

My Life with Lincoln: History, Memory and Irony

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First. I want to thank Messiah for inviting me and providing wonderful hospitality for Polly and me. And I wish to recognize the Lincoln scholars who have participated in this afternoon's panel. Their presence, and that of a former mentor while I was a student here, makes me especially anxious about what I have to say tonight.

I graduated from this institution forty-five years ago and have often reflected on the meaning of my experience here—what I was like in 1964, and am now, and whether I would be able to talk to, or understand, my younger self. The Messiah I knew was a small, relatively isolated community of several hundred faculty, staff and students in a hamlet surrounded by miles of farmland. Most of the students were natives of this part of the state and came from small towns or farms. Most were members of the sponsoring denomination. All of this enhanced Messiah's intellectual and cultural insularity. Much change would occur, and some of it was just beginning. The college had recently been accredited. There was a new-fangled shopping center on the south side of Camp Hill, and Interstate 83 was relatively novel. Harrisburg, which had a population of about 90,000, was an urban island in a sea of corn and dairy farms. Hershey was a remote and isolated chocolate-making town. Route 15 was a narrow, two-lane highway that

undulated for about 40 miles over the gentle hills and valleys between my home and Gettysburg.

This is a somewhat indirect way of introducing my topic . What do I know about our sixteenth president, and when did I come to know it? And how and why? The larger question is how does one learn about the past? And why do I add “History,” “Memory,” and “Irony”? These are separate but interrelated concepts.

As I have practiced it, history is a relatively objective discipline that deals with facts, ideas, and interpretations through a methodology that has been utilized for well over 200 years. Historians revere the “C” words—change and continuity over time, context, and content. We insist that evidence be reliable and verifiable. We detest oversimplification and overgeneralization.

Memory resembles history in some respects but is fundamentally different from it. It can be personal or collective, as people of my age remember where they were at 1:00 p.m. on November 22, 1963. Memory, though, is highly selective and subjective, and is often at odds with the facts. Memories often clash with each other—witness, for instance, the Middle East. Historians have had to come to grips with collective memory, for example, in dealing with race in America.

And why do I add Irony? Do I mean by that a pretended eagerness to learn about someone else’s views in order to demonstrate how absurd they are? Or the use of words to express the opposite of what they mean? I wish to add a definition gained in the fall of 1964 at Harvard Divinity School, where I was introduced to Neo-Orthodoxy. For the grand total of \$2.00, I purchased and read Reinhold Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and*

Immoral Society (1932) and *The Irony of American History* (1952). I reread these last summer. I was struck by their relevance in our times. In the latter work Niebuhr declared Irony “consists of apparently fortuitous incongruities in life which were discovered, upon closer examination, to be not merely fortuitous. . . . The ironic situation . . . is differentiated from tragedy by the fact that the responsibility is related to an unconscious weakness rather than to a conscious resolution.” The realization that some “hidden vanity or pretension by which comedy is turned into irony” might lead to abatement of the pretension, “which means contrition; or it leads to a desperate accentuation of the vanities to the point where irony turns into pure evil.”¹ Tragedy “elicits tears of admiration and pity for the hero who is willing to brave death or incur guilt Irony, however, prompts some laughter and a nod of comprehension beyond the laughter; for irony involves comic absurdities which cease to be altogether absurd when fully understood.” Irony is increased when idealists seek to “escape from the ambiguity of man’s strength and weakness.”²

I would like to delay getting to Abraham Lincoln a bit by discussing what I have come to think is history. I cannot tell you who was responsible for this, and when, but I consider the best history as first a story, well written, for a general audience. The best history reflects having visited the places and empathized with the characters in the story. History captures the reader’s thinking-- through emotional as well as rational processes. One recent experience illustrates this: standing on the platform of the Hall of Representatives in the Old Capitol in Springfield and attempting to imagine what it was

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952), viii.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 3.

like in mid-June, 1858, when Lincoln addressed the Illinois Republican convention and spoke of a “house divided against itself, which could not stand.” On the same platform Stephen Douglas gave his last public appeal for the Union before his early death in June 1865.

I came to history by steps, beginning as a youngster with reading all the biographies I could check out of the Dauphin County Public Library. At John Harris High School I had a remarkable eleventh-grade history teacher. I majored in history here and had some strong mentors. After a period of uncertainty about career choices, I chose to focus on it in graduate school. And I was hired to teach it at a brand new public university on the banks of the Ohio in Evansville, the only metropolis between Louisville and St. Louis. Evansville’s location, in the center of a region called the Tri-State since the 1860s, and on the border between what was free and slave territory, at once intrigued me. Seven miles due south of my campus, for instance, was Henderson County, Kentucky, whose slaves constituted 41 percent of the population in 1860 . Evansville resembles Cincinnati, having much demographic and economic connection with the South, and a huge southern German population. But Evansville also looks like Louisville, which though a slave city was more northern in its ways than any other southern city except St. Louis. Both have been models for and rivals of my Ohio River city.

So, with research and travel funds limited and a virtual tabula rasa about the history of my region, I began researching and writing about the place where I lived. That, too, I have learned, is a good way to do history. Too much of what we read is about distant places and a relatively narrow stratum of society. Over nearly forty years I have

written about African Americans and German Americans in the Ohio Valley, about town building along the Ohio, about the impact of New Englanders on the Old Northwest, and most recently about the Ohio Valley's most famous son, Lincoln. One thing I learned early on was that the best approach was to try to picture myself in the time about which I was writing, and to try to think forward, not retrospectively--assuming that nothing was inevitable and that chance, luck, irrationality, and fate contributed to the shaping of events.³ My work on towns and villages in the 350 miles of the Ohio Valley downstream from Louisville attempted to sort through the process whereby some places grew and developed, while others languished or died. My recent study of African American communities and race relations in the counties and towns of four states along the Ohio following Emancipation sought to identify similarities as well as differences between Kentucky and its three northern neighbors and to reassert the importance that blacks played in shaping their destinies.

I believe in what of late is called "nearby history." Documents and artifacts from what is close at hand, including language, dialect, place names, religious affiliation, and the built environment, are wonderful ways of learning about and teaching civilization and nature. Unfortunately, many students do not see these as "historic" and overlook local places. For example, one of the most important battles in the Revolutionary War occurred fifty miles north of Evansville in Vincennes, then part of Virginia, in February 1779. The Reformed Seminary in Mercersburg, in Franklin County, PA, was the site in

³ David M. Potter, "Why the Republicans Rejected Both Compromise and Secession," *The Crisis of the Union*, ed. George Harmon Knoles (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), offers a good illustration of how chance and irrationality shape the course of history.

the mid-nineteenth century of an enormously important theological challenge to the prevailing evangelical Protestant front.

Each American place is special. Every village in Vermont, for instance, has a memorial to its Civil War soldiers, a reflection of the fact that the Green Mountain State, by percentage, probably had the highest casualty rate of any Union state. I am fond of looking at the yellow pages in telephone books when I visit a new place, especially examining the list of churches and synagogues, which gives me a sense of the culture of the region.⁴ Place names also tell us a lot, sometimes deceptively. Consider Oldwick, New Jersey, deep in the hunt country, where my late father-in-law and his wife resided. The name, like Grantham, suggests English origins, but the oldest church in the village is Lutheran, formed about 1740. It turns out that townspeople changed the name from Berlin to Oldwick during the last year of World War I. The people of St. Louis did the same thing to a major avenue in 1918—calling it Pershing instead of Berlin.

Now to Lincoln, who was born about 50 miles south of Louisville, spent his formative years in Spencer County, Indiana, midway between Louisville and Evansville, and resided from 1830 to 1861 in central Illinois, a four-hour drive from where I live. My life with Lincoln took an unexpected and dramatic turn in the fall of 2000, when I

⁴ We spent the evening of April 16 in Belle Vernon, PA, in the heart of the “Mon[gehela] Valley,” from Brownsville on the south to Clairton on the north. About 400 religious institutions were listed. I was surprised by the continuity from the time of Alexis de Tocqueville: the largest number were Methodist, and after that Baptist, and then Catholic. Then things began to become complex, reflecting this area’s role in the coal and steel revolution. Four Catholic churches, for starters, were identified by ethnicity. Fourth in rank were Orthodox churches from the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and Russia. At the end was one Unitarian church, probably organized by a plant owner or manager. What accounts for the two Mennonite congregations?

received a call from the White House, inviting me to become one of fifteen members of the newly formed U.S. Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission.

But what did I know about Lincoln? All of us learn about the past through different means, and ideally the most effective is schooling. I recall being introduced to him in grades eight and eleven, though I don't remember **which** Lincoln was presented. While growing up, my parents took us frequently to visit my paternal grandparents, who resided about 9 miles southwest of Gettysburg, where my father was born. I thought I knew the Battle of Gettysburg because our route took us past the Lutheran Seminary in the northwest part of the town, and my father and grandparents recalled stories they had been told about the battle and the fate of the wounded afterwards. Many years later I realized that my knowledge was limited to June 30 and July 1, 1863, and not the more important sites that witnessed the struggle south of the town on July 2 and 3. And I would learn later that Lee's advance toward the northwest side of the town had been blunted by the heroic stand of the First Brigade of the First Division of the First Corps—the famous “Iron Brigade” that included the Indiana 19th. Lee's retreat toward the southwest, through the region where my grandparents lived, meant undoubtedly that many of the wounded were Confederate. ⁵

In grade school, like most, I memorized and recited the Gettysburg Address (along with the Lord's Prayer and the preamble to the Constitution). The words meant little to me. The name “Lincoln” I associated with black schools. My Messiah College

⁵ A recent study of the post battle environment indicated that of the twenty Confederate field hospitals in the Gettysburg region, eleven were on or near the Fairfield road to the southwest. The rebel troops came to Pennsylvania significantly under-equipped, especially in medical supplies and tents. Hence in addition to these hospitals, farm houses, barns, other outbuildings, and churches became havens for the wounded. A notable collection point for Ewell's First Corps was the Lower Marsh Presbyterian Church.

American history text, by John Hicks, portrayed Lincoln's greatest achievement as preservation of the Union. (Volume I was titled *The Federal Union* and the second, after the Civil War, *The American Nation*.) The graduate history department at Kansas, like that of Illinois's, revered Stephen A. Douglas for seeking to keep moral issues out of politics. The Civil War was the result of blunders by fanatics, mostly abolitionists. My dissertation adviser had been trained by a Virginian at the University of Wisconsin who spoke of the "War against the States" and passed on to him a cynical approach to Lincoln's leadership. Thus I came to the University of Southern Indiana (USI) with a pretty jaundiced view of him.

For thirty-six years I taught the Civil War course at USI and wrote extensively about the African American experience during and after that war, but in neither did I get into Lincoln, probably because I focused on movements, factors, groups and institutions and deemphasized biography. To be sure, I visited the national park to the east of Evansville that preserves the memory of Lincoln's mother and of his youth in Indiana, but that knowledge gained there was reverential. It was, after all, a memorial.

So how and why did things change? For one, some of the members of the Commission were renowned Lincoln scholars and collectors, and I wanted to be able to converse with and learn from them. And I have learned much. I also wanted to be knowledgeable enough to communicate Lincoln's significance to the public and to the media. In addition, I wished to ensure that the work of the Commission would be successful.

For starters, I read the report of the Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission, published in 1960, and explored the centennial observances of Lincoln's birth in 1909,

the creation and dedication of the Lincoln Memorial, and the symbolism that memorial came to have in the public mind after Marian Anderson sang there on Easter Sunday in 1939. And I also began to read Lincoln's speeches and letters in print and on the web and to explore the vast amount of Lincoln literature that began to appear shortly after his death.⁶

My reading took me through all of what I subsequently learned were the *100 Essential Lincoln Books*⁷ and just about everything of note that has appeared since that book was published in 2003.⁸ Just when I thought I had caught up, I was recently asked to review two new books—one on Lincoln and race and another on “The Physical Lincoln.” I have along the way delivered several public addresses on Lincoln.⁹ I was guest editor of the *OAH Magazine of History* special issue on Lincoln, slavery and race that appeared in October 2007. But I am not a Lincoln “expert.”

So what have I determined about Abraham Lincoln? For one, the American people—and many around the world—revere him. Numerous western states have Lincoln counties, and plenty of our towns and cities are named after him, as are

⁶ . It is estimated that a new Lincoln book surfaces every five days, and that more has been written about Lincoln than anyone except Jesus.

⁷ This is the title of a book by Michael Burkheimer that was published by Cumberland Books in Nashville, Tennessee, in 2003.

⁸ A few examples—Doris Kearns Goodwin's study of Lincoln and his cabinet, Douglas Wilson's work on Lincoln as a writer, James Oakes's comparative study of Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, the Kunhardts' photo essay on the evolution of the Lincoln image between 1865 and 1930, Gabor Boritt's *The Gettysburg Gospel*, and a recent one-volume biography by Ronald White. A recent addition of note is Harold Holzer's revision of the Library of America anthology of essays and comments about Lincoln, beginning in February 1860.

⁹ One on Lincoln's gradual transformation into being a Republican, and the other on Lincoln, slavery and race.

countless parks, streets, and schools. The nation's first national highway, which runs close to here, bears his name. There are about 220 statues of Lincoln in the United States. Lincoln's image—from the penny, beginning in 1909, and the \$5 dollar bill, to countless products and commercials—is ubiquitous. Americans turn to his words, more than any other's, in national crises.

Reverence for the “real Lincoln” resembles in many respects the history of Christianity. In a nation that was deeply religious, his dying between Good Friday and Easter, which in 1865 was also Passover, having just made a triumphal entry (into Richmond) made him either a Moses denied access to the Promised Land or a Jesus who died for the sins of his people. There are two major national Lincoln organizations, or churches, one created in a schism with the other. There are noteworthy regional organizations and immeasurable Lincoln clubs and groups, which resemble sects and cults. Not unlike medieval Christianity, historic sites attract pilgrims who worship his memory. The so-called “Lincoln community,” which comprises bishops, priests, theologians, and church historians, create “official” biographies. Thousands collect “Lincolniana” in ways resembling relics in Roman Catholicism: pieces of the body, especially hair; clothing and other personal possessions of Lincoln and his wife; his signature, and ideally whole documents; and items owned by people close to him. Lincoln collectors have devoted their lives and fortunes to their passion. Countless disputes have arisen over what Lincoln really did or said, and Lincoln's name and words are invoked to support one cause or another. Not unlike what Charles Sheldon wrote about many years ago in the early years of the Social Gospel, innumerable people have

asked, “what would Lincoln do?” For the last several months, moreover, tourism groups have been promoting Washington trips that identify “in his steps.”

Securing consensus on Lincoln is ultimately impossible. First, Lincoln was cautious, elusive, or “shut-mouthed.” Second, he was continually learning and developing. He had at most one year of formal education and taught himself such disciplines as logic, geometry, the law, and military strategy. He memorized much of Shakespeare and the Bible, and for someone who never joined a church was unquestionably the most articulate president in matters relating to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. More than any public leader in his century, and matched perhaps only by Mark Twain, he wrote plainly and simply, without Victorian gloss. Edmund Wilson thought his skills with the language so profound, so poetic, that he could have succeeded in a variety of roles.

I have actively participated on the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission (ALBC) for nearly nine years. Through much of that time I have chaired a committee that has planned K-12 and college-level activities. About two months ago, February 10-12, much of our work culminated in a series of observances in Washington and around the nation. Formed by Congress in the summer of 2000, the ALBC was charged with certain duties—rededication of the Lincoln Memorial, redesign of the penny, issuance of commemorative stamps, and creation of a joint session of Congress, as well as a broad charge to encourage Federal and non-government organizations to participate. Its membership, which has remained fairly stable, was limited to fifteen—five each appointed by the President, the House, and the Senate. We come from nine states. We have three co-chairs: Senator Richard Durbin and then Congressman Ray LaHood from

Illinois, and Harold Holzer, a Lincoln scholar. The legislation was subsequently revised so that we would not only create a set of recommendations to Congress in 2004 but also establish an implementation plan and go out of existence in September 2010.

What have we achieved? Our context is greatly different from that of 1909 or 1959. (Messiah, coincidentally, was founded in the Lincoln centennial year. Was there any conscious connection?) In the former, whites and blacks celebrated the bicentennial separately. The NAACP was formed in 1909 in the wake of a deadly race riot in Springfield. In 1959, before the crest of the civil rights movement, the emphasis was on Lincoln as Saviour of the Union. We adopted, early on, a motto: “Freedom, Democracy, and Equal Opportunity for All.” We also emphasized the “unfinished work,” especially regarding equality and race.

Regarding the mandates, all were or will be implemented. The first of five new pennies was placed in circulation in February. The ALBC actively participated in reviewing and recommending designs. There was a special ceremony chaired by the Speaker of the House in the Rotunda of the Capitol on February 12 at which the President and other notables spoke. And the Memorial will be rededicated in May—four score and seven years, coincidentally, after its dedication . There are also commemorative stamps, issued February 9, though the Postal Service’s citizens’ stamp committee proved to be impervious to outside comments. The ALBC was involved in varying ways in other special events in February—the unveiling of a new Lincoln exhibit at the Library of Congress on February 10 that will travel to five cities; the rededication of the restored Ford’s Theatre February 11; and the special commemorative ceremony at the Lincoln Memorial on the morning of February 12. We also worked with the National

Archives to arrange a live “Teach-in” on February 12 that connected a panel of three Lincoln scholars via a web link to over 500,000 students in the United States and Canada. Matt Pinsker, present tonight, was a member of that panel.

Most of what we have achieved—through standing and ad hoc committees—has been done with a small amount of federal support that allows us to have a small staff and an office. We have no grants to administer. A foundation, supported by revenue from a new commemorative dollar, will ensure that legacy projects are implemented.

And a great deal has been done, especially by our ability to attract private funding for our projects. Some examples. One of our first achievements was obtaining funds to allow two teachers from Fairfax County, Virginia, to prepare fifteen lesson plans for middle- and high school teachers. The History Channel supported the Teach In as well as provided funds to print certificates for over 5,700 schools that applied to become Lincoln Bicentennial Schools.

The latter reflects our recognition that there were few of us and that we had limited funding, as well as the larger realization that success or failure would depend on grassroots involvement. In 2001 we formed an Advisory Committee comprising about 150 Lincoln and Civil War scholars and civic leaders. In the fall of 2003 we created an endorsement process that as of last count has generated 225 events and projects from every state in the Union that we feature on our Web site, which is another means of reaching the public. And we encouraged each governor to create a bicentennial commission. As of February 12, 2009, 48 all had done so, including all of the states of the former Confederacy! And we have created programs in civic education through town

halls that continue to have enormous long term implications. A recent one occurred in late February in Washington, on board the *USS Abraham Lincoln*.

What will be our legacy? We won't leave a Lincoln Memorial or place copies of *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* in every college library, as the Sesquicentennial Commission did. We shall leave new pennies, to be sure, and lots of commemorative paraphernalia. Our web site is one important legacy. It will be sustained by the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. I think our greatest bequest, though intangible at present, will be secured through the many educational programs we have either created or endorsed. Think of this—a child in fourth grade in Indiana, for instance, will formally learn about Lincoln for the first time during this year. If that child were to become a teacher, let's say upon graduation in 2022, he or she would be participating in and/or training students who would be joining the ranks of teachers and writers at the time of Lincoln's 250th anniversary in 2059. We have no idea what their challenges will be, but we know that somehow Lincoln will figure in their approach to them.

Finally, what do I have to contribute to the understanding of the sixteenth president? For starters, Merrill Peterson has described reasons we revere him—as Saviour of the Union, as the Great Emancipator, as Commander-in Chief, as the Original American, and perhaps most of all as the Self-Made Man.¹⁰ Those who have studied him do not necessarily place equal emphasis on each of these five qualities. That he became a martyr, moreover, has facilitated myth and legend. His word can be used to justify a variety of causes.

¹⁰ Merrill Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Reverence for Lincoln does not imply sainthood, though, and I think it grows because one recognizes his humanity. His ability to develop—to *achieve* greatness—is what makes him heroic. A country without heroes is a nation adrift. Perhaps it is his being like us that attracts generations of Americans to him. What matters most to me is not his motives for doing things, like issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, but the fact that he did them. He was first and foremost a politician and needs to be judged by the criteria incumbent on that position. Several examples will help.

First, on the separate but related issues of slavery and race, consider where he came from and where he ended up. In many respects the racial values of whites in Spencer County, Indiana have not changed since the 1820s. Yet Lincoln declared on a number of occasions that he was always against slavery. Those African Americans who met him were impressed with his treating them as equals. Most people in Indiana and Illinois, by contrast, thought blacks as inferiors. Laws in both states forbade blacks to settle there, and both had a series of black codes that, even after the end of the Civil War, forbade such things as interracial marriage and blacks' serving on juries. **Context** matters. The setting of Illinois between 1854 and 1860, when Lincoln was helping to form a new political party, was quite different from the presidential years. What he was able to do in the spring of 1861 was vastly different from the spring of 1864, in which a majority of people in the Union states were willing to support a constitutional amendment abolishing slavery. In March 1864 he even suggested the new governor of

Louisiana provide public education for black children and give the vote to intelligent blacks and black veterans of the Union army.¹¹

Regarding equality, he never faltered in his commitment to the Declaration of Independence—that blacks as well as whites shared certain inalienable rights as humans. Slavery was part of an ages-old struggle between “the common right of humanity and . . . the divine right of kings.” The latter believed “[y]ou work and toil and earn the bread, and I’ll eat it.”¹² As to civil equality, he moved dramatically away from positions he had held as a legislator in Illinois. Consider his supporting the vote for blacks, which he advocated at the end of his life. John Wilkes Booth gave this as the reason for killing him. W. E. B. Dubois called him “big enough to be inconsistent.”¹³

On the third level, social equality, he understood how deeply racist the nation was, and personally thought social equality unlikely. (Most abolitionists were also opposed to social equality.) He realized, for instance, that an executive order or a law regarding emancipation would not prevent Americans from reversing what the war had brought.¹⁴ Hence his active support of the Thirteenth Amendment because the war would soon be over and the present constitution protected slavery. But as a politician, to

¹¹ In 1840, campaigning for William Henry Harrison’s election to the presidency, he had chided Martin Van Buren for supporting black suffrage in New York state.

¹² Quoted in William E. Gienapp, ed., *This Fiery Trial: The Speeches and Writings of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 202), 57, 66. A discussion of black codes in the Ohio Valley is found in Darrel E. Bigham, *On Jordan’s Banks: The Aftermath of Emancipation in the Ohio River Valley* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 33-58.

¹³ That is the title of George M. Frederickson’s last book: *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

¹⁴ Recent work by James P. Oakes vividly illustrates the need to approach equality on three-levels. See James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).

achieve the power to act, he had to get himself elected and to persuade the people of the rightness of his course of action.

Frederick Douglass, the pre-eminent African American of his day, understood this. In his speech dedicating a statue to him in April 1876 that freed people had funded, Douglass began by saying Lincoln was “preeminently the white man’s President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men.” He declared “[w]e are at best only his step-children.” Usually only this part is quoted. But Douglass—whose childhood poverty and love of learning resembled Lincoln’s—went on to say that for whites he “saved for you a country . . . [but] he delivered us from bondage, according to Jefferson, one hour of which was worse than ages of oppression your fathers rose in rebellion to oppose.” Douglass insisted listeners appreciate Lincoln’s perspective, “that of a democratically elected official with legitimate obligations to all the people. . . . To do one or the other, or both” he had to have “the earnest sympathy and the powerful cooperation of his loyal fellow-countrymen.” Lincoln should be judged “by the standards of the nation at large. . . . By that measure, he ‘was swift, zealous, radical, and determined.’”¹⁵ His moral compass never wavered.

Lincoln’s development, in the second place, is illustrated by his evolving religious values. Like Andrew Jackson, he never joined a church. He knew the Bible, much of it by heart, because that was one of the few books available in his early years. As president he attended services at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, where the pastor had

¹⁵ Quoted in James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican*, 267-72. Ten years earlier he had identified Lincoln as “‘emphatically the black man’s president,’” and ten years later he would describe him a “‘leader of the colored people, far greater than I.’”

been trained under Charles Hodge in the Old School Princeton Theological Seminary. Raised in a Baptist or Calvinist tradition, he sometimes spoke fatalistically, so much so that David Donald's biography focused on Lincoln's alleged passivity. Often cited is his letter of April 4, 1864 to a Kentucky editor: "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me."¹⁶

The complete letter, though, hardly supports that image. Lincoln concluded that letter with reference to God's control of events and his "operating as the Almighty's principal negotiator in the American political arena." Such belief has encouraged "historical actors to 'display the most indomitable energy . . . [and] perform the most astonishing feats.'"¹⁷ By 1864 Lincoln's sense of divine providence had moved far beyond simple fatalism. And nowhere is that expressed as clearly as in his second inaugural address.

A third illustration of Lincoln's development is found in his role as Commander-in-Chief, an achievement recently praised by Civil War historian James McPherson.¹⁸ The Constitution and existing legislation were quite ambiguous on this. He *defined* the

¹⁶ Quoted in Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery*, completed and edited by Ward M. McAfee (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 319-20.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 320. The letter followed a meeting between Lincoln and Kentucky officials, who had objected to the enlistment of Kentucky men in Kentucky units of the Union army. The commonwealth would eventually provide the second largest number of men from slave states, about 25,000, after Louisiana's approximately 29,000. Kentucky, politically, turned dramatically to the right after 1863, voting Democratic for decades after Emancipation. Many think the commonwealth joined the Confederacy after the war was over, given the number of CSA generals who were governors until the 1890s.

¹⁸ James M. McPherson, *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).

role of the president as Commander-in-Chief and became our greatest wartime president. Few areas illustrate as vividly his self-education.¹⁹

The way he held the Union together provides a fourth example. In his first inaugural address, given after the Confederacy's formation and while eight slave states were considering secession, he defined the struggle against insurrection in terms reminiscent of Andrew Jackson's response to South Carolina's nullification of a federal tariff. Declaring the Union be eternal, he declared secession to be insurrection against a legally elected government. The very concept of republican government was at stake, as it was a "people's contest." The Confederacy's foundation was obsolete, having made the protection of slavery a central part of its constitution. Lincoln had also been elected as a *Republican*, whose name evoked the party of Jefferson, a champion of inalienable rights. His election brought profound apprehensiveness in slave states, which thought *themselves* heirs of Jefferson and Jackson, but only so far as the chimera of "states' rights" was concerned. That Lincoln was the first president ever to speak of the need to limit slavery's growth was the rub. He believed slavery was an anachronism that should eventually disappear. This "people's contest" meant that the Union would never be the same.

¹⁹ He deferred originally to leaders in the Army and the Navy, who knew their business, as compared with Lincoln, whose experience consisted of brief and uneventful service in the Illinois militia. But he read avidly works on all aspects of the military and kept in close touch with his generals. In the process, he finally found men capable of pursuing the sort of war that could achieve victory. He came to understand and to redefine America's national strategy, making liberation inseparable from reunion. He understood the importance of military strategy and of operations. And even at one point, in the campaign in 1862 around Hampton Roads, he even directed troops to occupy what he rightly considered a better position.

Throughout his presidency, Lincoln insisted that the Union was indivisible and that eternal principles were at stake. But his constituency comprised all Americans, including those in rebel states. Hence his steps on the liberation of slaves were deliberate. So was his selective use of the suspension of habeas corpus. By contrast, no elections were postponed or eliminated, including the presidential contest of 1864, which he could have lost, making the fate of black Americans grim. That would have recognized the legitimacy of the Confederacy.

As in his evolution as Commander-in-Chief, Lincoln created not only a model for the modern presidency, but also refined the meaning of Union. No where is that more evident in his brief remarks at the dedication of the national cemetery in Gettysburg on November 19, 1863, which greatly expanded the concept of the Union as a “people’s contest.”²⁰ Lincoln began by setting the origin of the country on the day that the Declaration of Independence—the core value of the nation—was adopted. He used the word Nation five times and People—another version of Nation—three. The Union that would survive the horrors of war would not be the same as the one in March 1861. At Gettysburg Lincoln portrayed the Union as inclusive—he need not to have said blacks as well as whites. Black soldiers by then had demonstrated by their bravery their right to be free and equal. It was not a coincidence that a few months later Lincoln committed the Republican party in the election of 1864 to an abolition amendment to the Constitution.

²⁰ For a full account of the process leading to this, to the creation of the drafts of the address, and to its subsequent replacement of the Emancipation Proclamation in American memory, see Gabor S. Boritt, *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech That Nobody Knows* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006). This Gettysburg Address, recited by American schoolboys and girls for generations, supplanted the Emancipation Proclamation in American memory as the central event of the Civil War for reasons related to changing contexts for memory after Reconstruction. It is one of two Lincoln speeches carved into the walls of the Lincoln Memorial, the other being the ending of the Second Inaugural.

In providing this rather impressionistic review of Lincoln’s capacity for growth—and the accompanying “flip-flops” that would be fodder for today’s round-the-clock political commentators—I would like to suggest reasons for his evolution as a public figure. That is, what qualities did he possess that distinguished him in his times? He had a restless, inquiring mind, an astonishing memory, and a remarkable way of thinking through (often aloud) the logic of issues facing him. He was an avid learner and a gifted writer, whose words were designed to be heard—that is, they were aural.²¹ He utilized modern technology—the new medium of photography, and the telegraph—to shape his image and to keep in touch with his armies. Most of all, he was patient and prudent, aware of the power of public opinion and what it was willing to support. To abolitionist Charles Sumner he remarked in late 1861 that, and I paraphrase, the two were only about a month or six weeks apart on slavery. He was one of the most gifted politicians of the century, if not in all of our history.²²

Let me close by suggesting his greatest achievement—not just saving the democratic republic but also giving it new language. These are not new ideas, but what some historians of late have been saying.

²¹ Douglas L. Wilson, *Lincoln’s Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006) provides a masterful analysis of this often overlooked gift.

²² One sees this, for instance, in the plan he created for the Whigs’ campaign in Illinois in 1840 and in his handling of Radicals’ criticism of William Seward’s influence in his cabinet. He was a master wire-puller, operating behind the scenes. Getting the lame duck House of Representatives to support the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in January 1865 was one of his greatest achievements. Perhaps that is the reason that he boldly signed the Amendment, though the Constitution did not require it.

Lincoln's response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 anticipated all he did thereafter.²³ In speeches in Springfield and Peoria in October 1854, he criticized Southerners' tardiness in implementing gradual emancipation and attacked the new law for reversing the Founders' policy regarding slavery. Extending slavery violated the Declaration of Independence, "sheet anchor of American republicanism." The concept of popular sovereignty violated "the sacred right of self-government. . . . [I]f the negro is a man, is it not to that extent, a total destruction of self-government, to say that he too shall not govern himself?"²⁴ Slavery was in 1776 a **local** matter, at best a tolerable evil that would gradually disappear. It was certainly not intended to be a **national** institution that the federal government would sanction and enlarge. The heart of his "house divided" speech in June 1858, when he accepted the Republicans' nomination as candidate for the U. S. Senate, was that there was a well organized conspiracy to reverse the founders' views and to promote a "don't care" view about slavery.²⁵

²³ James M. McPherson is one of many who describe this position as the lodestar that never moved after the Nebraska Act. See also William E. Gienapp, *Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 50-52, and Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 201-202.

²⁴ Quoted in Richard J. Carwardine, *Lincoln* (Harlow, England, 2003), 25-26.

²⁵ Don E. Fehrenbacher, "The Origins and Purpose of Lincoln's House Divided Speech," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 46 (March 1960), reprinted in Sean Wilentz, ed., *The Best American History Essays on Lincoln* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 149-74.

Lincoln's argument was conservative.²⁶ Lincoln was, to historian George Fredrickson, a "conservative constitutionalist" whose fundamental opposition to slavery was never in doubt. His approach to its future, though, evolved.²⁷

Lincoln's words after the first inaugural enriched the meaning of the "people's contest" and gave inspiration to a nation at war and to generations since then. Two examples :

In his second annual message to Congress, delivered December 1, 1862, at the nadir of Union hopes for victory, Lincoln first reviewed federal activities over the previous year.²⁸ He also proposed—for the last time—three constitutional amendments: gradual emancipation of slaves, compensation of loyal owners for the loss of their slave property, and colonization of emancipated slaves. Congress did not approve any of these. Never again did Lincoln publicly endorse colonization, though one "pilot" project he endorsed at the end of that year went forward and failed miserably.²⁹ A month after this speech he issued the most sweeping executive order in our history, freeing slaves in areas of rebel control and enlisting black men in Union armed forces—all in the name of military necessity.

²⁶ He was also politically adept, given the cultural milieu, by advocating colonization until the end of 1862. After all, many blacks as well as whites had viewed that as the ultimate solution for a racially divided nation. Political skill, cautiousness, and belief in slavery's immorality were intertwined

²⁷ Fredrickson, *Big Enough to be Inconsistent*, 81-83, 119.

²⁸ Consider the carefully measured steps he took, beginning with a suggestion for emancipation in Delaware in the late winter to three proposed constitutional amendments in his second annual message to Congress.

²⁹ No where did he suggest forcible colonization, and the term *deportation* is ahistorical.

Often forgotten are the eloquent closing paragraphs of that annual message. “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulties, and we must rise to the occasion. As our case is new, we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save the country.” Americans could “not escape history”: we would “be remembered in spite of ourselves. . . . The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation.” Closing, he said that “In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free—honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best, hope of mankind.”³⁰

Expanding on this inspirational challenge in his address at Gettysburg almost a year later, he offered his most moving description of the meaning of the war in his second inaugural address. The brief address contained only 703 words, 505 of them one syllable and was delivered to an audience containing many blacks. Blacks now had a permanent place in America, as their responsiveness to his speech illustrated. Most of us know by heart the last portion of that address, carved into a wall of the Lincoln Memorial. Its tone was pastoral, recommending charity and not malice as an ethical imperative. We know less about what preceded it—a review of conditions four years earlier, a connection between slavery and the outbreak of civil war, and an assessment of how the war fit into the God’s plan. This was the only time that an American president issued a *jeremiad*, a common element of Puritan culture.³¹

³⁰ Quoted in William Lee Miller, *President Lincoln: The Duty of a Statesman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 272.

³¹ Ronald C. White Jr., *A. Lincoln* (New York: Random House: 2009), 661-67.

The penultimate paragraph spoke in a language fundamentally at odds with the prevailing wisdom of the nation's public leaders, especially its evangelical Protestant clergy. Consider how its words contrasted with those of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic!! Tying the existence of slavery to the suffering caused by war, Lincoln insisted "that every stage of this immensely destructive conflict had an unanticipated unfolding. He did not blame the South for the war or for its destructiveness"32 Neither side expected this terrible destruction or wanted it. Neither expected it would destroy slavery. Lincoln moved from the question of right and wrong to "forces larger than the contending parties."33 Both sides "read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other."34 Here was true irony. Reinhold Niebuhr declared about the passage that followed: "It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged."35 This put "the relation of our moral commitments in history to our religious reservations about the partiality of our moral judgments more precisely than any statesman or theologian has put them."36 Lincoln had often connected toil, sweat and bread and linked them to a perennial moral struggle between right and wrong. But he "was a politician, not a social prophet." Though describing slavery as monstrous, he acted when it became politically realistic to do so." The heart of his "House Divided" speech, for instance, was that there was no middle

³² Miller, 402-403.

³³ Ibid., 403.

³⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*

³⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*

³⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 403-404.

ground on slavery. But here, on March 4, 1865, he added to that a statement that we—and he—were not to judge not.³⁷

Lincoln then stated the key point : “The Almighty has His own purposes.”³⁸ This reflected what he had been thinking about for some time and had written on in an unsent document dating to either the late summer of 1862 or in 1864. Never a member of a church and long skeptical about creeds, “he nevertheless grasped the moral core of the Christian religion.” He was not, however, “off-loading [responsibility] onto an all-controlling Providence, or to make himself passive. But its effects were, rather, personal and national humility and self-criticism: while we act, responsible for our actions, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see it, we recognize that there are purposes beyond our own.”³⁹

Belief in a God who governs “the world can do great damage in politics, as no one in the twenty-first century needs to be reminded.” It can lead to “fanaticism, self-righteousness, uncompromising zeal, cruelty to infidels, masquerading as devotion to God.” Lincoln avoided these perils “by enlarging the vision of the stage upon which the historical drama is played and turning its affirmations critically against his own side and himself rather than using them self-defensively against opponents.”⁴⁰

Then Lincoln, quoting Matthew 18:7, described how the offence of slavery, “continued through [God’s] appointed time,” was a sin shared by both North and

³⁷ Ibid., 404-405.

³⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 406.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 406.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 407.

South, and that God gave “both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came.” The remainder of the paragraph assumed “the shape of a Calvinistic providential-arranging God, one which is not the same as fatalism. “ It makes quite a difference, even if one believes events are beyond the control of human beings, “*whether or not* one sees that determination done with purpose by an agent with an active will, and with the ‘attributes’ to which Lincoln refers, that ‘believers in a Living God’ assign to Him.” Lincoln “confronted a depth of tragic complexity that evoked the profoundest symbolic and imaginative expression in the culture by which he was surrounded.”⁴¹

Having expressed a prayer for the speedy end to the war, Lincoln evoked Job: if God willed that the conflict continued, until all of the wealth created by 250 years of slavery be lost, and until every drop of blood shed by the lash be paid for with “another drawn with the sword . . . The judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous together.”⁴² This passage, recalling the Old Testament notion that a baptism of blood expiates the sins of a people, implied both a profound abomination of slavery and revulsion against war and a commitment to end the bloody conflict. “This paragraph contains the element of an act of will that marks religious faith, in this case the act of will of a strong person”⁴³ Despite the offence and woe, there are divine attributes at work—the Lord’s judgments are “true and righteous altogether.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Miller, 408, 409.

⁴² Quoted in *ibid.*, 409

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 411.

⁴⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*

From that it is not difficult to understand the pastoral tone of the past paragraph, which many of us know by heart. What is an American to do in such circumstances?

At the reception following the inauguration, Lincoln sought out Frederick Douglass and asked him what he thought of his speech. Douglass described it as a “sacred effort.”⁴⁵ Five days later, though, Lincoln wrote New York Republican boss Thurlow Weed. Though he expected the speech to wear well, and was better than anything he had ever produced, he believed it would not be immediately popular. Why? Men did not like to hear there was “a difference of purpose between the almighty and them. To deny it, however . . . is to deny that there is a God governing the world. This is a truth which I thought needed to be told.” As for humiliation, that fell on him. “I thought others might afford for me to tell it.”⁴⁶

Niebuhr described the threats posed by the two major strains of American thought—Puritanism and Jeffersonian liberalism--their emphasis on virtue and godliness as being linked to prosperity and American exceptionalism. America’s moral perils historically were not the consequence of conscious malice or an explicit lust for power, but of “the ironic tendency of virtues to turn into vices when too complacently relied upon; and of power to become vexations of the wisdom which directs it is trusted too confidently.” American idealism needed to come to terms with “the limits of all human wisdom, the precariousness of all historic configurations of power, and the

⁴⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 416.

⁴⁶ Lincoln to Weed, March 9, 1865, *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865*, comp. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Library of America, 1989), 689.

mixture of good and evil in all human virtue.”⁴⁷ Two aspects of our historical situation aggravated the problems of American idealism—the inordinate power of America in the world and the fact that the international situation offered “no clear road to the achievement of either peace or victory over tyranny.”⁴⁸

Niebuhr selected Lincoln, not a member of a church and who was to his death somewhat of a skeptic, as the most remarkable student of irony in our history. Here was truly a secular redeemer whose work lay outside the confines of a church. Lincoln’s comments near the end of the most devastating war in our history were especially instructive for the America of 1952, just after the National Security Council declared war on Communism—and one might add 2009, when our greatest threat is religious fundamentalism. His “brooding sense of charity” emanated from religious awareness of another element—that both sides consider(ed) their causes Godly. This pretense was rooted in the awareness of an “over-arching providence whose purposes were partly contradicted and yet were not irrelevant to the moral purposes of the conflict.” Lincoln understood the importance of moral resoluteness and of another religious dimension, meaning and judgment. He addressed the difficult but not impossible task of remaining loyal to the moral treasures of free civilization while “having a religious vantage point over the struggle.” While in Lincoln’s time both sides read the same Bible, and in 1952 the other side did not (and neither does it in 2009), it was and is dangerous to state that America’s cause is divinely driven, as the true God is known only when we become

⁴⁷ Niebuhr, *Irony*, 133. See also 67-77, 96-97.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 134. When I graduated, President Johnson promised the “Great Society” at the University of Michigan graduation ceremony. Two months later, Congress overwhelmingly approved the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, giving him a free hand in Southeast Asia. In less than four years, the implications of hubris—irony—were amply evident.

aware of the contradiction between our purposes and God's.⁴⁹ "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary." While history is "shot through with oral meaning, the meaning is never exact. Sin and punishment, virtue and reward are never precisely proportioned."⁵⁰

My learning about Lincoln, in closing, has been a microcosm of my understanding of history. Our knowledge of the sixteenth president is continually evolving. Mine has certainly. Lincoln would appreciate that, as his mind was always receptive to new ideas. Remember what he said in his second annual address. "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulties, and we must rise to the occasion. As our case is new, we must think anew, and act anew."⁵¹

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⁴⁹ Ibid., 171-74.

⁵⁰ Niebuhr, quoted in Jon Meacham, "More a Matter of Mystery than Magic," *Newsweek* (July 21, 2008): 30, 31.

⁵¹ Quoted in William Lee Miller, *President Lincoln: The Duty of a Statesman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 272.