

LINCOLN
“by littles”



Abraham Lincoln, November 8, 1863

*The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York
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INTRODUCTION

William Wilberforce could not be indifferent to slavery. For twenty years, the wealthy heir to a merchant fortune worked unceasingly to end slavery in the British Empire. His labor bore fruit when Parliament acted in 1807 to abolish the slave trade. Abraham Lincoln admired the Herculean efforts exerted by Wilberforce. Like his English counterpart, Lincoln could not be indifferent to the immorality of slavery. Lincoln and Wilberforce embraced the natural law principle of the equality of all men. Wilberforce drew upon the words of St. Paul: “God hath made of one blood all nations of men.” Lincoln found his text in the “self-evident” equality principle of the Declaration of Independence: “All men are created equal.”

In a speech fragment that Lincoln wrote in the late 1850s, he joined high principle to an honorable ambition, observing that “in the republican cause there is a higher aim than that of mere office.” The self-tutored lawyer from Illinois could not understand those “don’t care” politicians, such as Senator Stephen A. Douglas, who pretended indifference to involuntary servitude. Such men reminded Lincoln of Wilberforce’s opponents who “blazed,” “flickered,” and “died,” whereas the memory of Wilberforce endured.

Well-remembered for his first major, printed, antislavery speech of 1854 at Peoria, Lincoln would thereafter campaign tirelessly against the spread of slavery. He often predicted that slavery might not be extinguished in the United States “within the term of my natural life.” On January 31, 1865 – only a few months before his assassination – Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment to abolish slavery. Lincoln himself had contributed more than his “humble mite to that glorious consummation.”

Mr. Lincoln’s attitudes toward slavery were unmistakably rooted in the Declaration of Independence, drafted by Thomas Jefferson. Mr. Lincoln’s nationalist economics were unmistakably the policies of

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Jefferson’s rival, Alexander Hamilton. But we still hear in Mr. Lincoln’s speeches the echoes of Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence when on his way to Washington in early 1861, the president-elect declared in Philadelphia, “I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiment embodied in the Declaration of Independence.” Lincoln observed: “Most governments have been based, practically, on the denial of the equal rights of men...ours began, by affirming those rights.” But only free labor can exercise equal rights. Lincoln’s re-affirmation of this equality principle at Gettysburg in 1863 evoked “a new birth of freedom.” At Gettysburg the President insisted that America – despite the flaw of slavery, accepted by the Constitutional Convention in order to establish the Constitution and the Union of 1789 – had been “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

Bringing together the central ideas of the great adversaries of the early republic, Hamilton and Jefferson – President Lincoln in 1864 explained to Ohio soldiers visiting the White House that the Civil War itself was a struggle to create “an open field and a fair chance for your industry, enterprise, and intelligence; that you may all have equal privileges in the race of life...” From the war issued the Emancipation Amendments – the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution. This Lincoln patrimony is the authentic Republican party heritage.

From time immemorial, America has been different from other nations. Bound together neither by race and blood, nor by ancestral territory, Americans inherit but a single legacy – equality under the law and equality of opportunity. That Mr. Lincoln’s equality was equality of opportunity cannot be denied. “I think the authors of that notable instrument [The Declaration of Independence] intended to include all men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness, in what respects they did consider all men created equal – equal in ‘certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’” This is what the emancipator said; and this

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is what he meant. “We proposed to give all a chance; and we expected the weak to grow stronger, the ignorant, wiser; and all better, and happier together.”

And so, to be stronger and wiser, Americans have ever been ambitious, at home and abroad, for their liberal democracy. Mr. Lincoln was no exception; he, too, was ambitious for American liberal democracy. Indeed, he was history’s most ambitious nation builder, presiding as he did over our most profound war and the preservation of the American Union – the future hope of all liberal democracies. In an unforgettable phrase, Lincoln’s law partner, William Herndon, said Lincoln’s ambition was “a little engine that knew no rest.” So, too, may it be said of America.

Mr. Lincoln was ambitious to use government to good effect. Government, he said, should enable men and women to do the things they cannot do, or do so well, for themselves – in order to develop their freedom, their future, and their country. In his earliest political years, as a state legislator, Lincoln urged that government should be pro-labor and pro-business. During the decades before his presidency, he advocated government support in creating canals, railroads, banks, turnpikes, a national bank – all needed to integrate a national market – to the end of increasing opportunity, social mobility, and productivity. Like the first Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, and Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky, Lincoln sponsored an “American System.”

As an economic nationalist, he advocated a modest tariff to give the competitive advantage to American workers, to American firms, and to enhance American independence. The tariff would, as a source of federal revenue, make the income tax unnecessary. As a sophisticated student of banking and monetary policy, Mr. Lincoln argued throughout his political career for a sound and uniform national currency.

His economic philosophy rejected the idea of necessary conflict between labor and capital, believing them to be cooperative in nature. Cooperation could, in a society of free labor, lead to economic growth and increasing opportunity for all. In fact, Lincoln argued that capital

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was, itself, the result of the savings of free labor. Wrought by the mind and muscle of men, the products of labor yield savings which are then deployed as capital. Thus, it follows that people are the most important resource, not wealth. This proposition was so important that President Lincoln argued in his first annual message of 1861 to Congress that “labor is prior to, and independent of capital. Capital is the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed.”

The 19th century echoes of Lincoln’s speeches roll down like thunder in the 20th century voice of Martin Luther King. For it was Mr. Lincoln who defined the essence of the American dream. “There is not, of necessity, [Mr. Lincoln declared], any such thing as the free hired laborer being fixed to that condition for life... The prudent, penniless beginner in the world labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land for himself; then labors on his own account for awhile, and at length hires another new beginner to help him. This is the just, and generous, and prosperous system, which opens the way to all – gives hope to all, and...energy, and progress, and improvement of conditions to all.” This right to rise is today the hope of a winning Republican majority.

From hard struggle for success, Mr. Lincoln had developed tenacious convictions. Born poor, Mr. Lincoln was probably the greatest of truly self-made men, believing as he said that “work, work, work is the main thing.” His economic policy was designed not only “to clear the path for all,” but to spell out incentives to encourage entrepreneurs to create new jobs, new products, new wealth. Mr. Lincoln’s America was, in principle, a color-blind America. “I want every man to have the chance,” Lincoln announced in New Haven in March 1860. “And I believe a black man is entitled to it...when he may look forward and hope to be a hired laborer this year and the next, work for himself afterward, and finally to hire men to work for him! That is the true system.”

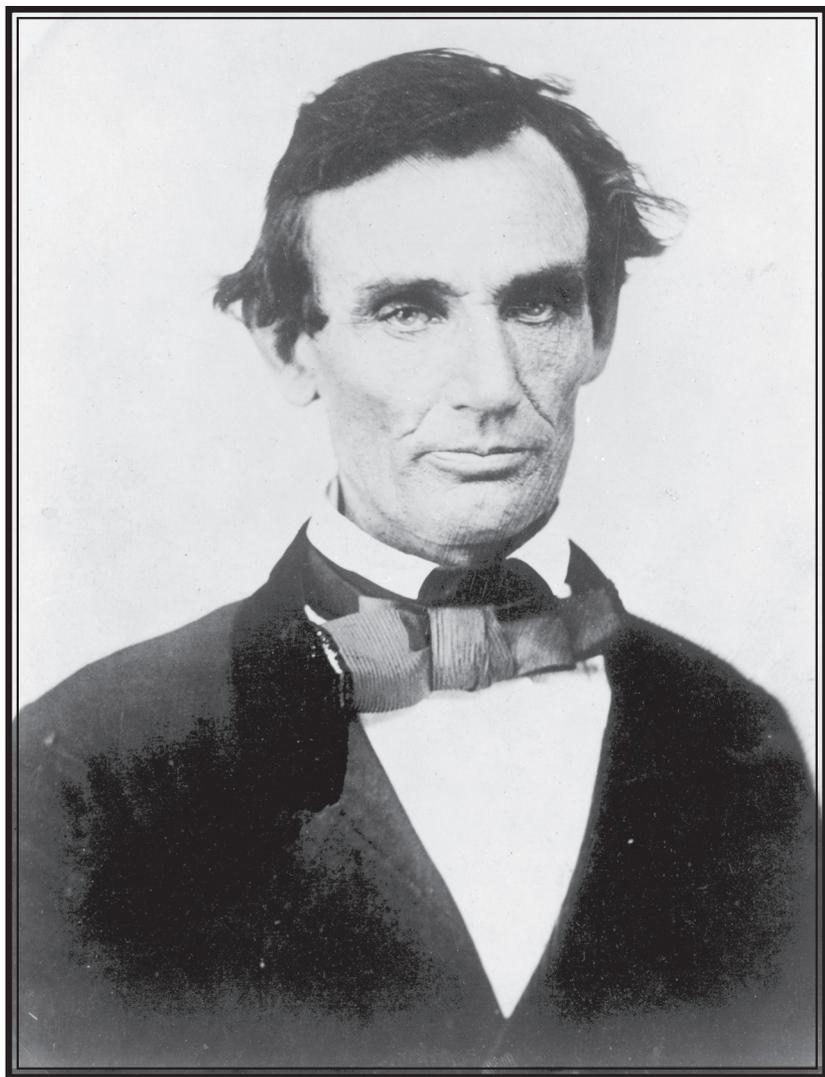
In Lincoln’s American system, government fosters economic growth. Equal opportunity leads to social mobility. Intelligence and free labor lead to savings and entrepreneurship. Such a color-blind economic system was the counterpart of the Declaration’s color-blind equality

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principle. The great black abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, saw this clearly, pronouncing the fitting tribute when he said of President Lincoln that he was “the first great man that I talked with in the United States freely, who in no single instance reminded me of the difference of color.” He attributed Lincoln’s attitude to the fact that he and Lincoln were, in Douglass’ phrase, self-made men.

President Lincoln’s political and wartime legacy has transformed world history. As a last resort, he had accepted war to preserve the Union, and with war, to free the slaves: “It is an issue which can only be tried by war, and decided by unconditional victory.” Even after four years and 725,000 deaths, his grim determination on victory was, he argued, not imprudent. “The national resources are unexhausted, and, as we believe, inexhaustible.” Without the leadership and resolve of our 16th president, separate slave and free states might today compete on the same continent; and the emergence of American liberal democracy, as we know it, would have been stillborn. Thus there would have been no integrated, peerless, American economy based on free labor. But without continental American industrial power – which Lincoln self-consciously advocated – the industrial means would not have been available to contain Imperial Germany as it reached for European hegemony in 1914. Neither would there have been a national power strong enough to destroy its successor, Hitler’s Nazi Reich, nor to crush the aggressions of Imperial Japan.

And, in the end, there would have been no unified, continental, American power to oppose and overcome the Communist empire of the second half of the 20th century. Empires based on the invidious distinctions of race and class – the defining characteristics of the malignant world powers of our era – were preempted by the force, and leadership of the United States of America. “We made the experiment; [Lincoln declared]; and the fruit is before us. Look at it. Think of it. Look at it, in its aggregate grandeur, of extent of country, and numbers of population, of ship, and steamboat, and rail.”

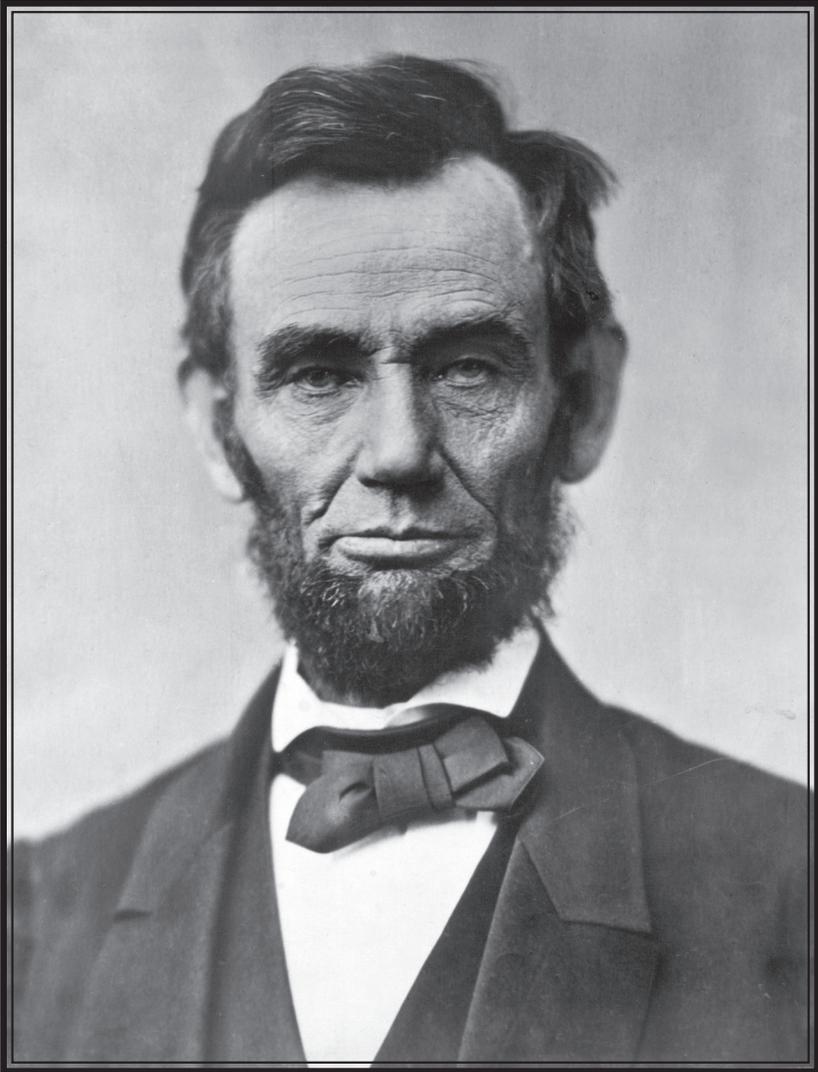


Abraham Lincoln, 1858 ca. March 6, 1844

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PART I

Background



Abraham Lincoln, November 1863

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Chapter One

**SOME REFLECTIONS ON MR. LINCOLN
FOR THE FIRST MEETING
OF THE LINCOLN SEMINAR**

Gettysburg College, January 19, 1995

Abraham Lincoln, I think, was the greatest man of the modern era. Of his extraordinary deeds there are few secrets. Of the ultimate consequences of his decisions, there is still much more to be understood. About the inner man himself, it may still be said we do not know him.

So we begin by remarking on his public deeds. Mr. Lincoln made American politics not only a struggle for personal power and prestige, but instead, a campaign of just ideas, a battle of first principles, a vindication of right-minded policy. He believed the American Union had been aimed by the founders toward an unimpeachable end, the ultimate triumph of the inalienable rights spelled out in the Declaration of Independence. He knew that America was the first nation in human history to be established on such philosophical principles. To Mr. Lincoln, this American proposition implied that all human beings should have the right to rise, an equal opportunity in the race of life, the primary claim to the fruit of their labor. This is what Mr. Lincoln said; and this is what he meant.

For him, nothing short of the future realization of the inalienable rights to life and liberty would do, because, he argued, the American nation had embraced in its Founding Act of 1776 the self-evident truth that all human beings are created equal. Neither blood ties, nor racial homogeneity, nor ancestral territory – the origins of all previous nations

– had grounded the new nation on the shores of the Atlantic. Instead, as Lincoln insisted, the new republic was anchored by the declared abstract truth of human equality in the Declaration; and it was this self-evident truth alone which made the American birthright unique, which gave to all Americans, immigrants without exception, a common patrimony.

A politician who gives over his life to realize such a noble and humane creed is to be praised above his self-seeking peers. The statesman who – against all odds, in the most hostile environment, in peace and war – remakes reality in the image of a just doctrine, belongs to that exclusive circle of the ancient lawgivers, to a distinct race of the founders of civilization. At the center of this circle we find Mr. Lincoln.

What he believed to be true, he said in public places, and he said it with unparalleled perfection. Thus, we have in his writings the most profound and elegant axioms of democratic society. In speeches as diverse as his on national banking in 1839, on the Kansas-Nebraska Act at Peoria in 1854, on *Dred Scott* in 1857, he evoked the highest and best use of rhetoric to demonstrate political economy and democratic principle. His First and Second Inaugurals, and the Gettysburg Address, are three peerless monuments to his republican genius. When he attained the power of office, moreover, he actually did what he believed. Without his Emancipation Proclamation, the Thirteenth Amendment, and his military victory as commander-in-chief, America, as we know it today, would have been unthinkable. Indeed, it was the unconditional victory of Mr. Lincoln's Union Party in the Civil War which gave birth to a reformed Constitution – in effect, to a refounding of the American nation on its first principle of the inalienable right to life and to liberty. Indeed, what the world cherishes in the American way of life would be today no more than an early American fantasy, if Mr. Lincoln had not transformed a slave society – riddled with prejudice North and South – into a free society, struggling to this day, to overcome its all too human prejudices.

Moreover, if we consider the long-term consequences of his life and work, these effects themselves clearly mark him as the lawgiver of our age. For without his triumph, there would have been no unified

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American democracy, as the world knows and emulates it today. On the contrary, there would be, on this continent, several petty principalities, probably still squabbling over their boundaries between the Atlantic and the Pacific – some provinces all-slave, perhaps others free, all jealous and competing for advantage, wide open to the intervention of those large and unified world powers which commandeered the stage of history in the 20th century.

Without Mr. Lincoln's presidential victories in 1860 and 1864, and his military victory in 1865, there probably would exist today no continental republic, grounded in the "free and equal" Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments of the Constitution, to serve as a living example for subjugated peoples striving for free labor and equal opportunity the world over. In the most practical economic terms, which Mr. Lincoln understood better than most presidents before and since, there would have been no integrated North American economy in which emerged the most powerful, free-market, commercial civilization the world has ever known. Without such an American industrial machine, and the educated manpower which produced it, the means would not have been available to contain the Imperial German Reich in 1914 as it reached for European hegemony, nor would there have been a national power strong enough to destroy its global successor in 1945, Hitler's Nazi Reich, nor to crush the aggressions in the Pacific Ocean of Imperial Japan; and, in the end, there would have been no world power to oppose and overcome the Soviet Communist empire during the second half of our century. World conquest, based on the invidious distinctions of race and class – the goal of all the malignant world powers of our era – was prevented by the force and leadership of a single country, the perpetual union of the American states, a free republic dedicated in principle to the inalienable right to liberty of all peoples everywhere. These are but a few of the unforeseen consequences of the complete victory of the Union cause in the American Civil War.

Hovering over the whole of this history, there lingers still the enigma of the private man and the shadow of his personality. We scrutinize Mr. Lincoln; but we see him through a glass darkly. We mine his papers, sap the memoirs left by those who knew him, plumb his personal

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relationships; but he escapes us. Surely we know about his humble parents, his lack of formal education, his many jobs in early manhood, his discreet but towering ambition, his elite and troubled marriage, his parochial Illinois politics. While his is the greatest name of American history, we wonder that, unlike the Adams family, the Roosevelts, the Kennedys, he left no descendants to carry on his legacy of great deeds.

To understand him, many scholars have studied all these things and, just as carefully, the people with whom he did these things. But in the end we peer into the darkness whence he emerged, there to blink again before the eternity into which he disappeared. It is as if, like a luminous comet, he thrust himself in front of our eyes, the eyes of the world – but for a brief moment – then to dissolve into the vast deep of the cosmos from which he came.

This archetypal American, this man of flesh and blood, a man like you and me – this is the elusive creature we should be looking for in our seminar at Gettysburg College in the spring of 1995.