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Abstract

Edwin M. Stanton gets only a footnote in John Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*, but the phrase is one that many know by heart, words this normally irascible and overbearing powder-keg of a man uttered at Abraham Lincoln's deathbed: "Now he belongs to the ages." That, at least, was how John Hay recorded Stanton's words. Dr. Charles Sabin Taft, who had been boosted awkwardly from the stage to the presidential box in Ford's Theatre and who accompanied the dying Lincoln across Tenth Street to the Petersen House's back bedroom, thought that Stanton had said, "He now belongs to the ages." James Rowan O'Beirne, who as provost-marshal of the District of Columbia had volunteered himself as Andrew Johnson's bodyguard, expressly denied Hay's claim in 1905 and could only recall Stanton having said, "That's the last of him." The stenographer Stanton had drafted for service that night to take depositions from witnesses, Corporal James Tanner, didn't remember Stanton saying anything: "The utmost silence pervaded, broken only by the sound of strong men's tears," until Phineas Gurley proposed to say a prayer. In later years, Tanner would remember more and more of what he heard that night (even though there is some evidence from the notes of Dr. Ezra Abbott, one of the physicians at Lincoln's bedside, that Tanner might not have been in the Petersen House at the time of Lincoln's death), and he is cited by Adam Gopnik as claiming that Stanton really said, "Now he belongs to the angels." "Angels," however, may only be a mistranscription from an article Tanner wrote before his own death in 1927 and included by Dorothy Meserve Kunhardt and Philip B. Kunhardt in their *Twenty Days: A Narrative in Text and Pictures of the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*. [excerpt]

Keywords

Abraham Lincoln, Civil War, John Hay, Edwin M. Stanton, assassination, Ford's Theatre, John Wilkes Booth, president

Disciplines

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ALLEN C. GUELZO

Edwin M. Stanton gets only a footnote in John Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*, but the phrase is one that many know by heart, words this normally irascible and overbearing powder-keg of a man uttered at Abraham Lincoln's deathbed: "Now he belongs to the ages."¹ That, at least, was how John Hay recorded Stanton's words. Dr. Charles Sabin Taft, who had been boosted awkwardly from the stage to the presidential box in Ford's Theatre and who accompanied the dying Lincoln across Tenth Street to the Petersen House's back bedroom, thought that Stanton had said, "He *now* belongs to the ages." James Rowan O'Beirne, who as provost-marshal of the District of Columbia had volunteered himself as Andrew Johnson's bodyguard, expressly denied Hay's claim in 1905 and could only recall Stanton having said, "That's the last of him." The stenographer Stanton had drafted for service that night to take depositions from witnesses, Corporal James Tanner, didn't remember Stanton saying anything: "The utmost silence pervaded, broken only by the sound of strong men's tears," until Phineas Gurley proposed to say a prayer.² In later years, Tanner would remember more and more of what he heard that night (even though there is some evidence from the notes of Dr. Ezra Abbott, one of the physicians at Lincoln's bedside, that Tanner might not have been in the Petersen House at the time of Lincoln's death), and he is cited by Adam Gopnik as claiming that Stanton really said, "Now he belongs to the angels." "Angels," however, may only be a mistran-

1. John Hay and John George Nicolay, "The Fourteenth of April," *Century Magazine* 39 (January 1890): 436; John George Nicolay, *A Short Life of Abraham Lincoln: Condensed from Nicolay & Hay's Abraham Lincoln: A History* (New York: Century, 1902), 540.

2. Taft, "Abraham Lincoln's Last Hours," *Century Magazine* 45 (February 1893): 635; O'Beirne, interview with James E. Kelley (October 8, 1905), in *Generals in Bronze: Interviewing the Commanders of the Civil War*, ed. William B. Styple (Kearny, N.J.: Belle Grove Publishing, 2005), 287; Tanner to Henry F. Walch (April 17, 1865), in Howard H. Peck, "James Tanner's Account of Lincoln's Death," *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* 2 (December 1942): 179; George S. Bryan, *The Great American Myth* (1940; reprint, Chicago: Abraham Lincoln Bookshop, 1990), 189.

scription from an article Tanner wrote before his own death in 1927 and included by Dorothy Meserve Kunhardt and Philip B. Kunhardt in their *Twenty Days: A Narrative in Text and Pictures of the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*.³

To be sure, invoking the angels at that moment would not have been uncharacteristic for Stanton. Stanton was, after all, an Episcopalian and a product of Kenyon College, the evangelical Episcopalian greenhouse founded by Salmon P. Chase's proselytizing uncle, Philander Chase, and a lifelong friend of Heman Dyer, the secretary and general manager of the Evangelical Knowledge Society.⁴ Authentic or not, there has remained a healthy demand for the Lincoln who belonged to the angels as well as the ages. Only four days after Lincoln's death, Josiah Gilbert Holland (who would shortly become Lincoln's first full-length biographer) not only situated Lincoln with the angels, but above them, as a kind of Christ-figure who had redeemed the nation through his death. "If he could speak to me from that other shore," said Holland to a mass meeting in Springfield, Massachusetts, about a man whom he'd never actually met on *this* shore, "he would say, what all his actions and all his words said of others not less guilty than his assassin: 'My murderer was mad and mistaken, as well as malignant. He thought he was doing a great and glorious deed, on behalf of a great and glorious cause. My death was necessary to the perfection of my mission, and was only one sacrifice among hundreds of thousands of others made for the same end.'"⁵ Anyone who did not hear Holland putting 'Father, forgive them' into Lincoln's mouth must have been culturally tone-deaf.

And thus began a great stream of literature devoted to establishing that Lincoln was a Christian—or, depending on the way it was told, a secretly baptized Baptist, an applicant for Presbyterian membership, a Swedenborgian, a Unitarian, a Universalist, and at last, in the hands of an Ohio rabbi, "a descendent of Hebrew parentage" who was "bone

3. "The Death-Bed. The Unofficial Account of the Last Moments of the President," in Henry J. Raymond and Francis B. Carpenter, *Lincoln: His Life and Times* (New York: Hurst, 1891), 2:785–86; Gopnik, "Angels and Ages: Lincoln's Language and its Legacy," *The New Yorker* (May 28, 2007), 29, 36; Dorothy Meserve Kunhardt and Philip B. Kunhardt, *Twenty Days: A Narrative in Text and Pictures of the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln* (1965; reprint, Secaucus, N.J.: Castle Books, 1977), 80. See Richard Wightman Fox, "A Phrase for the Ages, August 2, 2010, <http://www.alplm.org/blog/2010/08>.

4. Benjamin P. Thomas and Harold M. Hyman, *Stanton: The Life and Times of Lincoln's Secretary of War* (New York: Knopf, 1962), 59, and Heman Dyer, *Records of an Active Life* (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1886), 252–56.

5. Holland, *Eulogy on Abraham Lincoln: Pronounced at the City Hall, Springfield, Mass., April 19, 1865* (Springfield, Mass.: L. J. Powers, 1865), 17.

from our bone and flesh from our flesh.”⁶ Lincoln glows with sacred fire in the stained glass of Henry Ward Beecher’s Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, the Episcopal National Cathedral, the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church and the Foundry Methodist Church in Washington, D.C., in the Little Rock Missionary Baptist Church in Detroit, the Riverside Church in Manhattan, the Heinz Chapel at the University of Pittsburgh, the First Congregational Church in Los Angeles, the First Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Illinois, and even the diminutive cathedral of the diminutive Polish National Catholic Church, in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Never has a man with so modest a religious profile gotten such spectacular attention from so many congregations.

But with all due respect to the angels, Hay was the one who spoke with authority, and every Lincoln biographer thereafter, starting with Ida Tarbell, has settled on “Now he belongs to the ages” as the official Stantonian utterance. The problem, of course, is that *Now he belongs to the ages* is also, word-for-word, less easy to parse than *angels*. What, exactly, does it mean to *belong to the ages*? Taken one way, it may simply be a secularized version of assigning Lincoln to the angels, with generations of memorial statues standing in for the seraphim and cherubim. Take it another way, and it may simply mean that Lincoln’s final deed has now been done and all that is left of him from this point forward is the record of his accomplishments, with (sadly) nothing more to be added (“That’s the last of him”). At its most sinister, however, *Now he belongs to the ages* could imply that, just behind the undertakers, the historians and biographers were lining up to take title to Lincoln and to reshape, remake, and redefine his legacy.

Stanton, who worked himself into an early grave in 1869, was never available to explain what it was he said or meant, but there is some truth in seeing the three paths that lead outward from that Delphic and inscrutable pronouncement about belonging to the ages as markers of how Americans’ estimate of Lincoln has changed over the last century and a half. Certainly, Lincoln has been the prize of every American age since 1865, whether it be the Gilded Age, the Progressive Era, or the Age of Reagan. Lincoln has never failed to stand somewhere in the top three of the greatest American presidents, and he has remained a constant subject of popular biography and scholarly research—and occasionally, some disappointingly unpopular biographies and pseudo-biographies and some slightly unhinged works of fiction and nonfiction: *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*, *Abraham Lincoln’s DNA and Other*

6. Edgar DeWitt Jones, *Lincoln and the Preachers* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), 108.

Adventures in Genetics, The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln: An Illustrated Biography in Postcards, Abraham Lincoln in New Hampshire, Iowa and Abraham Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln and the Western Territories, Abraham Lincoln: Incidents in His Life Relating to Waterways, The Reincarnation of Abraham Lincoln, and The Proverbial Abraham Lincoln: An Index to Proverbs in the Works of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln has managed to peek into more movies, documentaries, and television serials than any other American politician, beginning in 1903 in a short Edison production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and won cameo appearances twice in *The Twilight Zone* and once in *Star Trek*. Even Lincoln's statue has wangled a role in the movies, from *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* in 1939, to the remake of *Planet of the Apes* (2001), *Legally Blonde 2* (2003), and *Night at the Museum 2* (2009).

Not all of this celebrity has been velvet-lined; rarely, in fact, has a man so dedicated to moderation been handled so immoderately. The Charleston newspapers began denouncing Lincoln as soon as he was nominated for the presidency in 1860, calling him a "horrid-looking wretch . . . sooty and scoundrelly in aspect; a cross between the nutmeg dealer, the horse-swapper, and the nightman," and the Richmond papers were not much more charitable: Lincoln was an "illiterate partisan" of the abolitionists, "possessed only of his inveterate hatred of slavery."⁷ But Wendell Phillips, the abolitionist, was evidently not a serious reader of Southern newspapers, because two weeks after the *Richmond Enquirer* stamped Lincoln as an "inveterate" hater of slavery, Phillips denounced Lincoln as "the Slave-hound of Illinois" for refusing to condemn the Fugitive Slave Law or to pledge the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia.⁸ And all through his presidency, Lincoln was so tortured by partisan savagery that he told Orville Hickman Browning that if his fellow Republicans "wish to get rid of me . . . I am sometimes half disposed to gratify them."⁹ At some points, the only way he could imagine an escape from the

7. Robert W. Johannsen, *Lincoln, the South, and Slavery: The Political Dimension* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 104, 112.

8. Wendell Phillips Garrison and Francis Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of his Life* (New York: Century, 1889), 3:503; Ralph Korngold, *Two Friends of Man: The Story of William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, and Their Relationship with Abraham Lincoln* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1950), 270.

9. Browning, diary entry for December 17, 1862, in *The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning*, ed. Theodore Calvin Pease and J. G. Randall (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1926), 1:600; Robert L. Wilson to William H. Herndon (February 10, 1866), in *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews and Statements About Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 207.

stress “would be to take a rope and hang himself on one of the trees in the lawn south of the president’s house, looking out at the trees through the window at the same time.”¹⁰

All of this was silenced by Lincoln’s death, partly because in the last few months of his presidency, the success of his policies finally hushed even the most shrill of his critics. Kentucky governor Thomas Bramlette, who had never been less than a thorn in Lincoln’s side, admitted before a mass meeting in Louisville on April 18, 1865, “We . . . have differed with him, but when the judgment of future events has come, we found we were differing blindly; that he was right and we were wrong. . . . Experience and time has demonstrated that his was the only line of salvation for our country.”¹¹ But an even more effective mute for the critics was the timing and manner of his death, which had so impressed people with its similarities to martyrdom; if the old rule of *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* ever had any force, it had it after Lincoln’s assassination. There would always be private rumblings of dissent, especially in the defeated Confederacy, but Joseph Gregoire Hamilton was only stating what had become the nearly official Southern view in 1909, that Lincoln’s death had been met with “genuine regret” by Southerners “for the loss of a leader who was already regarded differently from other prominent men in the North” and that ensuing decades had rendered the South “proud of his Southern birth and blood, gladly acknowledging the debt that the South, not only as a part of the nation, but individually, owes him, and placing him in the same category with Washington as a maker of the nation.”¹²

Barry Schwartz has pegged the spring tide of Lincoln’s reputation, for both ages and angels, in the decades of the 1920s and 1930s; what has followed since then, despite the uptick in Lincoln interest during the Bicentennial and the efflorescence of Lincoln scholarship since the mid-1990s, has been something akin to Matthew Arnold’s “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” on Dover beach. There are, I think, four reasons for this. The first is simply the law of diminishing returns. By the 1890s, the generation of people who had known Lincoln personally was beginning to die off—Leonard Swett in 1889, William Henry Herndon in 1891, Dennis Hanks in 1893, John Hay in 1905, Lincoln’s niece Harriet Chapman in 1915, his son Robert Todd Lincoln in 1926, his sister-in-law Emilie Todd Helm in 1930. Ida Tarbell published the last Lincoln

10. Robert L. Wilson, in *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Don and Virginia Fehrenbacher (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 504.

11. Bramlette, in Lowell H. Harrison, *Lincoln of Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 11.

12. Hamilton, “Lincoln and the South,” *Sevanee Review* 17 (April 1909): 133–34.

biography from direct interviews in 1900; after that, writing about Lincoln increasingly acquired the tired sense of retreading already known facts and long-published material, leading James G. Randall to muse aloud in 1934, "Has the Lincoln Theme Been Exhausted?" The work of Michael Burlingame, the Lincoln Legal Papers Project, and many other energetic scholars have shown how hasty a conclusion that was; but for much of the twentieth century, Lincoln scholarship really did acquire a perception of weariness and dullness.¹³

A more politicized source for the shortening of Lincoln's stature since the 1920s is the repudiation of Progressivism and Progressive politics after World War I. The Progressive movement earned its heyday in the post-Civil War era, from the mid-1880s until 1920. The Progressives had as their principal figureheads Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, but their real strength had been drawn geographically from the upper Midwest and from the new professional classes created by the breakneck industrialization and urbanization of the American economy in the postwar decades. Progressivism worked from the basic assumption that American society had undergone so many dramatic changes in the years after the Civil War that the old pre-Civil War America of self-reliant individualism and small-producer business was gone forever. The disorder generated by those upheavals threw off all the original calculations of the American founding and laid Americans open to the greed and exploitation of Gilded Age robber barons and urban machine politics; the cure for this was the reshaping of American society in a new, more efficient, and more balanced fashion, designed by social professionals who understood the new dynamics of a new age. Progressives—and Theodore Roosevelt is a prime example—had long wanted to claim Lincoln as one of their own, and through the 1920s, they did. But there had always been warnings that Lincoln would not fit the Progressive template all that easily. Helen Nicolay (the daughter of John G. Nicolay), writing in the same year that Theodore Roosevelt struck out on his own to found the Progressive Party, doubted whether Lincoln could be tailored to wear Progressive clothes. "The truth is that Lincoln was no prophet of a distant day. His heart and mind were busy with the problems of his own time. The legacy he left his countrymen was not the warning of a seer, but an example and an obligation to face

13. Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era: History and Memory in Late Twentieth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 26; Randall, "Has the Lincoln Theme Been Exhausted?" *American Historical Review* 41 (January 1936): 270–94. Randall hoped against hope that this was not true, and pointed to "both spade work and refining work" as yet undone, which would make "the field . . . far from being exhausted . . . rich in opportunity" (272).

their own dark shadows with the sanity and courageous independence he showed in looking upon those that confronted him. His early life was essentially of the old era. He made his own career by individual effort."¹⁴ And when the country turned its back on Progressivism after World War I, the Progressives themselves turned on Lincoln, criticizing Lincoln as a model of precisely the out-of-date, self-made man that had deluded Americans into rejecting the Progressives' policies. So long as *that* Lincoln was revered by Americans, he would become an obstacle to be attacked than a banner to fly.

And attack they did: Edgar Lee Masters, an embittered Illinois Progressive, wrote a slashing attack on Lincoln in 1931, snarling at Lincoln for having "no better than a country lawyer's understanding of the constitution," and as president, having "perverted the Constitution, began a reign of terror, and crushed the principles of free government." A more subtle, but also more effective, subversion of Lincoln by a Progressive biographer came at the hands of Albert J. Beveridge, who had joined Theodore Roosevelt in founding the Progressive Party in 1912, lost three elections as a Progressive, and turned to history writing as his balm thereafter. Beveridge was the son of a Civil War veteran and had for years accepted on faith the idolization of Lincoln as the Savior of the Union and the Great Emancipator. But as he went to work on a multivolume Lincoln biography in the 1920s, the Lincoln his research unearthed turned out instead to be gigantically un-Progressive: "strongly conservative and in firm support of vested interests and the conduct of business, unmolested as far as possible, by legislative or any kind of governmental interference." By the time he completed the second volume of his biography, it was not Lincoln but Stephen A. Douglas who emerged in Beveridge's telling as the genuine man of the people, the enemy of special interests, and a Progressive-before-his-time in breaking with the Democratic Party leadership over the Lecompton Constitution.¹⁵

Ironically, this did not earn Lincoln very much in the way of respect from conservative political thinkers at the opposite political pole from the Progressives, even after the birth of a conservative ideological revival in the 1960s. Much of the conservative intellectual movement took its bearings from either Frederick Hayek and Milton Friedman

14. Helen Nicolay, *Personal Traits of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Century, 1912), 381–82.

15. Herbert K. Russell, *Edgar Lee Masters: A Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 274–79; Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809–1858* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1928), 1:236; John Braeman, "Albert J. Beveridge and Demythologizing Lincoln," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 25 (Summer 2004): 18.

or from old-time Southern agrarians, and none seemed to have much affinity for Lincoln. The neo-agrarians, whether of the milder Northern stamp of a Russell Kirk or the aggressive Southern version championed by Melvin Bradford, saw Lincoln as the champion of a Yankee capitalism that was omnivorously dissolving all traditional social connections in the cash nexus, while the disciples of Hayek, with their suspicion of the incompetence of state management of economies, saw Lincoln's presidency as the original model for an all-powerful, centralized welfare state—this, despite the fact that Hayek had almost nothing to say about Lincoln apart from quoting Lincoln's observation that the world had never had a good definition of liberty. Lincoln, lamented Bradford, "played the central role in transforming" the federal government "into a unitary structure based on a claim to power in its own right . . . which, in the name of any cause that attracts a following, might easily threaten the liberties of those for whose sake it existed." Only conservative disciples of the political theorist Leo Strauss—and this translates into one name above all, Harry Jaffa—have seriously embraced Lincoln, although it could be said that Jaffa's championing of Lincoln as "the greatest of all exemplars of Socratic statesmanship" more than made up for all the others' hesitations.¹⁶

But the last, and certainly most surprising, recalibration of the Lincoln legacy emerged out of the Civil Rights movement. For eighty years and more after the Civil War, no single segment of American society clung more worshipfully to the image of Abraham Lincoln than African-Americans. "When I was growing up," Henry Louis Gates wrote on the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth, "his picture was in nearly every black home I can recall, the only white man, other than Jesus himself, to grace black family walls. Lincoln was a hero to us."¹⁷ Lincoln was "the dearest friend, the kindest man" that "as President" the freed slaves "ever knew," declared Henry Highland Garnet during a fund-raising event for the Thomas Ball Emancipation statue on July 4, 1865. Sixty years later, W.E.B. DuBois was pouring scorn on Lincoln in the editorial columns of *The Crisis*: "Abraham Lincoln was a Southern poor white, of illegitimate birth, poorly ed-

16. Bradford, "Against Lincoln: My Dissenting Views," *American Spectator* 17 (December 1984): 37–39. On Hayek and Lincoln, see Gottfried Dietze, "Hayek and the Rule of Law," in *Essays on Hayek*, ed. Fritz Machlup (New York: New York University Press, 1977), 112. For Jaffa, see his *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 368.

17. Gates, "Was Lincoln a Racist?" *The Root*, February 12, 2009, www.theroot.com/views/was-lincoln-racist.

ucated and unusually ugly, awkward, ill-dressed. He liked smutty stories and was a politician down to his toes . . . and indeed he had little outwardly that compelled respect." All that gave DuBois reason even to notice Lincoln was that Lincoln was at least "big enough to be inconsistent— . . . despising Negroes and letting them fight and vote; protecting slavery and freeing slaves. He was a man—a big, inconsistent, brave man."¹⁸ The distance between Garnet and DuBois measures not just a difference of opinion, but the difference between a community born in the South, in slavery, and with full knowledge of what it had been delivered from, as opposed to one born free, in the North, and angry that more in the form of equality had *not* been delivered. Freeing the slaves would never have the significance it once had among those who had never known what slavery was, nor would homage to white paternalism ever seem as routine as it once had. The Civil Rights movement drew its leaders from within the black community and relied on the traditional institutions of black life (particularly the churches), and after the 1950s, blacks never felt the old necessity for white sponsorship.

It was from that new baseline that black skepticism about Lincoln increasingly uncoiled, delivered in its most antagonistic form in 1968 by Lerone Bennett. Born in Mississippi when Jim Crow still ruled Mississippi's public life, Bennett had been raised to revere Lincoln. It was not until he stumbled across Lincoln's opening remarks during the fourth Lincoln-Douglas debate—*I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races*—that Bennett's reverence broke into pieces: "I was just—just absolutely shocked," Bennett told Brian Lamb in 2000, "because I find it difficult to understand how people could say this man was the greatest apostle of . . . brotherhood in the United States of America." After that Bennett found that he had to speak of Lincoln "from a different perspective . . . the perspective of the truly disinherited." Or if not for the "truly disinherited," Bennett certainly has spoken for a generation of middle-class African-Americans who do not understand why they should render homage to a white man who now seems so far below the level of their own expectations. Even Barak Obama admitted to *Time* Magazine in 2005 that "as an African-

18. Garnet, *Celebration by the Colored People's Educational Monument Association in Memory of Abraham Lincoln on the Fourth of July 1865 in the Presidential Grounds* (Washington: McGill & Witherow, 1865), 14; DuBois, "Lincoln Again," in *W.E.B. DuBois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986), 1197–98.

American . . . I cannot swallow whole the view of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator."¹⁹

By the time we arrive at 2011, Lincoln no longer seems part of many modern American stories, much less belonging to the ages, and the general image of Lincoln is in poor repair. He is still in the movies and on television, but now as a figure of jest, as in *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* (where he delivers an exhortation, not to dedicate themselves to the unfinished work of democracy, but to "party on, dudes"), on the dust jacket of Jon Stewart's *Naked Pictures of Famous People*, and in advertisements for Geico, Mountain Dew, and sleep medications where his companions are a deep-sea diver and a talking beaver. Among the heirs of the Civil Rights movement—Jesse Jackson Jr., Vincent Harding, Barbara Field—Lincoln has become stigmatized as a racist. At the 2010 Conservative Political Action Conference, Thomas DiLorenzo whacked Lincoln as "the very embodiment of evil," boiling with "sociopathological behavior" and "micromanag[ing] the murder of 350,000 citizens."²⁰ Partisans on the Right attack him as an enemy of free markets and limited government, as though they had never heard that slavery is the ultimate negation of free markets and that limited government does *not* mean, as Justice Robert H. Jackson said in 1949, that the Constitution is a suicide pact; partisans on the Left despise him as a capitalist tool, and struggle to sanitize his politics by praising his "growth," as though he were a poster boy for pop psychology.²¹ No history department in any Ivy League university—Princeton, Harvard, Yale, Brown, Dartmouth, Columbia, Cornell, or the University of Pennsylvania—offers any course of study focused on Abraham Lincoln. Not Howard University nor

19. See Lamb's interview of Bennett for *BookNotes* (September 10, 2000), *Booknotes: 800 Non-Fiction Authors in Hour-Long Interviews, April 1989–December 2004*, www.booknotes.org/Watch/158187-1/Lerone+Bennett.aspx; Bennett, *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* (Chicago: Johnson, 1999), 40.

20. Vincent Harding, *There Is A River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 236; Barbara J. Field, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* 181 (May/June 1990): 111; Obama, "What I See in Lincoln's Eyes," *Time*, June 26, 2005, www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1077287,00.html. On CPAC and DiLorenzo, see Max Blumenthal, "Feeling the Hate at CPAC 2010 With Andrew Breitbart, Hannah Giles and the Crazy Mob," *Huffington Post*, February 23, 2010, www.huffingtonpost.com/max-blumenthal/feeling-the-hate-at-cpac_b_474077.html. Gabriel Winant, "At CPAC today: A Checklist of Crazy," *Salon*, February 18, 2010, mobile.salon.com/politics/war_room/2010/02/18/cpac_highlights/index.html.

21. See Fred Kaplan, "Eric Foner's book on Lincoln and slavery, reviewed by Fred Kaplan," *Washington Post*, November 28, 2010.

Morehouse College nor Spelman College—all of them historically black institutions—offer any history course, seminar or colloquium on Abraham Lincoln, and even Lincoln University of Pennsylvania, another historically black university, features no entry in its course catalog that mentions Abraham Lincoln. Nor, for that matter, does the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, nor does Knox College, where the fifth Lincoln-Douglas Debate took place.

Much of the mud hurled at Lincoln is really little more than wet silliness and tabloid-style sensationalism, and it quickly evaporates under the application of a few questions. *Lincoln did not free the slaves?* Then whose name is at the bottom of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment? *Lincoln was a racist?* If he was, then why would he have bothered with emancipation at all? It certainly wasn't because he needed black votes, because there were hardly any in the Civil War North, thanks to black codes that disenfranchised all but a handful of free black voters. It certainly wasn't because he needed the abolitionist vote, because there weren't that many abolitionists to start with. And it was not because he was trying to fend off intervention by Great Britain or France, because it was precisely emancipation that had convinced the British government that Lincoln's proclamation would trigger a "servile insurrection" that only British intervention could avert. *Was Lincoln racially insensitive?* At times, yes. *But was he a racist?* Does a racist arm black men and send them into battle to kill white racists? Does a racist consciously run the risk of costing his party command of Congress and generating lynch mobs in the streets of New York City on behalf of emancipation? *Lincoln wanted to destroy federalism and states rights?* The Constitution already severely limited the circle of rights belonging to the states back in 1787: they were barred from coining money, could not enter into treaties or alliances, could not impose export or import taxes, could not maintain armies or navies. What the Civil War settled was that states had no specific right to *secession* and that states could not trump national citizenship. What was left of states' rights after that was actually destroyed by Progressivism, in the name of efficiency, and marked by Progressivism's two greatest constitutional achievements—the amendments providing for the direct election of senators (in 1912), and for the creation of the Federal Reserve system and for a direct federal income tax (in 1913). *Was Lincoln a dictator?* If so, the most obvious way to have become a dictator would be simply to have suspended all elections (in 1862 and 1864) on the grounds of national emergency. Surely, if ever there was a crisis for a president not to let go to waste, the Civil War was it; yet, Lincoln not only submitted to the test of democratic elections but acknowledged that his greatest project,

the Emancipation Proclamation, might very easily be overturned by the federal courts once the war was over, in which case, "If the people should, by whatever mode or means, make it an Executive duty to re-enslave such persons, another, and not I, must be their instrument to perform it."²²

Still, we do not need to make Lincoln a paragon in order to determine whether he still belongs to the ages. But we *do* need to step away from the arrogance of presumption—the presumption that *we* are the best judges of his own mind, that *we* are entitled to substitute our grievances for the real troubles of his time, that *we* are permitted to demand a perfection, an orderliness and a level of insight that we can't even impose on our own checkbooks—because only then will we recognize how very extraordinary Lincoln's achievements were.

1) His leadership and determination really were crucial to saving the Union. There was no point during the war when he couldn't simply have opened up negotiations with the Confederacy and quickly arranged a cease-fire and a mutually harmonious severance of the Union; and there was little in Congress, the army, or the public that could have thwarted him. But the result would have been a North American continent that resembled the Balkans, palsied by incessant low-level conflict and beggared by trade wars. Worse still, America then would have been the ultimate proof to those who aspired to freedom that democratic self-government "of the people, by the people, for the people" is an illusion that the slightest political stress will whirl into fragments. In so doing, he would have been the chief partner, as he put it, in "meanly" losing the "last best hope of earth."²³

2) Lincoln insisted that democratic politics must have a moral foundation. Thirty years before the Civil War, Alexis de Tocqueville warned that democracies will tend to veer in the direction of the lowest possible cultural denominator and the highest percentage of votes. Lincoln insisted that there was more to democracy than counting noses; democracy by nose-counting was the method of Stephen A. Douglas's "popular sovereignty." Lincoln believed that democracy is not two wolves and a lamb voting on what to have for dinner; democracy is a means, not an end in itself, and a means toward realizing the non-negotiable truths of natural law and natural rights written into the Declaration of Independence.

22. Lincoln, "Annual Message to Congress," December 6, 1864, Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953–1955), 8:152.

23. Lincoln, "Annual Message to Congress," December 1, 1862, *Ibid.*, 5:537.

3) Lincoln freed the slaves. They were not freed by confiscation (because the confiscation legislation passed by Congress only transferred title to the federal government, at best), and they were not freed by themselves by running away (because a runaway slave did not become a free man in law, but simply a runaway slave)—they were freed by the legal proclamation of the president of the United States, exercising his war powers as commander in chief, and by the constitutional amendment he called “the king’s cure for the evil.” Not, perhaps, the most prophetic or most cinematic method of freeing slaves from bondage, but certainly one that worked. And history, as Charles Sumner remarked, “dwells on results rather than the means employed.” Lincoln, he said, “put his name to Emancipation—made speeches that nobody else could have made—& early dedicated himself to the support of Human Rights. . . . Therefore, we honor him, & Fame takes him by the hand.”²⁴

4) Finally, Lincoln set the agenda for a new political generation. With Lincoln, Henry Clay’s old dream of a prosperous, dynamic “American System” finally achieved its goal, and so the domestic issues Lincoln represented—the homestead act, the national banking system, the protective tariff, the Pacific railroad—became the principal political issues for the following seventy years.

But beyond just Lincoln’s political accomplishments, there is also the appeal of the man himself. What keeps him a subject of perennial attention? Partly mystery (because he was so relentlessly private a man), partly mystification (because he so often out-foxed his opponents by inducing them to underestimate him), partly a set of agreeable personality traits (his humor, humility, perspective, resilience) that are necessary components to democratic political leadership (unlike monarchical leadership, which is about honor, style, and the acquisition of power, or bureaucratic leadership, which is about efficiency, competence, and procedure).

We live in a cynical age that has a hard time believing in the superiority of superheroes, much less heroes, and certainly that cynicism has played a role in the decline of Lincoln’s reputation. But to take the measure of the man’s accomplishments, and to stare into the complex depths of his personality, reveals a man before whom cynicism bows out backwards. So, with all due respect to the angels, I’m inclined to agree with John Hay—he does, indeed, belong to the ages.

24. Sumner to Lot M. Morrill (June 15, 1865), *Selected Letters of Charles Sumner*, ed. B.W. Palmer (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 2:306.