



2009

Abraham Lincoln as a Man of Ideas

Allen C. Guelzo
Gettysburg College

Michael Lind

Roles

Author: Dr. Allen C. Guelzo, Gettysburg College

Forward written by Michael Lind

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cwfac>

 Part of the [Intellectual History Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Guelzo, Allen C. Abraham Lincoln as a Man of Ideas (Southern Illinois University Press, 2009).

This is the publisher's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cwfac/24>

This open access book is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Abraham Lincoln as a Man of Ideas

Abstract

Abraham Lincoln was a skilled politician, an inspirational leader, and a man of humor and pathos. What many may not realize is how much he was also a man of ideas. Despite the most meager of formal educations, Lincoln's tremendous intellectual curiosity drove him into the circle of Enlightenment philosophy and democratic political ideology. And from these, Lincoln developed a set of political convictions that guided him throughout his life and his presidency. *Abraham Lincoln as a Man of Ideas*, a compilation of ten essays from Lincoln scholar, Allen C. Guelzo, uncovers the hidden sources of Lincoln's ideas and examines the beliefs that directed his career and brought an end to slavery and the Civil War.

These essays reveal Lincoln to be a man of impressive intellectual probity and depth as well as a man of great contradictions. He was an apostle of freedom who did not believe in human free will; a champion of the Constitution who had to step outside of it in order to save it; a man of many acquaintances and admirers, but few friends; a man who opposed slavery but also opposed the abolition of it; a man of prudence who took more political risks than any other president.

Guelzo explores the many faces of Lincoln's ideas, and especially the influence of the Founding Fathers and the great European champions of democracy. And he links the 16th president's struggles with the issues of race, emancipation, religion, and civil liberties to the challenges these issues continue to offer to Americans today.

Lincoln played many roles in his life—lawyer, politician, president—but in each he was driven by a core of values, convictions, and beliefs about economics, society, and democracy. *Abraham Lincoln as a Man of Ideas* is a broad and exciting survey of the ideas that made Lincoln great, just as we celebrate the bicentennial his birth.
From the publisher

Keywords

Abraham Lincoln, Civil War, president, intellectual history, biography

Disciplines

History | Intellectual History | Political History | United States History

Comments

Attached is the introduction to Dr. Allen C. Guelzo's book, *Abraham Lincoln as a Man of Ideas*.

Winner of the 2010 Illinois State Historical Society Certificate of Merit

INTRODUCTION: WHAT WOULD LINCOLN DO?

If there is, somewhere, a list of the top ten questions Americans ask themselves about their national life, this one has to be very near the top, or perhaps even *at* the top. In 1918, sheet music for rallying public opinion behind the American intervention in the First World War asked, "Abraham Lincoln, What Would You Do?" In 1939, Frank Capra brought Mr. Smith to Washington, and while he was there, he (in this case, Jimmy Stewart) went to the Lincoln Memorial in the search for hope and guidance, and he got it in the person of Clarissa Saunders (played by Jean Arthur):

Jeff—listen—remember the day you got here?—what you said about Mr. Lincoln?—that he was sitting up there—watching—waiting for someone to come along? . . . Someone with a little plain, decent, uncompromising *rightness* . . . and really light up that dome for once. This country could use some of that—so could the whole drunken, cockeyed world right now—a *lot* of it!

As though Lincoln sitting in his Olympian chair were a Greek oracle, ready to dispense his eternal and abiding wisdom to Americans in their moments of crisis. In 1964, John Ford's epic Western *Cheyenne Autumn* pictured Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz (played, improbably, by Edward G. Robinson) asking a portrait of Abraham Lincoln, "What would you do, old friend?" In the same year, when the Senate was deadlocked on the Civil Rights Act of 1964, President Lyndon Johnson appealed to Illinois's U.S. senator Everett Dirksen to break the deadlock by remembering Lincoln. "I saw your exhibit at the

World's Fair," Johnson said to Dirksen, "and it's the Land of Lincoln, so you're worthy of the Land of Lincoln. And a man from Illinois is going to pass the bill, and I'll see that you get proper attention and credit." And sure enough, when Dirksen defeated the filibuster that had blocked voting on the act, he was quick to remind the Senate that it was the same day Abraham Lincoln had been nominated for the presidency. Today, there are some 12.6 million entries on the World Wide Web which respond to the inquiry, "What would Lincoln do?" and the subject matter varies from confirming Supreme Court justices to the Iraq war. As the great Lincoln biographer David Herbert Donald once put it (quoting Dirksen), everyone wants to "get right with Lincoln."¹

All of this makes for interesting screenplays and sometimes even interesting politics. It's worth wondering, though, whether it can possibly have any meaning. Abraham Lincoln, after all, has been dead for a century and a half, and in that century and a half both our national politics and our daily lives as Americans have changed out of all proportion to the world he inhabited. Lincoln never paid income taxes, never filled out a job application, and never had a Social Security number. My colleague at Gettysburg, Gabor Boritt, was once asked, at the height of the Boston school-bussing controversy in the 1970s, what Lincoln would have said about school bussing, and he replied, with admirable drollery, "Lincoln would have said, 'What's a bus?'" Even in Lincoln's own lifetime, permanence and steadiness seemed to be evaporating on all hands. When he was born, in 1809, Thomas Jefferson was still president of the United States (or at least would be for three more weeks) and George III was still king of England. By the time he died, in 1865, he had taken passage on a steamboat, ridden on a railroad, and communicated across the country by electrical telegraph; in fact, had his death not come at the hands of an assassin, he might have lived long enough to turn on an electrical light, hold a conversation on the telephone, and record the Gettysburg Address onto one of Thomas Edison's acoustic cylinders. Lincoln himself was conscious of how rapidly his universe had turned on its axis when he journeyed from Springfield to Washington in 1861 for his inauguration:

We have seen great changes within the recollection of some of us who are the older. When I first came to the west, some 44 or 45 years ago, at sundown you had completed a journey of some 30 miles which you had commenced at sunrise, and thought you had done well. Now only six hours have elapsed since I left my home in Illinois where I was surrounded by a large concourse of my fellow citizens, almost all of whom I could recognize, and I find myself far from home surrounded by the thousands I now see before me, who are strangers to me.

If Lincoln's own world was faced with such startling and disruptive changes,

how likely is it that he could have anything meaningful to say after more than a century of even more disruptive changes?

Certainly, some people have doubted whether "what Lincoln would do" could have any bearing on what *we* should be doing. Helen Nicolay, reflecting in 1912 on the man her father, John G. Nicolay, had served as personal secretary through the Civil War years, wrote, "The truth is that Lincoln was no prophet of a distant day. His early life was essentially of the old era. He made his career by individual effort." And the sheer scale of the war, not to mention the transformation of American industry and finance in the nineteenth century, seemed to make whatever wisdom a man of the prewar decades had acquired seem antique and useless. After the war, wrote William Dean Howells in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, "I found that I had got back to another world. The day of small things was past, and I don't suppose it will ever come again in this country." It was in the same spirit that Richard Hofstadter, in a notorious chapter in his 1948 book, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*, wrote that Lincoln "belonged to the age of craftsmanship rather than industrialism. . . . Had he lived to seventy, he would have seen the generation brought up on self-help come into its own, build oppressive business corporations, and begin to close off . . . treasured opportunities for the little man." In Hofstadter's view, assassination came to Lincoln as a sort of gift, because he was not compelled to watch the postwar age of the robber barons make mincemeat of the ideals which had guided his life or watch his own Republican Party become "the jackal of the vested interests."

Nor did it stop there. From the 1950s onwards, prominent African Americans whose grandparents Lincoln had freed from slavery turned their backs on him and denied that he had really freed, or even wanted to free, any black person, and claimed he was instead an old-time racist who differed comparatively little from Bull Connor or George Wallace. And more recently, civil libertarians have decided that Lincoln's wartime suspension of civil liberties probably set a bad example rather than one we should consult today. "When a President takes away a civil right, he should have to worry about explaining himself to the people," wrote Caleb Crain in a recent review in the *New Yorker*. "He should fear as well as love us."²

None of this questioning of the question seems to much bother professional historians and biographers; but then again, they do not ask the question, "What would Lincoln do?" but merely, "What *did* Lincoln do?" Still, even as early as 1934, James Garfield Randall felt compelled to defend the historical study of Lincoln against querulous voices which asked whether "the Lincoln theme" had become "exhausted." Randall optimistically answered *no*, and for the most part, his optimism has been justified. Although historical and biographical study of Lincoln hit a long, dry patch between the end of the Civil War centennial and

the beginning of the 1990s, the last fifteen years have been the “golden age” of Lincoln scholarship. This began, in large measure, with the publication of Michael Burlingame’s *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* in 1994, a loose-knit collection of topical essays that was built on a foundation of research so vast as to make all the Lincoln biographies since Benjamin Thomas’s in 1952 look vapid and thin. This was followed in 1996 by the publication of Don and Virginia Fehrenbacher’s lifetime accumulation of Lincoln quotations in *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* (which, in effect, became a kind of single-volume annex to the standard *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, edited by Roy Basler from 1953 to 1955) and in 1998 by the publication of Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis’s *Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln*, which simultaneously restored the reputation of William Henry Herndon’s vast archive of firsthand Lincoln reminiscence material and made it easily available between two hardcovers. Just when the overworked fields of Lincoln biographical sources seemed unable to yield anything more, Burlingame, Fehrenbacher and Fehrenbacher, and Wilson and Davis opened the gates to acres of wholly unexpected material for scholars to harvest. It has to be said, too, that the gradual revival of the Abraham Lincoln Association (which had gone dormant and nearly bankrupt after the effort it put into underwriting the Basler edition of the *Collected Works*) and the creation by Richard Gilder and Lewis Lehrman of the Lincoln Prize, both of which came about in the late 1980s, put institutional encouragement and some hefty financial incentives to work behind a Lincoln renaissance.

Precious few, though, of those 12.6 million websites asking, “What would Lincoln do?” are the property of scholars. Historians, with a keen eye to cultivating a clinical aloofness toward mundane applications of history, are at best only willing to talk about how Lincoln’s achievements as president still affect American life today; this is a very different enterprise, however, from looking to Lincoln as a go-to man for modern problems, and it is this that the question *What would Lincoln do?* really wants satisfied. Because, clinical or not, the vast bulk of the modern American interest in Abraham Lincoln is not punctuated by gusts of joy over finding some unlooked-at letter or reminiscence, or by sage observations on how we live still within a Union that Lincoln preserved, but by the abiding conviction that Lincoln could somehow function as our contemporary and adviser. In the face of that inquiry, the historical clinicians are inclined to gape in astonishment.

What makes this more extraordinary to the minds of history professionals is that Americans ask this question of almost no one else in American history, except perhaps Jesus (who wasn’t an American but is often described as though he were) and Alan Greenspan. I have never heard anyone, gazing into the middle distance, ask what Woodrow Wilson would do, or what Millard

Fillmore would do; we only ask of Jack Kennedy what he would have *done* had he lived to see the situation in Vietnam deteriorate. Joseph Ellis, who has recently provided us with a Washington biography to add to his shelf of other books on the Revolutionary generation, actually did summon up George Washington to ask him, in the *Los Angeles Times*, what he would do about the Iraq war. But even Ellis prefaced his op-ed with the concession that this was "a ridiculous question," which largely deflates the whole purpose of asking it.³ Washington, after all, is not really a man you ask questions of, at least not without your cap firmly gripped in both hands. The knee breeches, the cutaway waistcoat, the powdered hair all bestow on Washington a look so antique to modern sensibilities that any question of his opinions about modern affairs seems moot; and that formidable (and carefully cultivated) sense of grandeur and command does not suggest that an offhand question on current events from Oprah or Leno would be warmly received by the Father of Our Country. Washington may have been first in war and first in peace, but it has been a long time since he was first in the relaxed, informal, fast-food hearts of his countrymen.

Lincoln remains a different matter entirely. The long, black frock coat and the stovepipe hat are definitely antiques, but at least he wears trousers, and a bow tie, and no uniform. And as the late historian of American speech, Kenneth Cmiel, so aptly pinned it, Lincoln cultivated a democratic, colloquial, middling way of writing and speaking, rather than the ostentatious three-decker style of the Founders. This keeps Lincoln reasonably accessible to modern readers, so that we don't feel at all out of place when we up and ask Lincoln just what he would do, without having to take on the lacy complexities of Washington's resignation letter or his farewell orders to the Continental army.⁴ We can still laugh at Lincoln's jokes; we do not know whether Washington ever told any jokes.

But if we feel no impulse to ask what Washington would do, what is it but the accident of appearances which makes us think we can ask the same thing of Lincoln? Or is it possible that Hofstadter et al. are right, and that any answers Lincoln could give us were designed for questions no longer worth asking about American life? I think this is a question worth considering seriously because it goes to the heart, not only of the standing of Abraham Lincoln, but of the function of history itself. For a great many of us, the living present recedes into the historical past too swiftly and too violently for the past ever to be more than the object of antiquarian study or genealogical ancestor-worship. History becomes a pursuit similar to stamp collecting—a silent, harmless drudgery. It is surprising, however, to discover how few history professionals think that this is what they are doing. Ever since Hegel turned history into a

organic chain of developments from one historical stage to another, and especially since Karl Marx identified historical development with the very urgent issue of reconfiguring economic and political society, historical practitioners have been agog with the idea that the past is a hieroglyphic, the deciphering of which can yield all manner of insights—usually political or economic—about the present and future. So, one looks hard at the emergence of capitalist society in the Mediterranean world of Philip II for evidence that capitalism is a consciously developed evolution out of feudal aristocratic society; and one assumes that a similar scrutiny of modern capitalist society (say, since the eighteenth century) will yield evidence of how it will evolve yet again, this time into a future socialist one. Or, if such predictive crudity seems a bit much, history can at least pull back the curtain on the modern inequities of a capitalist society which only a socialist one can resolve. The idea that historical clinicians are too abstract and detached from present realities to notice the bus schedule could not be further from the mark.

What this kind of clairvoyance-history is not is *personal*. Hegel's—and Marx's—concept of historical development was a chart of great, powerful, but faceless forces. This was not because Hegel was hostile to the force of individual personality in history, but because he did not want to attribute so much force to individual personalities that they had the power to redirect or halt the onrush of historical development. The fish were fine, so long as it was clear that they could do nothing to stop the river. Abraham Lincoln might, on that reasoning, be a perfectly worthwhile object of interest, but only if it were perfectly clear from the start that he was very much a prisoner of his own times and should only be thought of as a solitary moment within the general movement of things. None of us rises above the flux of our times; none of us has answers to questions beyond those of our own short moment.

I don't want to dispute the power of impersonal forces, such as markets or climate; I think it is more questionable whether they have built-in developmental direction, if only because I am very keenly aware that at certain moments in history everything really does seem to be poised on one turn of pitch-and-ross. Had Blücher not made it to Waterloo and Napoleon won the day there and achieved a restoration of the empire, or had Halifax and not Churchill prevailed in May 1940 in offering to negotiate with Hitler, it is very hard to believe that the subsequent course of modern history would be the same; or, for that matter, if John Wilkes Booth had been stopped from entering Lincoln's box that night at Ford's Theater. Development in history requires something similar to geological time—and obeys a clock which moves very slowly, but inexorably—and is innately hostile to the possibility of Thomas Carlyle's romantic notion of the "Great Man" who changes everything by sheer force of will. My own suspicion is that development in history looks less like a

clock and more like an accordion, with long periods of unsurprising somnolence and short, compressed, and agonizing periods of frenzied and unstable activity in which the decision and ideas of one individual may actually turn a very great deal around. The romantic "Great Man" is actually, at the end of the day, no more romantic than the "Long Development"; I would prefer the "Interesting Man" theory.

One very large reason why I think this way is because of the professional attachment I have to American intellectual history, which is to say, the history of American ideas. The Psalmist says, *As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he*, and I am inclined to agree, not because I am a Platonic philosopher who imagines that ideal forms are the only reality, but because ideas are the only things we really know and the things which turn out to have very long innings in human affairs. I suppose I came to this conclusion on the day, when I was about ten years old, that I realized, as I sat rocking and thinking, that thinking was an extremely pleasurable activity. Ideas, to be sure, have a developmental pattern to them; but ideas are also what are shaped, articulated, and applied by very different people. They do not act on their own, but through personalities, and in the hands of certain personalities, they can be terrible, indeed. Moreover, ideas do not have a chronological limitation. They can remain the same over very long stretches of time, or mutate dramatically in the hands of one or more people; and they can carry over from generation to generation in such a way that it is not at all unreasonable to ask, given a certain collection of ideas in someone's head, what they might do with the same ideas, but in different circumstances.

This is, incidentally, how I came to spend so much time on Lincoln in the first place. My reading about Abraham Lincoln actually goes back quite far—as a boy, growing up during the years of the Civil War centennial, and as the son of a career U.S. army officer, I fell pretty easily into a boy's interest in Lincoln and the war, and very likely the first thing I had in hand to read about Lincoln was a *Classics Illustrated* comic-book biography of Lincoln, bought on a train platform in 1962 as I was about to set off on a journey by rail to Chicago. Boyish interests being what they are, my attention soon wandered off to other things, until in high school—and for reasons I cannot recall with any certainty—I wrote a senior thesis in American government class on Lincoln's nomination to the presidency (heavily dependent on the school library's copy of Sandburg's *Abraham Lincoln*) and got the ticket as the narrator in the school orchestra's performance of Aaron Copland's *A Lincoln Portrait*. The next year, I bought my first wholly owned Lincoln book in (the now long-departed) Hasting's Book Store on Walnut Street in Philadelphia, an autographed copy of Stefan Lorant's photographic biography of Lincoln, which I did everything short of completely memorizing. This did not make me a Lincolnite, though. My first

clock and more like an accordion, with long periods of unsurprising somnolence and short, compressed, and agonizing periods of frenzied and unstable activity in which the decision and ideas of one individual may actually turn a very great deal around. The romantic "Great Man" is actually, at the end of the day, no more romantic than the "Long Development"; I would prefer the "Interesting Man" theory.

One very large reason why I think this way is because of the professional attachment I have to American intellectual history, which is to say, the history of American ideas. The Psalmist says, *As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he*, and I am inclined to agree, not because I am a Platonic philosopher who imagines that ideal forms are the only reality, but because ideas are the only things we really know and the things which turn out to have very long innings in human affairs. I suppose I came to this conclusion on the day, when I was about ten years old, that I realized, as I sat rocking and thinking, that thinking was an extremely pleasurable activity. Ideas, to be sure, have a developmental pattern to them; but ideas are also what are shaped, articulated, and applied by very different people. They do not act on their own, but through personalities, and in the hands of certain personalities, they can be terrible, indeed. Moreover, ideas do not have a chronological limitation. They can remain the same over very long stretches of time, or mutate dramatically in the hands of one or more people; and they can carry over from generation to generation in such a way that it is not at all unreasonable to ask, given a certain collection of ideas in someone's head, what they might do with the same ideas, but in different circumstances.

This is, incidentally, how I came to spend so much time on Lincoln in the first place. My reading about Abraham Lincoln actually goes back quite far—as a boy, growing up during the years of the Civil War centennial, and as the son of a career U.S. army officer, I fell pretty easily into a boy's interest in Lincoln and the war, and very likely the first thing I had in hand to read about Lincoln was a *Classics Illustrated* comic-book biography of Lincoln, bought on a train platform in 1962 as I was about to set off on a journey by rail to Chicago. Boyish interests being what they are, my attention soon wandered off to other things, until in high school—and for reasons I cannot recall with any certainty—I wrote a senior thesis in American government class on Lincoln's nomination to the presidency (heavily dependent on the school library's copy of Sandburg's *Abraham Lincoln*) and got the ticket as the narrator in the school orchestra's performance of Aaron Copland's *A Lincoln Portrait*. The next year, I bought my first wholly owned Lincoln book in (the now long-departed) Hasting's Book Store on Walnut Street in Philadelphia, an autographed copy of Stefan Lorant's photographic biography of Lincoln, which I did everything short of completely memorizing. This did not make me a Lincolnite, though. My first

year in college I was a music composition major. (That did not last longer than the first year, after I finally had to face up to the fact that I lacked any real talent for it.) I wrote my doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania, not on Lincoln, but on Jonathan Edwards and the problem of free will in American thought. And it was only when, in 1995, I was working on a follow-up volume on determinism and free will in modern American thought that I decided, more for the novelty than the history, to make some reference to Abraham Lincoln, who liked to describe himself as a "fatalist."

What I discovered, especially as I worked through the Herndon-Weik Papers, was that there was a great deal more going on in Lincoln's mind than incidental notions of politics and liberty. Lincoln had not had an extensive education to speak of, and he came by much of his knowledge through whatever books happened to fall his way in frontier Indiana. But he had the temperament of a thinker, and his reading was much more formidable in its breadth than I had ever been led to suspect. That February, I read a paper on Lincoln and his "Doctrine of Necessity" to the Abraham Lincoln Association, and shortly thereafter, Chuck Van Hof and William B. Eerdmans Publishing approached me about writing a book on Lincoln and religion. I turned them down—not once, but twice—since I knew all too well what kind of swamp-life inhabited the Lincoln-and-religion genre, and I wanted no association with it. But Mark Noll (then of Wheaton College and the most suave of all historians of American Protestant theology) prevailed on me to reconsider, and I subsequently argued with Van Hof that what was really needed was a book on "Lincoln as a man of ideas." And so emerged my first Lincoln opus, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (1999), with a title lifted lightly from Walt Whitman.

Having once put my hand into the pot, it proved very difficult to extricate it and turn to something else. (In fact, I've never gotten back to that book on free will and determinism.) It was while I was writing *Redeemer President* that Lerone Bennett published his vast anti-Lincoln screed, *Forced into Glory*, and I was so jarred by Bennett's unlikely demand of Lincoln that he possess a full-fledged set of modern sensibilities on race that when *Redeemer President* was finished, I felt almost obliged to turn my hand to the Emancipation Proclamation. I was dumbfounded to discover, at the very outset, how very little had been written on the proclamation—dumbfounded, but at the same time, relieved, since it gave me a free hand in delving into the subject. What I found was more than a little surprising—first, that Lincoln had been contemplating a serious move toward emancipation as early as November 1861; second, that a large part of his seeming slow-footedness and penchant for gradual emancipation and colonization of blacks back to Africa was not dictated by racism, but by the forbidding legal circumstances he faced as president; third, that behind the decision for a proclamation was the fear that George McClellan was on the

verge of some form of military intervention, and that a proclamation was the only way Lincoln had to wedge emancipation into public policy as quickly as possible; and fourth, that he was radical enough, even in the formulation of the proclamation, to contemplate a slave uprising behind Confederate lines. The difference between Bennett's white supremacist caricature and the actual progress of Lincoln's thought leading up to the Emancipation Proclamation turned out to be as different as a straight line is from the coast of Norway.

Even with the proclamation, you will notice, I was still dealing with the history of ideas. The particular set of ideas which dominated Lincoln's life, as so often is true in the history of ideas, had grown out of Lincoln's own experiences (and resentments) and yet was remarkably free enough to survive his own personal demise. He was, if I can capture Lincoln in a phrase, a classic nineteenth-century democratic liberal—which is to say that he took his inspiration from the economic and political ideas of the Enlightenment and built his mental universe on three classic liberal dogmas: *the desirability of economic mobility*, *social moralism* (not religion per se, but certainly a sense of universal ethical norms, based on ideas of natural law), and *national union*. "There is no permanent class of hired laborers amongst us," Lincoln said in 1859, thus neatly decapitating all theories of class warfare. "Twenty-five years ago, I was a hired laborer. The hired laborer of yesterday, labors on his own account today; and will hire others to labor for him tomorrow. Advancement—improvement of condition—is the order of things in a society of equals." Five years later, he told the soldiers of an Ohio regiment, "Nowhere in the world is presented a government of so much liberty and equality. To the humblest and poorest amongst us are held out the highest privileges and positions. The present moment finds me at the White House, yet there is as good a chance for your children as there was for my father's." Nor was Lincoln interested in identity politics, for ethnic identities (like class identities) were relics of the Old World that the American Republic had exposed as childish illusions. The Declaration of Independence, for instance, was not limited in its application to any single section, race, or nationality; it contained fundamental propositions about human nature which were true of all people everywhere. "Perhaps half our people . . . are men who have come from Europe—German, Irish, French and Scandinavian," Lincoln said in 1858.

. . . but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote

that Declaration, and so they are. That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.

But even a man as tightly logical as Lincoln understood that nations cannot be held together merely by abstractions. In the absence of appeals to race, ethnicity, kinship, or religion—the social glue of monarch-ridden Europe—a nation founded on a *proposition* can sometimes do the wrong thing with that *proposition*. It can, in the case of the slaveholding South, insist that the equality in that proposition is only an equality of white people; or it can say, in the case of Stephen A. Douglas, that everyone is entitled to pursue equality in their own way, free from anyone else's objection. Lincoln saw that, as much as politics and religion and morality don't always make a good marriage, they make for even worse divorce. For this consistently secular man, who never joined a church, there was still no way to speak in America of equality and politics in ways which did not conform to the eternal principles of right and wrong; nor did he hesitate to chart out a path for a political future he did not live to realize by reminding his audience that the future had to be seen under the dictates of the justice of God. For Lincoln, "Moral principle," in the end, "is all that unites us."

Lincoln's years as president have usually been measured against the events of the Civil War, and not without reason. But the noise and carnage of the war have frequently obscured the domestic agenda Lincoln implemented, an agenda which hefted into place legislation to encourage "the development of the industrial interests of the whole country," financing a transcontinental railroad (which would have been nearly completed by the end of Lincoln's second term as president, if he had lived that long), a national banking system, the highest protective tariff schedule the nation had yet deployed to protect American manufacturing, and homestead laws to open up the Western territories to immediate settlement. As president, Lincoln championed a domestic policy revolution almost as profound in its consequences as the Civil War itself and set the course for a Republican ascendancy that lasted (with only the minor interruption of Grover Cleveland) for the next fifty years—for a full political generation—until the election of 1912.⁵ Homesteads, tariffs, and the money supply remained the three most controversial issues of postwar America, and they were fully as much the hot-button issues for the McKinley presidency as they were for Abraham Lincoln.

The ultimate guarantor of self-improvement and self-transformation was the Union, for it was the national Union, not the quarrelsome jealousy of states or regions, which gave Americans the largest stage upon which to act, plan,

and speak without fear of interference from parochial conformity or small-minded provincialism. Lincoln “knew no North, no South, no East, no West, but only the Union, which held them all in its sacred circle,” and he wished “to be no less than National in all the positions I may take.” In Lincoln’s eyes, the fundamental flaw of the states’ rights palaver of the Confederates was its cynical appeal to division, diversity, localism, and special interests, and all at the expense of the liberty which only a national Union could guarantee. “On the distinct issue of Union or no Union,” Lincoln told Congress in 1864, “the politicians have shown their instinctive knowledge that there is no diversity among the people.” Americans were everywhere Americans—including the freed slaves—and there were no gradations in that citizenship based on state, region, race, or religion.

Looking at him across the gulf of years, I am not sure that we can extort from Abraham Lincoln specific answers to the kinds of questions that come under the general heading of *what would Lincoln do?* But I do believe that the long-term trajectory of his ideas points us in certain definite directions. He believed profoundly in the virtue of social mobility, in empowering all citizens through the creation of favorable economic circumstances to achieve as much as their talents could manage. He believed that democracy was the expression of the natural possession of rights by human beings, but he also believed that it possessed a transcendent mandate to do what is intrinsically right, morally and naturally, and not merely to act as a process for endorsing whatever a majority wanted at a given moment. And he believed in the capacity of Americans as Americans to accomplish that good—not as individuals alone, but as a united nation, dedicated to the natural-law proposition of the equality of all men. I do not think that we will really learn how to “do what Lincoln would have done” merely by trying to squeeze from him a sound-bite answer to whatever question nags us at the moment; but neither do I believe that he is lost to us on the tides of time, washed away from all sight, if only because the ideas which were his polestar remain the ideas most dear to the American imagination. Lincoln the striver—Lincoln the moralist—Lincoln the American—remains, in an age whose elites shudder with embarrassment over my embrace of these terms, if not an oracle, still yet a guide.

Notes

1. David Herbert Donald, “Getting Right with Lincoln,” in *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era* (1955; New York, 2001), 13.
2. Caleb Crain, “Bad Precedent,” *New Yorker*, January 29, 2007, 84.
3. Joseph Ellis, “Washington: The Crying Game,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 29, 2006.

4. Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, CA, 1990), 59–60.

5. Or until 1932, if we are disposed to regard Wilson's victory in a three-way race in 1912, and a squeaker in 1916, as only interruptions in a Republican regime that resumed its dominance in 1920.