

# *Why Lincoln Matters*

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**A**braham Lincoln ranks as the most respected American President and the President deemed most effective and able. Streets and parks throughout the world are named in his honor. Almost all literate people know his name and something of his life. The significant details of his life are well known: his log cabin background, his successful effort to save the Union, his emancipation of the slaves, the *Gettysburg Address*, and his assassination. Less well known is the fact that his ancestral roots run deep into Virginia, the heart of the Confederacy.

In 1768, John Lincoln, referred to as “Virginia John” by Lincoln genealogists and historians to distinguish him from many other family members of the same name, moved to Virginia from Berks County, Pennsylvania, with his wife Rebecca Flowers Morris and their nine children, the oldest of whom was Abraham Lincoln. This Abraham Lincoln was known as “Captain” Abraham Lincoln because of his service in the American Revolution, while a resident of the Shenandoah Valley. Captain Abraham’s brother, Jacob, also served in the Revolutionary militia.

Virginia John and Rebecca Lincoln, together with their nine children, settled on a 600-acre tract of land acquired by the Lincolns in what is now Rockingham County, about six miles north of Harrisonburg. Captain Abraham was then twenty-four years of age. After he came to Virginia, he married Bathsheba Herring from Cooks Creek, Dayton, Virginia. While living on Linville Creek, Captain Abraham and Bathsheba Herring had all five of their children, including their youngest child, Thomas, the President’s father, born in 1778.

About 1782, Captain Abraham Lincoln moved to Kentucky to the community now known as Springfield. He sold his farm of 200 acres in Virginia acquired from his father’s tract a few years earlier. In 1786, he was killed in Kentucky in an Indian ambush. His grave is not precisely marked but because a stone bearing his initials was uncovered by a farmer plowing a field many years later, the approximate location is known.

Thomas Lincoln, the President’s father, eventually moved to Elizabethtown, Kentucky, where he met Nancy Hanks. They become the parents of President Abraham Lincoln and that part of the Lincoln family is quite well known. President Lincoln’s sister Sarah died in childbirth; no heirs of hers survived. Abe Lincoln’s infant brother died soon after birth. Only the President’s line

prevailed. His last descendant, a great-grandson, Robert Todd Lincoln Beckwith, died in 1986 in Springfield, Virginia, as an old man. Interestingly, Beckwith had married a young German woman who was maintaining his home for him. When she announced she was pregnant with his son, an apparent direct descendant of President Lincoln, Beckwith proved that such paternity was medically and physically impossible. He prevailed in divorce proceedings on grounds of adultery. Rather than submit the child to a blood test, the divorced wife returned to Germany. She reappeared when Beckwith's estate (inherited through the Robert Todd Lincoln family) of millions of dollars was settled, naturally, making a claim which needed to be accommodated to settle the estate. It is certain that the son of the German woman is not a descendant of the President. That line has died out.

Returning to the Virginia John Lincoln family, one of the other children of Virginia John and Rebecca Lincoln, Jacob, brother of Captain Abraham, and a soldier who was present at the Yorktown surrender of Cornwallis, became the progenitor of most of the Lincolns who remained in Virginia. Jacob built a beautiful two-story house within a few yards of his parents' home around 1800. That dwelling still stands and is known as the Lincoln Homestead. Virginia John Lincoln lived the rest of his days (about twenty years) on Linville Creek, and at his death was buried in what has become known as the Lincoln Cemetery. Five generations of Lincolns are buried in the cemetery. The last was buried there in 1938.

Like her husband, Rebecca Lincoln, the President's great-grandmother, lived her remaining almost forty years on Linville Creek, died in 1806, and was buried beside her husband in the Lincoln Cemetery. Their log house burned before she died and was rebuilt some fifteen years after her death. The replacement structure was demolished by 1920.

Of particular interest is the fact that Lincoln slaves are buried in the Lincoln Cemetery. Stones have been erected by the Lincoln family to honor Ned and Queen, the last of the Lincoln slaves. Theoretically, they were freed by the Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Abraham Lincoln.

President Lincoln was quite aware of his Virginia roots. In fact, while he was in Congress, in 1848, he wrote a letter to David Lincoln living on the Lincoln land in Rockingham County, acknowledging his connections with the Rockingham County Lincolns. He recited that his father had been born in Rockingham County, and his grandfather, for whom he was named, had lived there. He wanted to know more about his family.

Just as Lincoln knew of his Virginia connections, his Shenandoah Valley relatives were conscious of ties to the President during the Civil War. At one point a cousin was asked if Abe Lincoln was related to him; he replied, "Yes, I would like to meet Cousin Abe. I would like to

shoot him.” Obviously, family connections did not override the partisanship of war. In fact, Lincolns fought for the Confederacy.

Abraham Lincoln’s great-grandparents, grandparents, and father all lived in Rockingham County; his grandmother was born in Rockingham County; and his family has been in the community for over 200 years. Virginia, then, has stronger claims as the ancestral home of the Lincolns than any other state. Since we Virginians are proud of our heritage, we are not reluctant to claim that Abraham Lincoln’s greatness must surely arise in part from his Virginia heritage!

Almost thirty-five years ago, as a friend and I were having lunch, I lamented the fact that we did not do anything to honor the local Lincoln connections. We agreed that we should take some action. We decided that we would meet at the Lincoln Cemetery on Lincoln’s birthday, February 12, and that we would each read something about Lincoln to each other. This began a series of thirty-three consecutive annual ceremonies in which I have presented a program at the Lincoln Cemetery. There has never been a good February 12! I have been there in forty inches of snow when only my dog accompanied me. While I am glad to say the dog seemed to enjoy the program immensely, I did cut it rather short. The weather is so predictably bad that I have started thinking of it as “Stonewall Jackson’s revenge!”

On another occasion, Judge John Paul, my friend who helped me start the program, and I were the only two participants. It was a cold wintry day with blizzard-type conditions: the ground seemed to merge into the sky, all was white, the wind was howling, and the snow was blowing all around us. It was bitter cold. All of a sudden I saw emerging from the mist, and approaching us, a tall, dark figure wearing a stovepipe hat and what appeared to be a cape blowing behind him. I pulled Judge Paul’s sleeve and said, “I hope you see someone coming.” He agreed he did, and he said he was also relieved that I had seen it. Standing in a cemetery on a cold winter day with no visible landmarks, seeing an apparition of Abraham Lincoln is not an expected event! It turned out to be an actor who plays Lincoln in local schools, who happened to be in the area, heard about the ceremony, and “decided to surprise us.”

Over the years, I developed a general intention to establish an organization that would both undergird the efforts to inform the community of the Lincoln connections and to identify and preserve local Lincoln landmarks. Because of very busy careers as a lawyer, then as a college president, I felt I needed to postpone the organizational activities until a later time.

The timetable was accelerated, however, after my experience in Richmond in April, 2003. At that time, a statue of Abraham Lincoln with his son, Tad, was placed at the Civil War Visitor Center at the Tredegar Iron Works facility where the Confederate Army forged its weapons. While the statue was benign and its placement was welcomed by much of the Richmond community, there

were those who vented their bitterness about Lincoln's role in the Civil War by hooting, jeering, waving placards praising John Wilkes Booth, and generally condemning Lincoln as a tyrant and murderer. While I, a seventh-generation Virginian, also appreciate the Lost Cause tradition, I was shocked that more than 100 years after the War there should be such passionate negative expressions about Lincoln and the results of the Civil War. I deeply admire Lee, Stuart, and other great Southern generals, but I am absolutely convinced that Lincoln saved the Union, abolished slavery, and made possible the restoration of peace and unity after a terrible war. What I saw in Richmond was not good-humored expressions of devotion to the South; it was mean-spirited, vitriolic, and abusive. I felt that this was a perverse twist to the Lost Cause tradition and needed to be countered. It is not appropriate for succeeding generations of young Virginians to be exposed to such foolishness without a response. Hence, the creation of the Lincoln Society of Virginia was expedited.

While the Society, which now has about ninety members, will continue to have as its objectives the preservation of local Lincoln landmarks and the communication of the Lincoln Family connections in Virginia, it will also have as its objective to provide an honest and fair interpretation of Abraham Lincoln from a Southern point of view. In that connection, the Society holds an annual symposium at Bridgewater College, focusing on Lincoln and how Lincoln should be interpreted and understood from the point of view of Virginians and other Southerners. We are advocating an attitude of respect and admiration for Lincoln. Like the rest of the country – and the world – we Virginians admire Lincoln.



Photograph of Abraham Lincoln circa 1863, by Mathew Brady.  
(National Archives and Record Administration)



The story of Abraham Lincoln is well known. So is his image for good character. Shaped both by fact and myth, truth and fiction, Lincoln's reputation for honesty, wisdom, and fairness is indelibly engraved upon the consciousness of the American people. Revelations of misconduct and character flaws on the part of others who once held high office and treated as heroic have made us more skeptical about the authenticity of inherited images. Our skepticism has evolved into cynicism after being exposed immediately to revelations of scandals or moral errors by highly-visible leaders. The effect of these contemporaneous revelations is exacerbated by a 24/7 news format and a press almost completely free of any inhibitions, hero worship, or even moral perspective. Trivia and serious misconduct might get equal attention. Even now the excitement of electing the first African-American president, another Illinoisan, is tempered with the cynicism and partisanship that have become so much a part of our age.

When exposed to the cynicism of the current age and with the pressure of incredible scrutiny by historians and others over a period of more than 125 years, how does Lincoln's reputation hold up? While there are the contrarians and critics sprinkled among the host of commentators and scholars, it is almost universally believed by thoughtful observers that Lincoln truly was honest, reliable, trustworthy, wise, temperate, kind, fair and visionary and that his presidency was critical to the preservation of our Republic.

In practically every survey of perceptions of American presidents, both historians and general audiences rate Lincoln in greatness either first or second only to George Washington. Such surveys, whatever their deficiency as accurate assessments, have produced the same results as to Lincoln for more than seventy-five years. Representative of the view of historians is that of James McPherson, dean of Civil War historians:

In every regard, Lincoln was a superior president. An extraordinary politician, he knew how to assess men's character and was a master of the details of party organization. Tolerant and forbearing, he possessed a genius for getting individuals of diverse viewpoints to work together on a broad range of issues. Manifesting an uncanny feel for public opinion, he displayed a sure sense of timing, always crucial in politics. Flexible in his approach, he possessed the ability to weigh alternatives and to perceive clearly the consequences of his actions. Never losing sight of his larger objectives, he knew when to stand firm and when to compromise. Not tied to the past, he was willing to try new policies to achieve his ends, and, always ready to shoulder responsibility, he was not afraid to change his mind or admit that he had been wrong.<sup>1</sup>

The assessment of Lincoln, however, is complicated by the dubious accuracy of much that has been written about him. Some of the early accolades showered on Lincoln clearly resulted from his martyrdom from an assassin's hand while Lincoln was still in office and because it happened at the successful conclusion of a great civil war. One should not be surprised at the martyrology that resulted; many of us can remember rather heroic, almost mythical, post-death images of John F. Kennedy, also murdered while in office.

The heroic embellishment of Lincoln, which began immediately upon his death, complicates the work of historians in their efforts to assess his effectiveness and character. The embellishments were immediate and profound. Conveniently for the myth-makers, Lincoln was murdered on Easter Friday, or Black Friday, so on Easter Sunday, the parallel to the death of the Christian Savior could not be resisted. Even formerly harsh critics joined in the nearly unanimous parade of hero worshipers (In fact, some critics who expressed satisfaction at his death suffered beatings, jail sentences or even death.) The lectures, articles, pamphlets, and books started immediately. As early as 1866, Josiah Holland published a complete biography, quite good in many respects, but highly idealized. He described Lincoln, who never joined a church, "as eminently a Christian President" and attributed all Lincoln's achievements "to the fact that he was a Christian President."<sup>2</sup> Other articles and biographies soon joined in to portray Lincoln in idealized, even mythical, proportions. What Merrill Peterson calls the apotheosis had begun.

Lincoln's longtime law partner, Bill Herndon, was appalled. Almost immediately after Lincoln's death, he started interviewing people who had known Lincoln, retrieved letters or other writings, and conducted research that he thought might help interpret Lincoln. He committed not only to produce a factually accurate biography, warts and all, but when he eventually published his book, he claimed to be interpreting the "subjective inner life of Lincoln" or the mind of Lincoln. While Herndon's biography was not published until 1889, his lectures on Lincoln starting in 1866 challenged and rejected any effort to make Lincoln into a Christian. He also soon planted his claim that Lincoln was a non-believer, even an atheist; he started the tradition that Lincoln did not love his wife, that his life with her was pure hell; he is responsible for the tradition that Lincoln loved Anne Rutledge and was overwhelmed to the point of being suicidal because of her death. It was Herndon who claimed that Lincoln admitted that his mother Nancy Hanks was illegitimate, and Herndon even claimed that Lincoln himself was illegitimate.

Herndon's controversial lectures provoked a hostile response throughout the country. Ward Lamon, another friend of Lincoln bought a copy of Herndon's research notes and documents and published his own biography in 1872.<sup>3</sup> Repeating some of Herndon's most controversial claims about Lincoln, it so enflamed the readers that a planned second volume had to be abandoned.

From those early days to this, the battle lines have been drawn. Some biographers and historians have been on one side of Herndon's interpretation, some on the other. As recently as 1998, Douglas Wilson, formerly director of Jefferson Studies at Monticello, in *Honor's Voice*, attempted to redeem the disparaged credibility of Herndon and his sources.<sup>4</sup> For example, Wilson accepts as true the story of young Abraham Lincoln's passionate love for Anne Rutledge. Distinguished Lincoln scholar Mark Neely said about Wilson's acceptance:

From this meager factual record has been woven one of the most fantastic romantic tales in all of American folklore. Wilson, by contrast, believes Herndon correctly interpreted events from interviews that Wilson finds credible.<sup>5</sup>

The tradition of Anne Rutledge, like so many others associated with Lincoln, is hard to establish as factually accurate. Because of the martyrology, the early embellishment of Lincoln's life and service, the antagonism of his biographers which resulted in condemnation of the other side's evidence or interpretations, the reader might despair not only of knowing who is right but whether anything that we have learned about Lincoln is reliable and complete.

It is a challenge, then, to try to draw conclusions about why Lincoln is perceived by scholars and amateurs alike to be such a great president, to know which characteristics or events we can accept as true in arguing our case. Clearly, some of the interpretations of Lincoln need to be rejected as not credible or as inconsistent with better evidence. For example, just in recent years, the "memoirs" of Mariah Vance, the Lincoln's Springfield, Illinois, housekeeper in the 1850s, have been transcribed and published. While they may very well be her actual testimony, her recollection almost fifty years after the events, published almost 100 years after that, are simply not credible, not because Mariah Vance was not truthful, but because her memory, necessarily suspect after fifty years, was clearly affected by all the stories, legends, controversies, and claims about Lincoln to which she had been exposed during those years.

Even as to undocumented traditions and subjective interpretations of Lincoln, however, certain patterns emerge which seem to constitute reliable understandings of Lincoln. Merrill D. Peterson in his extraordinarily helpful book, *Lincoln: An American Memory*, reviews all the important Lincoln literature and traditions and lays out five themes constituting the enduring image of Abraham Lincoln. They are:

- ◆ Savior of the Union
- ◆ Great Emancipator
- ◆ Man of the People

- ◆ First True American
- ◆ Self-Made Man<sup>6</sup>

Professor Peterson masterfully marshals the evidence and patterns of interpretation to support each of those images of Lincoln as core, accurate, and enduring. To Peterson's invaluable contribution to Lincoln scholarship there should probably be added two other major themes: Man of Character and author of federal rights. While Peterson, as is true of almost all Lincoln scholars, acknowledges the exceptional reputation of Abraham Lincoln for personal honesty and integrity, both during his lifetime and since, I submit that his character and wisdom are the primary reasons for his greatness and for his enduring position as one of our two greatest presidents. (The effectiveness of George Washington, the other of the two greatest presidents, also depended to a very great extent on the perception of his character.)

A claim that Lincoln was one of our greatest presidents implies some criteria such as success in war, popularity, economic prosperity, oratory, independence, and many other possible factors. My model or framework is admittedly existential. Rather than to adopt criteria from learned historians, biographers, and students of leadership or to develop criteria of my own, I take Lincoln as he really was – even with all the problems with the evidence I have already acknowledged – and look for the principles of greatness that seem critical to his success. To the extent that those principles are not unique to time, place, and circumstances, it seems reasonable to draw conclusions and inferences from the study of Lincoln that might be posited as general principles for greatness in presidents. In other words, to be great, a president should copy Lincoln. Clearly, the attribute of wisdom, ability to compromise, to understand the mood of the public, to develop consensus among disparate views, all contributed to his effectiveness. But his greatness came primarily from presidential character.

Before turning to the evidence which led me to name character as Lincoln's defining, essential quality, I will say what I mean by the term "presidential character." By presidential character, I include several characteristics critical not only to an understanding of the man but to an understanding of his greatness as President. I mean more than personal integrity although it is an essential component of Presidential character. These are the four characteristics that constitute presidential character in Lincoln:

1. Lincoln had the ability to identify and articulate a vision, a statement of goals that were aspirational and noble and goals that lifted the human spirit.

2. He understood and interpreted the events of his day in moral terms, not necessarily religious terms but certainly in moral terms.
3. He was rigid as to core principles. On those, he would not yield.
4. He had personal integrity and credibility. It was this personal integrity which made it possible for him to succeed.

I contend that character as I have defined it explains Lincoln's greatness and is essential for greatness of a leader in a democratic republic in which leadership is dependent on the popular will. Since I have already acknowledged that much of the evidence about Lincoln is either challenged or contradictory, I cannot simply cite uncontroverted circumstances of his life to make my case. I can, however, cite two major results that are not controverted even though people may draw different conclusions from them. They are preserving the Union and the emancipation of slaves. Then, I will describe some events whose successful outcome, I believe, were due to Lincoln's personal credibility.

Let me turn to the evidence on which I rely. These are actions or accomplishments where interpretations may differ but the historical facts are reasonably well established.

## SAVING THE UNION

Lincoln was so adamant about the preservation of the Union that he accepted war. His was not simply a concern about territory and property; as a Congressman, he had taken the unpopular position of opposing our war with Mexico to grab more territory. He had a vision of America as a self-governing republic which was wrapped up in the preservation of the Union. Lincoln not only saw a connection between the preservation of the Union and liberty, but he articulated a vision of the Union as the embodiment of liberty and self-government. He said in 1861:

The central idea pervading this struggle is the necessity that is upon us of proving that popular government is not an absurdity.... If we fail, it will go far to prove the incapability of the people to govern themselves.

The distinguished political scientist, David Greenstone, wrote:

Lincoln, then, accepted but went beyond Webster's and Douglas's description of the Union. Lincoln's version did not simply refer to some existing regime

with a specific set of republican institutions. It also included the Union's commitment to equality of rights, to the love of justice, and to the extension of positive liberty to all. Moreover, *Lincoln's loyalty was to this description.*<sup>7</sup>

Lincoln saw the survival of the Union in moral and ethical terms. He saw the Union in almost transcendental terms, as an instrument for good. He thought its destruction risked this great experiment for good to be accomplished by good people. As Greenstone observed:

Consequently, for Lincoln the real danger was that the Union might no longer deserve to be so described – not because of a geographically divisive sectional quarrel but because of an assault on the Union's basic ethical principles.<sup>8</sup>

And Greenstone adds: "Lincoln's concept of liberty and his description of the Union were ethical norms to be used in the facts he observed."<sup>9</sup>

In his non-negotiable efforts to save the Union, Lincoln saw the Union as the vehicle for achieving the kind of nation the Founders had envisioned but had not fully established. For him the Union was this "last great hope," where government of the people, by the people, and for the people must prevail. His ability to articulate that vision, especially in the Gettysburg address is clearly established. He saw this struggle in moral terms. Even in the Second Inaugural Address, he acknowledged the will of Divine Providence and the justice that required enough blood to flow in war to requite the slave master's whip.

And, as to the Union, he was rigid. He never recognized the right of a state to withdraw from the Union. Even when he was told that he could end the war, even when many men in the North were willing to acknowledge secession, he was unmovable.

## THE ISSUANCE OF THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

In late 1862, just after the battle of Antietam, Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation to be effective on January 1, 1863. Many, including important politicians and General McClellan, bitterly opposed it.

While the Emancipation was a war measure and did not liberate all slaves, its practical origins do not disguise its moral intent and dimensions. It had an enormous effect and met with extraordinary reactions, positive and negative. Jefferson Davis said it was the most execrable document in human history; many Democrats in the North condemned it and said they could no longer support the war; abolitionists loved it but thought it did not go far enough.

Lincoln's courage, sense of justice, and his ability to see the value of making the war a moral struggle prevailed. It was important that the troops and the citizenry trusted Abraham Lincoln and believed him when he talked about the importance of emancipating slaves.

Lincoln always hated slavery and while he conceded its constitutional and legal basis, he would not back off from condemning it and doggedly refusing to accept its extension. It is true that he made statements about the social inferiority of Blacks and discussed colonization of Blacks outside the country; however, he always saw slavery as immoral and said so. By the end of the war, he had brought the Nation to his point of view.

As with the preservation of the Union, once Lincoln established the course of emancipation, he was tenacious in refusing to back down. Even when he was told in 1864 that the retreat from Emancipation might end the war, he refused and made it a non-negotiable condition for ending the war.

In his successful fight to save the Union and in the emancipation of the slaves, Lincoln prevailed because of his character: his ability to envision and articulate noble ideals; his interpretation of events in moral terms, which gave the war the color of crusading for justice and liberty; and his tenacity in refusing to budge from his primary objectives. But Lincoln's success was also aided immeasurably by his own personal integrity and his credibility; he was seen as honest and just, almost an Old Testament tower of righteousness. People trusted him.

In some potentially disastrous circumstances, he prevailed to a great extent because he was perceived as a man of character even though he was unpopular. Just as his character helped him prevail in the struggle to save the Union and to emancipate the slaves, in other areas Lincoln's credibility and character helped him succeed in extraordinarily difficult circumstances and contentious areas. These include the conscription of citizen-soldiers, reconstruction policies, and the re-election of 1864.

## CONSCRIPTION

When conscription was inaugurated, there was immediate opposition. Many thought it unconstitutional; probably most thought it was alien to democratic principles. The opposition was more than intellectual. It sometimes became violent. Just a few days after the successful battle of Gettysburg, there were violent demonstrations in several states. In New York City, 100 people were killed and troops were needed to restore order. To have young farm boys from Iowa, Illinois, Ohio, and Irish and German immigrants to accept service in the military, it was critical they be able to trust the President. While troops came to love General McClellan and to respect and love some of their other commanders, the Union struggle came to be clearly identified with the persona

of Abraham Lincoln, in sharp contrast to the lack of identification with Jefferson Davis in the South. Even though many people resisted the draft, sometimes violently, it was successful in supplying the necessary troops for the Union armies. Those men who complied and remained in the field trusted “Ole Abe” and were willing to die far from home because they believed in him.

## RECONSTRUCTION

Remarkably, Lincoln really believed that there should be “malice toward none.” While he was determined to defeat what he saw as an insurrection and was committed not to let the plantation owners take control of the defeated South, notwithstanding the incredible loss of life and destruction of property, he did not yield his intellect to his emotions. Like a wise parent disciplining a child, he wanted the South fully restored with almost all its citizens participating. His Ten Percent policy was lenient. His exclusion of so few Confederates from the amnesty provisions made it easy to meet the ten percent requirement for rebels who must take the oath of loyalty to qualify the state for readmission. Lincoln was consistent: just as the Southern states could not withdraw from the Union, they should not be excluded from it.

There were many in his party who disagreed, and after his death, they prevailed. For Lincoln, in contrast with the Radical Republicans, reconstruction represented more than a protection of presidential prerogative against Congressional usurpation; he believed fundamentally and fervently in the Union. Just as he had fought a war to preserve it, he would not permit the peace to destroy it by treating the South as mere conquered territory.

Abraham Lincoln’s moral leadership, the ability of people to believe him and believe in him, also meant that the war did not become a war of revenge and punishment. While reconstruction had its hard aspects, Lincoln’s moral leadership during the war and his actions during the closing days of the war set a tone which kept the war in perspective as one to preserve the Union, and eventually to free slaves, not to punish Southerners. Hence, the bloody retribution so often associated with civil wars in other countries did not occur in our own land.

Just six weeks before his death he said in his great Second Inaugural Address:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

## ELECTION OF 1864

One would like to think that a man of Lincoln's eventual popularity would have had no trouble winning the election of 1864. After all, in the previous year, the North had been victorious at Vicksburg and Gettysburg. The South was thought to be on its last legs; the popular Ulysses Grant had been brought in from the West to take charge of the Union armies. But in the months preceding the November election, Lincoln was in grave danger of not being re-elected.

He was unpopular with many groups. The abolitionists rejected him because he was too cautious on the slavery issue; the War Democrats and the Copperheads hated him because he made freedom of the slaves a condition of peace; the Radical Republicans in Congress were angry that he appeared to be soft on the South as far as reconstruction; others were angry because of the prolongation and lack of success in the war.

War fatigue was overwhelming. People wondered if the war would ever end. After Grant took over the Eastern armies, just from May to August, he churned out 100,000 casualties and always came out second best to Lee. There had already been 500,000 deaths; eventually the total would reach 600,000.

Lincoln had upset many because of his executive decisions. He had suspended the writ of habeas corpus and permitted military courts to put opponents in jail. He had applied heavy-handed tactics to keep Maryland and other border states in the Union.

The Emancipation Proclamation was a big problem. Issued in September 1862 to become effective January 1, 1863, it infuriated the War Democrats who had supported the war but passionately opposed making the war a contest over slavery. Their slogan had been: "The Constitution as it is; the Union as it was." Now some added: "And the Negroes where they are!" The election, in many respects, was a referendum on slavery.



Lincoln's political position in the summer of 1864 was tenuous. The Democrats nominated General George McClellan who had previously commanded the Union armies. He was extremely popular, particularly with his troops who would be voting in this election.

The Union victories at Atlanta on September 2, 1864, and Sheridan's heroic rally at Cedar Creek in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia on September 30, 1864, clearly helped turn public opinion to Lincoln, and he won re-election decisively. He was also helped by the Copperheads or Peace Democrats as they were also known whose identification with the Democratic Party hurt

McClellan in the election. However, several aspects of the election show the effect of Lincoln's character on the results:

- ◆ Despite General McClellan's popularity with the troops and the general population, Lincoln decisively defeated him.

- ◆ Even though the Union troops knew that McClellan's victory might end the war so they could go home, by a vote of eighty percent they supported Lincoln, knowing it would keep them in the killing fields for more war. They clearly trusted Lincoln; they believed in him.

- ◆ In dramatic fashion, Lincoln was able to turn the Union around on slavery. His clear stand that the war must be fought until slavery was destroyed, so unpopular when he first asserted it, carried the day.

After his re-election, there was never again any question of slavery continuing. But as late as August 1864, just ten weeks before the election, Lincoln was in great political trouble. Would his persona, his character, his reputation for integrity carry the Union cause in the face of the horror of hundreds of thousands of casualties, extraordinary economic and social displacement, and general weariness of war? To a friend in August 1864, he said: "You think I don't know I am going to be beaten, *but I do* and unless some great change takes place *badly beaten*." On August 23, he signed this memorandum: "This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so cooperate with the President-Elect, as to save the union between the election and the inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such ground that he cannot possibly save it afterwards." Because Lincoln was such a man of character and integrity and believed so fervently in Constitutional government he would not take extraordinary measures to cancel or postpone the election, even during a civil war, to maintain his position although he recognized that if he were defeated, the cause for which he had fought so hard would be forfeited. As a matter of conscience, he would not abandon the noble cause; he would not diminish the nobility of the effort.

While it might have helped him win an election to have appeared more flexible in negotiating a peace agreement with the South in 1864, particularly showing a flexibility toward the emancipation of slaves, he issued this statement in a “To Whom It May Concern” letter just before the election: “Any proposition which embraces the restoration of peace, the integrity of the whole Union *and the abandonment of slavery*...will be received and considered.” (Emphasis added.) His critics howled; they thought he was continuing to require Union blood to be shed over a stubborn insistence that slaves must be free.

David Long, in *The Jewel of Liberty*, wrote: “The re-election of Abraham Lincoln provided the glue that sealed the cracks in the foundation of representative government. It was a necessary rite of passage for a nation struggling to live up to its stated ideals while it tossed in a sea of violence.”<sup>10</sup>

I contend, then, that the words of Lincoln, the most eloquent of any president, the consistency of his positions on matters of principle, his view of the struggles in moral terms, and his personal integrity explain his greatness as a president. While some characteristics of Lincoln are disputed, others are beyond dispute. His reputation for honesty which earned him the sobriquet “Honest Abe,” is well known and unchallenged. As early as his young adult years in New Salem as a storekeeper, going to great lengths to return change erroneously withheld or a book borrowed or to correct a misstatement, through his practice as an attorney when he refused to handle unjust causes and was perceived to be so honest that one could take his word for anything, and into the White House, one could believe Abraham Lincoln. His lack of pretense, his wonderful prose in letters and speeches, his kindness (he could hardly bear to authorize deserters to be shot) and his fundamental fairness (as seen in his refusal to withdraw the Emancipation Proclamation) confirmed his persona of justice and integrity, and helped make him a Man of the People, and for most in the Union, but clearly not all, a sympathetic figure. His kindness and empathy were reflected in letters to widows and mothers of soldiers killed in combat; he frequently visited military hospitals where he could not control his tears, once stooping to kiss the forehead of a dying soldier; he complained that he who could not kill a chicken because of abhorrence of blood should preside over so much killing. Turning from one young soldier in a military hospital whose leg had just been amputated, he exclaimed: “Oh, this awful, awful war!” Pressed by one of his generals to authorize execution of a soldier deserting to get home to see his mother, he said: “General, there are already too many weeping widows in the United States. For God’s sake, don’t ask me to add to the number for I won’t do it.” His soldiers came to understand that he cared deeply about them; they personalized the relationship and thought of him as “Uncle Abraham.”

Lincoln's special qualities as President also included an extraordinarily high degree of personal honor and integrity. While he was seen as a man of tenderness, sympathy, kindness, and fairness, all of which endeared him to his soldiers and to most of the Union population, those characteristics would not have been enough to permit him to prevail through four years of bloody warfare and for his name to continue to be so hallowed even in a cynical age. The additional, critical, ingredient was his personal honesty and integrity. Merrill Peterson has written: "Many marveled at the entire absence in him of vanity and affectation, malice and guile. He was open, candid, and honest. 'Honest Abe' was more than a political slogan; it was God's truth."<sup>11</sup> One could believe Abraham Lincoln. When he said something, he meant it, and one could rely on it. On matters of honor and principle, he not only spoke clearly and firmly; he could not be budged from his position even in the face of overwhelming opposition and the prospect of almost certain defeat. At many points during the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln's personality and character were critical to his ability to prevail in the face of overwhelming odds.

Ultimately, it was Lincoln's character, particularly his reputation for honesty, which made the American people trust him. His personal integrity permitted him to educate and persuade the troops and the citizenry to the *moral* aspects of the struggle to achieve his twin objectives: maintain the Union and liberate slaves. Ida Tarbell, one of Lincoln's biographers, noted that after his death: "They [the people] saw how slowly, but surely, he had educated them to feel the vital importance of these objects [Emancipation and preserving the Union], had resolved their partisan warfare into a moral struggle. The wisdom of his words, the sincerity of his acts, and the steadfastness of his life were clear to them at last." Tarbell goes on to say that while mythology has elevated Lincoln's image to prophet and martyr, that goes too far, she noted:

He is the simple, steady, resolute, unselfish man whose supreme ambition was to find out the truth of the questions which confronted him in life, and whose satisfaction was in following the truth he discovered.<sup>12</sup>



His lofty moral courage in the Civil War was the logical result of lifelong fidelity to his own conscience. From his boyhood he would keep faith with that which his mind told him was true though he lost friend and place by it.



It is this man who never rested until he had found what he believed to be right, and, who having found it, could never be turned from it, who is the Real Lincoln. In the final analysis, it was Lincoln's character which made the Union soldiers and the American citizens believe in him; it was his character which caused his message of justice and reconciliation to prevail after the war; it was his character which has endeared him to succeeding generations of Americans. Even in this era of cynicism in which nostalgia, idealism, and the eternal American optimism are in jeopardy, we can hold on tightly to an authentic belief that Abraham Lincoln was truly one of that rare breed, an authentic American hero, a man of character.

The implication of my premise is clear: if presidential character is the essential factor that explains Lincoln's qualities, then we must have it in presidents who will be great. Some can be able, good administrators, good politicians, even popular. They may make good decisions, deliver good speeches. But in the times of crisis and during our greatest national challenges, it is presidential character like Lincoln's that will be required so that this "last great experiment" of a moral people governing themselves with liberty and justice for all shall not perish from the earth.

So, for a Virginian with ancestors extending back seven or more generations, descendant of Confederate soldiers, why does Lincoln matter? For the same reasons he matters to the nation, to the world and to history:

- He saved the Union – not alone, but he provided invaluable, visionary, courageous and tenacious leadership;
- He emancipated the slaves – not as a traditional abolitionist but as a pragmatic disciple of fairness and justice;
- He restored the idealism to the American experience in self-government by affecting a greater reality to the Declaration of Independence;
- He advanced the positions that the federal government could take responsibility for the rights of citizens – through emancipation, the Civil Rights Amendments in progress at his death, and his willingness to assert federal supremacy;
- He provided a model for the presidency rivaled only by Washington – one based on pragmatic idealism, the wise use of power, rigid adherence

to core principles, a total lack of egotism and revenge, and his incredible personal integrity.

He was the image of America at its best and his example is one that should motivate our leaders – and us – today.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> James McPherson, *We Cannot Escape History: Lincoln and The Last Best Hope of Earth*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995) p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Josiah Holland, *Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Springfield, Massachusetts: Gurdon Hill, 1866), p. 542.

<sup>3</sup> Ward H. Lamon, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln From His Birth To His Inauguration as President* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Co, 1872).

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Wilson, *Honor's Voices: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Mark Neely, *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia* (McGraw-Hill, 1982), 265.

<sup>6</sup> Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln: An American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> David Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion: Remaking American Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 236.

<sup>8</sup> Greenstone, 236

<sup>9</sup> Greenstone, 240

<sup>10</sup> David Long, *The Jewel of Liberty: Abraham Lincoln's Re-election and the End of Slavery* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1994), xix.

<sup>11</sup> Peterson, 33.

<sup>12</sup> Ida Tarbell, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Lincoln Memorial Association, 1900), vol 3: 57-8.