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Lincoln and Leadership: An Afterword

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Lincoln and Leadership: An Afterword

Abstract

Lincoln and Leadership offers fresh perspectives on the 16th president—making novel contributions to the scholarship of one of the more studied figures of American history. The book explores Lincoln’s leadership through essays focused, respectively, on Lincoln as commander-in-chief, deft political operator, and powerful theologian. Taken together, the essays suggest the interplay of military, political, and religious factors informing Lincoln’s thought and action and guiding the dynamics of his leadership. The contributors, all respected scholars of the Civil War era, focus on several critical moments in Lincoln’s presidency to understand the ways Lincoln understood and dealt with such issues and concerns as emancipation, military strategy, relations with his generals, the use of black troops, party politics and his own re-election, the morality of the war, the place of America in God’s design, and the meaning and obligations of sustaining the Union. Overall, they argue that Lincoln was simultaneously consistent regarding his commitments to freedom, democratic government, and Union but flexible, and sometimes contradictory, in the means to preserve and extend them. They further point to the ways that Lincoln’s decision making defined the presidency and recast understandings of American “exceptionalism.” They emphasize that the “real” Lincoln was an unabashed party man and shrewd politician, a self-taught commander-in-chief, and a deeply religious man who was self-confident in his ability to judge men and to persuade them with words but unsure of what God demanded from America for its collective sins of slavery. Randall Miller’s Introduction in particular provides essential weight to the notion that Lincoln’s presidential leadership must be seen as a series of interlocking stories. In the end, the contributors collectively remind readers that the Lincoln enshrined as the “Great Emancipator” and “savior of the Union” was in life and practice a work-in-progress. And they insist that “getting right with Lincoln” requires seeing the intersections of his—and America’s—military, political, and religious interests and identities. [*From the publisher*]

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Shortly after his arrival in Washington in late February 1861, Abraham Lincoln was confronted by an anxious delegation from a national peace conference that was even at that late moment hoping to head off the national gallop toward civil war. They were not unfriendly; many of the conference's members were, like Lincoln, old-time Whigs from the Upper South and the border states. But they wanted some statement from Lincoln about the policy he would adopt toward the seven southern states that had declared their secession from the Union, a statement that they could add to the oil they were trying to spread on the nation's troubled waters. Bafflingly, Lincoln replied that he was still too unacquainted with the situation to make any statements about policy. He informed them "that he was accidentally elected president of the United States"—*accidentally*, in this case, meaning that his election was the result of the three-way splintering of opposition candidates who had thus ensured his election by default—"that he had never aspired to a position of that kind; that it had never entered into his head; but that from the fact of his having made a race for the Senate of the United States with Judge Douglas in the state of Illinois, his name became prominent, and he was accidentally selected and elected afterwards as president of the United States."¹ He was, in other words, simply unprepared to offer them anything—direction, hope, even hostility.

The delegation listened to this with a healthy degree of incredulity, and so do we. We do not elect presidents because they lack ideas, but because the majority of the citizenry agree with the ideas the candidates take so much trouble to articulate. But in some senses Lincoln was speaking more truly than his hearers credited. His election *had* been something of an electoral fluke. He carried only 39 percent of the popular vote in the election of 1860 (although that 39 percent was concentrated in northern states with rich electoral-college representations, which could probably have elected him even if the three rival candidates had banded together on one ticket). Even more, his nomination by the Republican national convention came from far, far behind the pack of front runners like William Henry Seward and Salmon Chase. He had twice, unsuccessfully, run for the

U.S. Senate, in 1855 and again in 1858: He had never been a governor (like Seward and Chase)—never even mayor of his hometown of Springfield. And as Gregory Urwin reminds us, he was entering the presidency with only the slightest experience in military affairs, and at a time when military acumen was liable to become his greatest need. Stood up against his opposite number, the new provisional president of the Confederate States, Jefferson Davis, Lincoln looked ineffective, fumbling, and indecisive. Davis, at least, was West Point-educated, a former-U.S. senator, and had been an innovative and capable secretary of war under President Franklin Pierce.

And yet Lincoln's presidency became (along with Thomas Jefferson's and Franklin Roosevelt's) one of the "hinge" presidencies of American history. He re-oriented the relationship of government and business through public financing of a transcontinental railroad, protective tariffs, a new national banking system, and "homestead" legislation that converted vast stretches of the public lands in the West to commercial development. In Lincoln's hands, government became a supportive ally of business rather than an uncooperative neutral party. He became the first president to embrace the use of "war powers" by a commander in chief, thereby beginning a debate over the meaning and extent of those powers that continues to this day. And he swiftly emerged as a jealous guardian of executive privilege: He rebuffed with equal firmness attempts by his cabinet, Radical Republicans in Congress, and his generals to seize decision making from his hands. Caleb Blood Smith, Lincoln's first secretary of the interior, complained that "Mr. Lincoln doesn't treat a Cabinet as other Presidents—that he decides the most important questions without consulting his cabinet."² Smith was not exaggerating. For the previous six decades, overmighty cabinet secretaries had acquired increasing amounts of discretion and initiative, while executive authority languished. Lincoln decisively subordinated his cabinet secretaries to his own dictate as president, and thus laid down the outlines of cabinet-style administration that we live with yet.

To have done all this, while at the same time directing a four-year-long civil war, emancipating 3.5 million slaves, and deflecting bitter, almost-treacherous opposition from his critics, is enough to persuade almost anyone that Lincoln's election might have been "accidental," but the man himself was not. And indeed, locked within the shambling, ungainly appearance was an array of character assets that hardly anyone at the time suspected Abraham Lincoln possessed:

Persistence: Lincoln once remarked that he was a slow walker, but never walked backwards. The one lesson that he had learned from his father (who oth-

erwise had few lessons that Lincoln cared to remember) was that the best way to deal with a bad bargain was to hug it tighter. This should not be mistaken, however, for mere unthinking stubbornness. As Matthew Pinsker's chapter tellingly illustrates, Lincoln was no pragmatist. He could conciliate, maneuver, and compromise with the best, but at the end of the process, Lincoln would still be adamant about the principles and goals that guided him. "I desire to so conduct the affairs of this administration," said Lincoln, "that if, at the end, when I come to lay down the reins of power, I have lost every other friend on earth, I shall at least have one friend left, and that friend shall be down inside of me."³

Resilience: Lincoln's long history, as a trial lawyer had prepared him to lose as well as win, and any lawyer who could not live with loss had best seek out another line of work. As president, Lincoln was hampered with blows that would have broken almost anyone else. Shattering military defeats and lengthening casualty lists twisted anguished laments from him. After the death of his old friend Edward Dickinson Baker, at Ball's Bluff in 1861, the news "smote upon him like a whirlwind from the desert."⁴ After the great loss at Chancellorsville in May 1863, the journalist Noah Brooks heard him cry out, "What will the country say? Oh, what will the country say?"⁵ After the Union Army failed to finish off the Confederate Army at Gettysburg, he said to Navy Secretary Gideon Welles that "there is bad faith somewhere. . . . What does it mean Mr. Welles—Great God, what does it mean?"⁶ And yet Lincoln absorbed these punishments the way a champion boxer absorbs the pummeling of his opponents, never at a loss for control, rarely responding in malice. "I shall do nothing in malice," he wrote in 1862. "What I deal with is too vast for malicious dealing."⁷

Humility: One key to Lincoln's resilience was his sense of proportion between his own self and the responsibilities of his office. Lincoln was far from being a political innocent; to the contrary, William Henry Herndon (his law partner for fourteen years) understood all too well that "Mr. Lincoln was a secretive man, had great ambition, profound policies, deep prudences . . . was retired, contemplative, abstract, as well as *abstracted*. . . . His ambition was never satisfied; in him it was consuming fire."⁸ And yet he was capable of separating the internal craving for personal admiration and affirmation (which seems to be the common psychological deficit of all politicians) from the need to see a greater good being served. When he was slighted by George McClellan in 1862, Lincoln's secretary, John Hay, was amazed that Lincoln didn't pull his general's chain: "I would hold McClellan's horse," Lincoln replied, "if only he would give us victories." Nor did Lincoln nurse grudges. An amazed John Hay wrote in his diary, "It seems utterly

impossible for the President to conceive of the possibility of any good resulting from a rigorous and exemplary course of punishing political dereliction. His favorite expression is, 'I am in favor of short statutes of limitations in politics.'⁹ Ultimately, as Harry Stout's chapter reminds us, it was that humility that pulled him, and the nation, back from the abyss of self-righteousness and triumphalism at the end of the Civil War.

Knowledge: It is a common misperception that leadership is a spark of passion that falls from heaven on some single, foreordained head. In Lincoln's case, "passion" seemed to be what he lacked most. "It is thought by some men that Mr. Lincoln was a very warm-hearted man, spontaneous and impulsive," recalled Herndon. "This is not the exact truth." Actually, "Lincoln dwelt entirely in the head and in the land of thought. . . . He held his conscience subject to his head, he held his heart subject to his head and conscience."¹⁰ And in truth, leadership *must* be based on the head—it requires exhaustive knowledge, acquired from whatever means available. Passion, no matter how pure, cannot suffice as compensation for ignorance. And this was certainly true of Lincoln. The Canadian lawyer and journalist George Borrett was taken aback in 1864, when a visit to Lincoln drew from the president "some shrewd remarks about the legal systems of the two countries," and "a forcibly drawn sketch of the constitution of the United States" and its "material points of difference" with "the political aspect and constitution" of Great Britain.¹¹ Leonard Swett, who practiced law with Lincoln on the old Eighth Circuit in Illinois and who acted as a personal emissary for Lincoln during the war, remembered that "whenever I would get nervous and think things were going wrong," Lincoln had a comprehensive resource of facts and figures to allay his doubts: "He kept a kind of account book of how things were progressing for three, or four months, and he would get out his estimates and show how everything on the great scale of action . . . the resolutions of Legislatures, the instructions of delegates, and things of that character, was going exactly as he expected. . . . It was by ignoring men, and ignoring all small causes, but by closely calculating the tendencies of events and the great forces which were producing logical results."¹² This command of events, politics, and law provided Lincoln with both direction and confidence. When John Hay asked whether he was irritated at "the editorials in the leading papers" on the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln merely replied that "he had studied the matter so long that he knew more about it than they did."¹³ Knowledge not only told him the course to take, but also armored him against the criticism of those who wanted him to abandon the war or emancipation.

Loving the drudgery: Logan Pearsall Smith, the American-born British essayist, once said, “The test of a vocation is the love of the drudgery it involves.” He might have been thinking of Lincoln in that regard, because Lincoln not only knew both law and politics, but also rejoiced in the nuts and bolts of them. “The leading rule for the lawyer, as for the man of every other calling, is diligence,” Lincoln wrote in a lecture to aspiring lawyers. There were no shortcuts around the drudgery of the law, Lincoln warned. “If any one, upon his rare powers of speaking, shall claim an exemption from the drudgery . . . his case is a failure in advance.” Lawyering, he said in 1860, “is very simple, though laborious, and tedious. . . . Work, work, work, is the main thing.”¹⁴ As a lawyer, riding the circuit, he was often away from home as much as twenty-eight weeks in the year, and it bothered him not a bit. David Davis, who sat as the presiding judge for the Eighth Judicial Circuit, believed that “Mr Lincoln was happy—as happy as he could be, when on this Circuit—and happy no other place.”¹⁵

Persuasion: One final characteristic of Lincoln’s leadership also grows out of his experience as a trial lawyer, and that is his persuasiveness. As much as Lincoln acknowledged his “defective” education, he had more than made up for it by his own program of self-administered learning, whether the subject was geology or political economy, and by a marvelously retentive memory that permitted him remarkable powers of recall. These he disciplined in the unforgiving school of juries of farmers, mechanics, and merchants all across the Eighth Circuit and in the state appeals courts. Jury pleading—and more than a thousand of the 5,173 cases for which Lincoln is the attorney of record went to jury trials—forced him into the funnel of logical argumentation, clarity of expression, and transparent earnestness.¹⁶ “His legal arguments,” wrote Isaac Newton Arnold, one of Lincoln’s warmest congressional allies, “were always clear, vigorous, and logical, seeking to convince rather by the application of principle than by the citation of cases”: “He excelled in the statement of his case. However complicated, he would disentangle it, and present the real issue in so simple and clear a way that all could understand. Indeed, his [opening] statement often rendered argument unnecessary, and frequently the court would stop him and say: ‘If that is the case, Brother Lincoln, we will hear the other side.’”¹⁷ As president, he turned from persuading juries to persuading public opinion, and he emerges from the mass of his state papers as one of the most effective persuaders ever to occupy the presidential office. If for no other reason, wrote the Massachusetts abolitionist George Boutwell, “Lincoln’s fame will be carried along the ages” by “the proclamation of emancipation, his oration at Gettysburg, and his second inaugural address”

These place him alongside “the noblest productions of antiquity, with the works of Pericles, of Demosthenes, of Cicero, and rivals the finest passages of Grattan, Burke or Webster.”¹⁸

Taken together, these qualities do not necessarily “make” a Lincoln, since these are only the most salient markers of Lincoln’s leadership, and since the operative balance between these markers is a formula locked in the recesses of Lincoln’s own personality. But they do illuminate what is required for political leadership in a democracy. Unlike *monarchical* leadership, which is about honor, style, and the acquisition of power, or *bureaucratic* leadership, which is about efficiency, competence, and procedure, or *progressive* leadership, which is about empathy, image, and the embodiment of a communal will, a genuinely *democratic* leadership requires humor, humility, perspective, and resilience. And rarely has the combination been more fruitful, or more demanded by the moment, than in Abraham Lincoln. By 1863 John Hay thought that Lincoln had become a “backwoods Jupiter” who “sits here and wields . . . the bolts of war and the machinery of government with a hand equally steady & equally firm. . . . He is managing this war . . . foreign relations, and planning a reconstruction of the Union, all at once. I never knew with what tyrannous authority he rules the Cabinet, til now. The most important things he decides and there is no cavil.” And yet, Hay added, “there is no man in the country, so wise, so gentle and so firm. I believe the hand of God placed him where he is.”¹⁹

Hay’s quasi-idolatrous sentiment has to be qualified by at least three deficiencies in Lincoln’s presidential leadership. First, Lincoln was, to use a modern term, a workaholic. He suffered from what we might now diagnose as a mild form of depression, and his cure (that of many others in similar circumstances) was to turn his mind constantly to work. “Let me urge you, as I have ever done . . . in the depth and even the agony of despondency, [to] avoid being idle; I would immediately engage in some business, or go to making preparations for it.”²⁰ As president, he believed that he was responsible even for answering the incoming mail (an illusion that his staff quietly dispelled). His oldest son, Robert Lincoln, recalled in 1918 that his father’s “methods of office working were simply those of a very busy man who worked at all hours.”²¹

Second, Lincoln’s confidence in his mastery of the issues occasionally led him to the borderlands of unconscious arrogance. Leonard Swett told Herndon that “from the commencement of his life to its close, I have sometimes doubted whether he ever asked anybody’s advice about anything . . . and when his opinion

was once formed he never had any doubt but what it was right."²² And John Hay, reflecting on Lincoln toward the end of Hay's own long and distinguished diplomatic career, admitted that Lincoln's "intellectual arrogance and unconscious assumption of superiority" was an irritant "that men like Chase and [Charles] Sumner never could forgive."²³ Nor was Lincoln always as much the master as he imagined he was. Gregory Urwin's chapter is a unique reminder that a great man cannot always be great in everything, and Lincoln's inexperience in military affairs may have been the weakest link in his chain. Not only did Lincoln meddle in the minutiae of command to an alarming degree, but he often did so based on strategic lessons that were long obsolete: Lincoln nagged commanders unmercifully about the need to come to grips with enemy armies in pursuit of a single, overwhelming, Napoleonic-style victory, and when his generals failed to do so, he darkly attributed their failure to political unreliability. But the day of the winner-take-all battle had faded decades before; victories were won not by smashing through enemy lines of battle, but by cutting lines of supply and support, and capturing the industrial centers that kept the armies in the field. It took Ulysses Grant and the Overland Campaign of May–June 1864 to convince Lincoln that the endless slugfest of battlefield armies was pointless, and that the real targets needed to be Atlanta, Richmond, and Mobile. When those places fell, the Confederate armies dropped in their tracks.

Yet, Herndon insisted, what these strengths and weaknesses created in Lincoln "was a perfect and an imperfect man, a strong man and a weak one; but take him all in all, he was one of the best, wisest, greatest, and noblest of men in all the ages." Ultimately, there is no single formula that explains Lincoln, or that allows us to identify another like him, and indeed most of the claims of politicians and presidents to have inherited Lincoln's mantle are not unlike the Frank Bellew cartoon (accompanying Matthew Pinsker's chapter), showing a crowd of lilliputian politicians trying to measure Lincoln's boots. But the example of how leadership grew from the meeting of a most unexpected man and our most dreaded hour is a reminder that no crisis is insoluble, and no field of counselors so unpromising but that one of them may indeed possess the single wisdom that the situation demands. Which is why, even as we toil through our own darkening political crises, we still look to the "bronzed, lank man" in the "suit of ancient black" that marks him as

The quaint great figure that men love,
The prairie-lawyer, master of us all.²⁴