to be "Copied from Knighthood of Catholicism by W.J. Burbank, State Treasurer of Iowa. . Lincoln was finally assassinated (sic) April 15, 1865 by Roman Catholics."

³ Lincoln to Joshua Speed, August 24, 1855 in Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings 1832-1858 (NY, Library of America, 1989), 363.

⁴ Greeley quoted in Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln v, p. 389.

⁵ Ibid, 388-389.

⁶ The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It (NY, Knopf, 1989ed) 130-131.

⁷ William Freehling, The South vs. the South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War (NY Oxford, 2001), chapter 2.

⁸ Richard Carwardine, "Abraham Lincoln, the Presidency and the Mobilization of Union Sentiment," in The American Civil War: Explorations and Reconsiderations, Susan Mary Grant and Brian Holden Reid, ed. (Longman, Harlow, England, 2000) 71.

⁹ Collected Works, Vol. 2, pp. 89, 255-6; Paludan "The Better Angels of Our Nature:" Lincoln, Propaganda and Public Opinion in the North during the Civil War (Gerald McMurtry Lecture, Lincoln Museum, Ft. Wayne, Indiana, 1992)

¹⁰ Richard Carwardine, "Abraham Lincoln, the Presidency and the Mobilization of Union Sentiment," The American Civil War: Explorations and Reconsiderations, (Harlow, Essex, England: Longman, 2000) Susan Mary Grant and Brian Holden Reid, eds., 68-97; Phillip Shaw Paludan, The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln (Lawrence, Ks., University Press of Kansas, 1994) 222-226.

¹¹ As quoted in Paludan, The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln (Lawrence, Ks., University Press of Kansas, 1997), 292.

¹² As quoted in Thomas brown, Politics and Statesmanship Essays on the American Whig Party (NY, Columbia University, 1985) 10-22. On politics of the era generally see Robert Kelley, The Cultural Pattern in American Politics (NY, Oxford, 1969). On Whigs see Daniel Walker Howe, The Political Culture of the American Whigs (Chicago, U of Chicago, 1979); Rush Welter, The Mind of America 1820-1860 (NY, Columbia, 1975), 190-218. Writing after Lincoln Douglas debates had ended the pro Republican Illinois

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Journal observed that Lincoln's speeches "are stamped with the impress of a sincerity and candor which appears at once to the higher and noble faculties of the mind, and wins over the better feelings and affections of our nature. . . They, in effect, are in advance of the age. . .and thus contain those elements which. . .[carry] them beyond the present and makes them useful and beautiful in the future." Nov 14, 1858, p.1.

¹³ Mark E. Neely, Jr, Southern Rights: Political Prisoners and the Myth of Confederate Constitutionalism (Charlottesville, U of Virginia, 1999); Neely, The Fate of Liberty (NY, Oxford, 1991).

¹⁴ Collected Works of Lincoln, Vol. IV, p. 430. For discussion of the historiography of Lincoln's dictatorship see Mark E. Neely, Jr. The Fate of Liberty: Abraham Lincoln and Civil Liberties (NY, Oxford, 1991), epilogue.

¹⁵ Douglas Wilson, "Young Man Lincoln," The Lincoln Enigma: The Changing Faces of an American Icon, Gabor Borill, ed. (NY, Oxford, 2001), 30-35; Donald, Lincoln, 118; Collected Works, I, 368-370. The Lyceum address has been subject to analysis by scholars who see in its warnings about dictators rising Lincoln's prediction and analysis of his own ambition. Michael Burlingame challenges this view by focusing on the truth in the implicit allegation that Lincoln secretly aspired to be a dictator. See Michael Burlingame, The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln (Urbana, U of Illinois, 1994) 253-254. What needs to be recognized, I believe, is that Lincoln was not only thinking in political terms here; he was dealing with his own fears that people of genius might lose control of themselves and overturn the rule of reason personally just as dictators overthrew the rule o flaw politically.

¹⁶ The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: The Complete Documentary Edition. Martha Benner, Cullom Davis etal, editors. University of Illinois, 2000. 3 volumes DVD.

¹⁷ Truth quoted in Carleton Mabee, "Sojourner Truth and President Lincoln," New England Quarterly, Vol. 61 (Dec. 1988), 521. Douglass in Allen Thorne-dyke Rice, ed. Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time (NY, No. American Review, 1886), 193.

¹⁸ Life and Times of Frederick Douglass. Written by Himself (Reprinted from 1892 edition by Collier Books, London, 1962) 489. Morel, "The Other Lincoln-Douglas Debate" Lecture April 28, 2001, Harrods-gate, Tn.