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[Introduction to] Lincoln's Legacy of Leadership

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Lincoln's Legacy of Leadership

Edited by
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Introduction

GEORGE R. GOETHALS AND
GARY L. MCDOWELL

As president-elect Abraham Lincoln stood on the platform that February day in 1861, preparing to board the train that would take him east to Washington, he faced a future so uncertain that even a man of his towering ambition and sturdy self-confidence found it daunting. Not only was his trip to assume the duties of the presidency fraught with threats of assassination or kidnapping, but the republic itself was disintegrating. The friends of states' rights and slavery, those who were committed, as he had put it on more than one occasion, to "blowing out the moral lights around us," had begun their move to dissolve the Union and to form their own confederation where their "peculiar institution" would be safe. And now it fell to this largely unseasoned and relatively unknown western politician to do something about it. Little wonder he took his leave from Springfield by imploring the people gathered there to pray for God's guidance as he prepared to lead the nation through its "fiery trial."

Lincoln knew that many of those countrymen doubted he was up to the task. He had, after all, largely come out of nowhere to win the presidency over men clearly better prepared for that high office. A one-term congressman and a twice-failed senatorial candidate, Lincoln had begun to gain a national name for himself only two years earlier after he had dragooned Stephen A. Douglas into a series of debates across Illinois. Although he lost that campaign to Douglas, the leaders of his young Republican Party took notice. However rough his edges, here was a man who could give political voice to a moral vision that made his fledgling party a true alternative to Douglas's Democrats.

And after he delivered a stunning address in New York City at the Cooper Institute in February 1860, Lincoln became a national figure with whom all others would have to reckon.

The essence of Lincoln's vision that propelled him to the top of national politics was, of course, his stance on the slavery question. If slavery was not wrong, he insisted, nothing was wrong. In a nation founded on the natural rights principles of the Declaration of Independence there was, in his view, no room for the moral indifference over slavery that was urged by Douglas. Yet he was no abolitionist. While personally against slavery as a great moral, political, and social wrong, he also believed that, as president, he had no power to interfere with slavery where it legally existed. Thus as he pulled out of Springfield that day, the newly elected president was committed not to the extirpation of that noxious institution but to the preservation of the Union. While he might have to endure slavery, he could not endure secession. And "the war came."

Lincoln's entire presidency was a wartime presidency. The South had seceded before he could take the oath of office; Lee's surrender to Grant took place less than a week before Lincoln was struck down by John Wilkes Booth. Appreciating the enormity of what he faced as president is, in many ways, the key to understanding his legacy of leadership. The essays that follow seek to explicate and explain Lincoln as a leader within the maelstrom of the events that he insisted controlled him. To understand him properly, then, requires an effort to understand Lincoln as he understood himself, to free him from the myths and misrepresentations history has imposed upon him.

The Lincoln of American memory, as Edward Ayers makes clear, is in many ways far removed from the historical Lincoln. Not only did many of his most eloquent words—words which still resonate in the national moral imagination—not penetrate very deeply with his own generation, but his administration was not infrequently indicted in the public prints for its "imbecility, corruption and fanaticism." As Ayers points out, had the presidency been at stake in 1862 instead of in 1864, Lincoln would have lost his bid for reelection. And even in 1865 the now-celebrated second inaugural address was dismissed in the party press as "unworthy of comment." In the view of his critics, the paper went on, Lincoln "had nothing to say, and he has said it."

Yet, looking back, his leadership is clear. The secret to Lincoln's success, Ayers shows, was his instinctive ability to capture "what he could from each moment of possibility" and to avoid "the worst in each moment of disaster." His task as a wartime leader was to confront a

constant and unrelenting flood of “desperate challenges.” The ferocity of the war and the mounting losses of life were staggering, far exceeding anything anyone might have guessed that day he left for Washington. And the reason was perhaps as clear then as it is now. “The North and the South fought each other so bitterly,” Ayers argues, “because they fought for a shared patrimony.”

As Herman Belz makes clear, that “shared patrimony” comes into sharpest focus when it is viewed through the prism of popular self-government. A large part of the dilemma Lincoln faced was not merely political but deeply philosophical. The fact was the Constitution in “express and literal terms” did not answer the question of whether there existed a right for the states to leave the Union. While the Declaration Lincoln so celebrated surely formed what Belz describes as “the moral basis of government by the consent of the governed,” it also did more. Jefferson’s “merely revolutionary document,” as Lincoln would describe it, also provided for the right of revolution whenever any government might become destructive of the ends for which it was constituted. “The moral dimension of the right to revolution did not confine, but rather opened it to wide if not promiscuous application in the increasingly aggressive and pluralistic controversy over slavery in American society.”

In the deepest sense, Belz shows, Lincoln’s “project of preserving popular self-government . . . defined his achievement as a democratic statesman.” He succeeded in this because he “rightly understood the nature of popular self-government.” Armed with that understanding, and “through judgments of practical reason and acts of prudential statesmanship,” Lincoln “was able to conform government by consent to the demands of justice in making a more perfect Union in the face of secessionist rebellion.” Douglas’s theory of popular sovereignty and his indifference to whether slavery was voted up or voted down in the states was “insidious” in Lincoln’s view not simply at the level of policy but at the level of fundamental principle. It undermined government by consent properly understood.

Lincoln’s ability to resolve the theoretical ambiguities of the American constitutional order was due in no small measure to his own self-education. That education was, as Jeffrey Sedgwick argues, the context of Lincoln’s search for America’s true identity. Thus one can learn much about Lincoln’s leadership not simply by assessing his presidency but also by casting a glance back at his earliest writings and considering the cultural context of the America in which he grew to manhood. One sees in his speech of 1838 before the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield

the earliest evidence of Lincoln's deepest political understanding as to the nature of the regime itself. In his exhortation to the young men gathered before him to commit themselves to "the perpetuation of our political institutions," Lincoln grappled with the unfinished business of the American founding in ways that foreshadowed his intellectual and rhetorical efforts as president. In the end, as Sedgwick points out, institutions alone are not enough to make a republic endure; it takes something deeper, something akin to friendship. It takes, as Lincoln would put it, an appreciation for, and a dedication to, those "mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land."

It seems clear that this view of the American character gave both form and direction to what William Lee Miller calls Lincoln's "giant battle for national self-definition." It is also this reliance on what Lincoln called simply "the better angels of our nature" that prepared him to be the kind of leader he became. He was possessed, as Miller makes clear, of a rare degree of magnanimity. Power simply did not corrupt him. Rather, the "higher he rose and the greater the power he gained, the worthier his conduct would become." As a result, he was able to combine as no one else a sense of resolve along with an unfaltering magnanimity. "I shall do nothing in malice," Lincoln famously said. "What I deal with is too vast for malicious dealing." Lincoln's "grounding in reason, duty, and truth rather than ego and will," Miller argues, meant that the president "could be resolute without being ruthless, he could admit mistakes, he could change his mind; and...he could combine generosity with his steadfast resolve."

Lincoln's virtues were not simply honed in the fires of the civil war, of course. He had been a political man from his earliest years, but always a self-reflective political man. In what has come down to us as his first political utterance, the young Lincoln confessed to the people of Sangamo County, Illinois, not only his ambition to be esteemed by his fellow citizens, but his loftier ambition to be worthy of that esteem. He seems never to have departed from holding that ideal as central to his political life. As Daniel Walker Howe shows, much can be learned about Lincoln and his political skills and quest for esteem by taking seriously his one term in the U.S. House of Representatives and especially his arguments against the Mexican War. Lincoln was convinced that the war was not only one of aggression, but that it had been deliberately provoked by President James K. Polk in order to get around the Constitution's clear grant of the war-making power to Congress alone.

Lincoln's efforts against the war were designed to correct the misguided policies of a president he considered to be "a bewildered, confounded, and miserably perplexed man." His speeches as a junior congressman were spawned not by personal malice but were the result of the fact, as Howe makes clear, that Lincoln "sincerely hated war, international aggression, and duplicity of all kinds." His speeches "represented a confluence of sincerity and ambition" and thus were a matter of passion that was tamed by Lincoln's "practical political goals." As a result, these speeches, which for too long have been largely ignored, can be very helpful in coming to grips with Lincoln's "values, his principles, [and] his social and political outlook." Perhaps not least that one term in Congress contributed to the future president's "wonderful self-reliance."

That wonderful self-reliance, as Richard Carwardine argues, stemmed in part from the fact that Lincoln was in the strictest sense a "self-made man" whose own "self-making gave him added confidence in his innate faculties." He seems never really to have doubted his own judgment, often choosing to keep his own counsel. Moreover, his self-confidence in some ways gave birth to what Miller has praised as his magnanimity. "This confidence in the rightness of his own position," Carwardine points out, "toughened him against chronic wartime criticism, but stopped short of becoming an overdeveloped self-regard." In the end, his wonderful self-reliance is what rendered Lincoln "a political master whose capacities bordered on genius."

Jennifer Weber demonstrates how well this genius served Lincoln in his dealings with the Democratic opponents of the war, the so-called Copperheads. His ability to navigate the often treacherous waters of his presidency, Weber insists, was not merely attributable to his genius but to his extraordinary sense of political timing. It took supreme self-confidence in his own judgment to play the game he often played with his critics. His reticence was often so great as to make it seem he had ceded the ground to the conservative Democrats in Congress. In truth, it was simply a way to keep his options open. However dangerous the game was, it allowed him to control events to at least some degree, announcing policies and decisions only when he was ready to do so.

The core of Lincoln's greatness as a leader, and, perhaps, the basis of his reputation in the collective American memory is his eloquence, both in the spoken and the written word. His greatest skill, Douglas Wilson argues, was his "ability to shape public opinion with his pen." He had trained himself in the skills of rhetoric for one simple reason. "Public opinion in this country is everything." Lincoln knew that

to influence, if not control that opinion was, in the highest political sense, the very essence of leadership. While best known for his famous speeches such as that at Gettysburg, Lincoln was also the master of the well-timed public letter. In this he displayed time and again that same “shrewd sense of timing” Jennifer Weber noted in his dealing with his congressional opponents. Over the course of his presidency his carefully orchestrated “public letters hit their target audience with maximum force.” This was not simply luck. Lincoln was, as Wilson makes clear, a committed and disciplined writer and his own best editor. His patience to search for just the right word was the true secret to his success in getting his points across. His habit of jotting down his thoughts and keeping them in his drawer (or even in his hat) until the time was right served him well. He never ceased thinking about what he needed to say and how, exactly, he needed to say it.

The one area where Lincoln’s natural gift of leadership did not always serve him well was in his role as commander in chief. A string of uncooperative or incompetent or self-absorbed and usually unsuccessful generals was his nightmare. This was a problem that was exacerbated by his own lack of any real military experience. While he set about to teach himself as much as he could about the theory and practice of warfare, he remained, by and large, in the view of Joseph Glatthaar, little more than “a talented novice.” Lincoln’s “searing mind” did not lend itself to military ways of thinking. While Lincoln was, in Glatthaar’s view, undoubtedly “the greatest American wartime president,” that was the result of his political judgments rather than his military ones. While he could often see the weakness and fallacies of his generals’ plans and decisions, he simply was not a “natural military strategist.” Throughout the war he remained “an amateur” who was constantly handicapped by “his lack of knowledge.”

Yet, as Brian Holden Reid argues, war is “first and foremost a matter of *instinct*,” and Lincoln, while he might have lacked technical knowledge in military matters, had instincts that were “pronounced and sensitive to the military environment around him.” Those instincts, in part, contributed to his willingness to delegate authority and then stand out of the way. While a dominant force in his administration of the war, the president resisted the impulse to interfere. His greatest skill was his “profound grasp of the popular dimensions of the conflict,” a grasp that “allowed him to adapt his outlook as his own opinions and public opinion shifted.” He did not need to be a minutely attuned battlefield strategist but rather had to be a political leader who was able “to articulate in powerful and timeless eloquence what the war was

actually about, culminating in the Gettysburg and second inaugural addresses." Such a task, Holden Reid reminds us, is "fiendishly difficult in practice," but in this Lincoln was nothing less than a "triumphant success."

When Lincoln left Springfield for his new life he noted that he was leaving, "not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return." Eleven days later, in a stop at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, the president-elect took the opportunity to say again that he "had never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence." The deepest sentiment was the fact that the Declaration was a beacon of "hope to the world for all future time." The most fundamental principle for that future world was the moral commitment "that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that *all* should have an equal chance." It was a principle so profound and so important, he declared, that he "would rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender it."

Lincoln fought the war for the Union, and then a war against slavery, in light of this principle for four long and bloody years. He never surrendered it, and never doubted that it was a principle truly worth fighting for. In the end, he knew that this was the principle that defined his beloved republic, a nation not only "conceived in liberty" but one "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." It was a war being fought, as he said that cold day at Gettysburg, for "a new birth of freedom," a war that would guarantee that "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." In the end, it was a principle to which he, no less than the "honored dead" at Gettysburg, would be called upon to give his "last full measure of devotion." And as the train bore his remains back to Springfield in April 1865 America had already begun to understand that history would make clear that this man, too, "shall not have died in vain."