

Heritage Lectures

No. 1109

Delivered February 12, 1998



Published by The Heritage Foundation

February 9, 2009

Abraham Lincoln: Statesman for All Ages

Edwin Meese III

Abraham Lincoln possessed a great sense of humor. There is a great story that was handed down to me. I have not yet been able to find footnote verification that it was actually said by Abraham Lincoln, but it's the kind of story that he should have said, in case he didn't. It illustrates Lincoln's dislike for pomposity and people who put on airs.

The story goes that he had a particular general who liked to send dispatches that were always headed: "Headquarters in the Saddle." Every day, or every other day, Lincoln would get one of these messages entitled "Headquarters in the Saddle." And he got quite annoyed with this, but he kept quiet, as he normally did, until, finally, one day somebody asked him about this general and about this habit of heading all these dispatches "Headquarters in the Saddle." And Lincoln said, "It seems to me that the general has his headquarters where his hindquarters ought to be."

On another occasion, he was confronted by a group of Washington officials who were complaining about General Grant and the fact that there was a rumor going around that General Grant was a regular drinker of alcoholic beverages. And Lincoln replied, "By the way, can you tell me where he gets his whiskey? He has given us successes, and if his whiskey does it, I should like to send a barrel of the same to every general in the field."

Well, as I have read about Lincoln, I have been tremendously impressed by the relevance of his leadership, his principles, and his thinking to the conditions that we have today.

Talking Points

- Abraham Lincoln had a great interest in the Founding Fathers, and he was inspired by what they had begun. He also recognized the role of the President in passing on these critical values embodied in the Founding and its principles to future generations.
- Lincoln was very outspoken about judicial activism and judicial attempts at supremacy, although not an awful lot is said about his view these days. In his opposition to the *Dred Scott* decision, he stressed the importance of recognizing the co-equal character of the three branches of government.
- Lincoln's advice and Lincoln's example are very important in the matter of national unity. Lincoln was compelled to unify the nation by force of arms, and he also sought to unify the people themselves emotionally, by patience, compassion, and persuasion. I would suggest that, today, we must unify the nation by the force of our ideas, by the validity of our principles, and by the persuasiveness of our rhetoric.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/Thought/hl1109.cfm

Produced by the B. Kenneth Simon
Center for American Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Lincoln, as we know, served as the sixteenth President of the United States. As we look back today, that's a point at which our nation had accomplished one-third of its history, as it pertains to where we are today. And under his leadership, and largely because of it, the United States completed the implementation of the promise that was contained in the Declaration of Independence, that all men are created equal, and fulfilled the potential of the Constitution, which is the commitment to equality under the law.

Grounded in the Founding

This was not by accident. Lincoln had a great interest in the Founding Fathers, and he was inspired by what they had begun. This is shown in many of his speeches, where he made reference to the Founding Period.

Stopping in Philadelphia in 1861, on the way to his Inauguration, Lincoln visited Independence Hall, and he gave a speech in which he said:

I have never had a feeling, politically, that did not spring from the sentiments of the Declaration of Independence. I have often pondered over the dangers which were incurred by the men who assembled here [Independence Hall], and adopted that Declaration of Independence—I have pondered over the toils that were endured by the officers and soldiers of the Army, who achieved that Independence.

I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of colonies from the motherland, but something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have an equal chance. This is the sentiment embodied in that Declaration of Independence.

Lincoln not only had that deep feeling about the Founding and its principles, but he also recognized what we might call the transitional role of the Pres-

ident, as the leader of the country, in passing on these critical values to future generations.

While he was in office, he spoke to the 66th Ohio Regiment. He had a habit of trying to meet with each of the regiments that had been recruited for the Union Army, from the various militias of the different states. As they assembled in Washington and marched by, he made it a habit of greeting each one. And afterward, he would take time to speak to them, to their officers, sometimes to whole groups of troops that were assembled there.

In August of 1864, he referred to himself in one of those speeches as “temporarily occupying this big, white house.” And then he went on to say, “It is not merely for today but for all time to come, that we should perpetuate for our children’s children this great and free government, which we have enjoyed all our lives.” Now, this sentiment was not just something he made up for the occasion, to greet these soldiers.

Nearly thirty years earlier, as a young man, he had said in the Lyceum Address in Springfield, Illinois that

we find ourselves under the government of a system of political institutions, conducting more essentially to the ends of civil and religious liberty, than any of which the history of former times tells us. We, then mounting the stage of existence, found ourselves the legal inheritors of these fundamental blessings. We toiled not in the acquirement or establishment of them; they are a long legacy bequeathed to us by a once hearty, brave, and patriotic—but now lamented and departed—race of ancestors.

Theirs was the task, and nobly they performed it, to possess themselves and through themselves, us, of this goodly land, and to uprear upon its hills and its valleys a political edifice of liberty and equal rights. ‘Tis ours only to transmit these to the latest generation that fate shall permit the world to know. Gratitude to our fathers, justice to ourselves, duty to posterity, and love for our species in general all imperatively require us faithfully to perform this task.

Well, that was his sense of passing these things on. And in thinking about this transitional role, as the principles and history of our nation are passed on from one generation to another, I think it is interesting to examine the parallels between Lincoln's leadership and things that are happening in our own time.

Lincoln and Reagan Parallels

Several examples come to mind. When Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980, there were pundits in the press who regarded him only as a gun-slinging, former actor from the Wild West, as many of them regarded California. Well, if you go back 120 years to Lincoln's election as President and look at the way he was viewed, such as is described in the words of Donald Phillips, who wrote the book, *Lincoln and Leadership*, those were the ways in which the Eastern Establishment regarded Lincoln.

Phillips said, "the first Republican President, elected by a minority of the popular vote, was a Washington outsider, who was viewed widely as a second rate, country lawyer and completely ill-equipped and unable to handle the Presidency." Well, I suspect that both presidents benefited greatly by being underestimated by their adversaries, as well as by the establishment of their respective times.

Another similarity is found in a description of Lincoln by the *New York Herald* in 1864. I think that you could have had a similar description of Ronald Reagan—it would have had to be done, not by a New York paper, but by the *Washington Times*. They said that, "plain, common sense, a kindly disposition, a straightforward purpose, and a shrewd perception of the ins and outs of poor, weak, human nature have enabled him to master difficulties which would have snapped any other man."

Further, let me mention that both Lincoln and Reagan shared one other characteristic, as illustrated in these words describing Lincoln: "He tended to be strikingly flexible while, at the same time, a model of consistency."

I would suggest to you that we can see other parallels in applying Lincoln's advice to situations with which we are all familiar today. Clarence Thomas has told of how he overcame the malicious and the unfair criticism simply by not reading the newspa-

pers or watching television. Compare that with Lincoln's statement in his last public speech, which he gave in April of 1865, when he said, "As a general rule, I abstain from reading the reports of attacks upon myself, wishing not to be provoked by that to which I cannot properly offer an answer." Donald Phillips said, "He had the courage to carry with him to the White House his main strategy of simply ignoring slander and vilification."

We could also take comfort and inspiration from Lincoln's words in his Cooper Institute address in February of 1860: "Neither let us be slandered from our duty by false accusations against us. . . . Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it."

Lincoln also understood the test of true leadership and the key to how a leader provides the necessary inspiration to his followers. James MacGregor Burns described it this way:

A leader is one who induces followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations, the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations of both the leaders and the followers. And the genius of leadership lies in the manner in which leaders see and act on their own, as well as on their followers', values and motivations.

In this sense, Lincoln has advice that could, perhaps, well be used by the Republican leadership in Congress today. As he said in his first Lincoln-Douglas debate in August of 1858, "With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions."

Lessons for Today

While those are examples of Abraham Lincoln's relevance to our own times, and while they are, perhaps, an interesting kind of overview of the relationship between one century and another, I would suggest today that there are two major public policy issues on which Lincoln's thought and actions are particularly valuable.

The first has to do with the role of the judiciary in our structure of government, including such things

as judicial activism and judicial attempts at supremacy. Lincoln was very outspoken about this, although not an awful lot is said about his view these days. Of course, one of the things that was a catalyst to his thinking on the whole subject was the *Dred Scott* decision.

In his opposition to that decision, he talked about his view of the Court and the importance of recognizing the co-equal character of the three branches of government. He said:

The candid citizen must confess that if the policy of the government upon vital questions and affecting the whole people is to be irrevocably fixed by decisions of the Supreme Court, the people will have ceased to be their own rulers, having, to that extent, practically resigned their government into the hands of that eminent tribunal.

In a sense, Lincoln was echoing words that James Madison had written some considerable time before. Madison said, “The several departments, being perfectly coordinate by the terms of their common commission, neither of them, it is evident, can portend to an exclusive or superior right of settling the boundaries between their respective powers.” That was what Lincoln enjoyed hearing, and on the basis of Madison’s words, he had his Attorney General prepare an opinion to justify his own decision to interpret the Constitution and then to act on what he believed the Constitution demanded.

He had his Attorney General, a gentleman by the name of Bates, issue an opinion the day after the address in which he made the statement I quoted, and Bates developed an argument based on the principles that were enunciated by James Madison.

Bates wrote the following opinion:

These departments, the executive, the legislative, and the judicial, are coordinate and co-equal. That is, neither being sovereign, each is independent in its sphere and not subordinate to the others, to either of them or both of them together. If we allow one of the three to determine the extent of its own powers and also the extent of the power of the other two, that one can control the whole government and has, in fact, achieved sovereignty.

This is an issue that we are wrestling with at the present time. I believe, following Lincoln’s example, that the Congress can be much more active and much more assertive in its role in relation to the judiciary. There are a number of ways in which this can happen. The Senate can more carefully fulfill its role in the selection of federal judges.

In the past, there have been attempts to intimidate the Senate for carefully looking at potential judges and determining who is fit to assume the federal bench and who understands the constitutional role of the judiciary among these coordinate branches of government. Furthermore, I think Congress can do much in reining in the judiciary by exercising its constitutional power to determine the jurisdiction and the regulation of the courts, and by Congress itself restraining its own actions, including the urge to create more federal laws and more causes of action—which only give more power to the courts and cause mischief.

The second thing that I believe is that Lincoln’s advice and Lincoln’s example are very important in the matter of national unity. Lincoln was compelled to unify the nation by force of arms, and he also sought to unify the people themselves emotionally, by patience, compassion, and persuasion. I would suggest that, today, we must unify the nation by the force of our ideas, by the validity of our principles, and by the persuasiveness of our rhetoric.

There are at least three ways that are very important to contribute to this unifying action. In one way, we must end the most divisive practice in our country today, which has had the effect of setting citizen against citizen. That is, of course, discrimination on the basis of race and sex through quotas and preferences. Much has been done, but much needs to be done.

This is a question of simple fairness, simple justice, and the simple application of the constitutional provisions, the constitutional principles that Lincoln talked about, and equality under the law—for all people—where no one receives a detriment or a preference because of their race or because of their gender.

Another way of promoting unity is promoting a common language for this country. For too long

we have been led to believe that we, as part of so-called diversity, have to accept a whole variety of languages, even in official matters, as opposed to policy decisions that could be made to help newly arrived citizens in our country learn the English language and assimilate into the culture, through the practice of that language and becoming part of society, generally.

What has happened is—again in the name of diversity, in the name of multiculturalism, or all the other buzzwords that are so common and are found on college campuses and, unfortunately, have spread into the rest of the community—we have tried to foster a multiplicity of languages, so that we have, in many of our cities, a replica of the Tower of Babel, in the sense of people not understanding each other. That, in itself, would be bad enough. The idea that in official documents, in voting, and in other official actions we would have a multiplicity of languages is bad enough.

What we are really doing, though, by not insisting on a common language for our people—besides the divisive effects on the people themselves—is dooming to economic inferiority the people who are not encouraged to get into the mainstream by learning the basic language of our country. It is for this

reason that we need to exert a unifying force by promoting a common language.

Thirdly, I believe it is very important that we resist the politicians and the political forces that engage in class warfare by appealing to the lowest and most base emotion of people, emotions such as greed and envy, and thereby attempt to divide Americans on the basis of their social status or their economic condition.

Just as Lincoln preserved the union by leadership and bold action, we must preserve the unity of our nation by our commitment and dedication to this cause. Ronald Reagan used to talk about a “shining city on a hill.” Lincoln, a century earlier, said it this way: “My dream is of a place and time where America will once again be seen as the last, best hope on earth.”

I would suggest to you on this, Lincoln’s birthday, that our task, as we work together, is to commemorate this great President by building a nation good enough for Lincoln.

—Edwin Meese III is Ronald Reagan Distinguished Fellow in Public Policy and Chairman of the Center for Legal and Judicial Studies at The Heritage Foundation. These remarks were originally delivered at The Claremont Institute’s Lincoln Day Symposium of February 12, 1998.