

Getting Right with Lincoln

By David Herbert Donald

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About no other American have so many words been written as about Abraham Lincoln. Jay Monaghan's *Lincoln Bibliography* requires 1,079 pages merely to list the books and pamphlets published before 1939, when even the experts lost count. On library shelves the multi-volumed biographies by Nicolay and Hay, Sandburg, and Randall and Current stand cover to cover with *Lincoln Never Smoked a Cigarette* and *Abraham Lincoln on the Coming of the Caterpillar Tractor*. Every February sees a fresh flood of Lincoln Day oratory and verse.

This extraordinary interest in the details of Lincoln's life seems the more astonishing in light of his low contemporary standing. His associates were sure there were greater figures in their era; usually they had at least one such person in mind--and close at home at that. Lincoln they thought a simple Susan, a baboon, an aimless punster, a smutty joker. He left the highway of principle to pursue the devious paths of expediency. A "huckster in politics," sneered Wendell Phillips, "a first-rate second-rate man." A Springfield neighbor called him "The craftiest and most dishonest politician that ever disgraced an office in America." "If I wanted to paint a despot, a man perfectly regardless of every constitutional right of the people," cried Saulsbury of Delaware in the Senate, "I would paint the hideous form of Abraham Lincoln...."

Not even assassination at once translated Lincoln into sainthood. "The decease of Mr. Lincoln is a great national bereavement," conceded Representative J. M. Ashley of Ohio, "but I am not so sure it is so much of a national loss." Within eight hours of his murder Republican Congressmen in secret caucus agreed that "his death is a godsend to our cause." Andrew Johnson, they believed, would carry through the proposed social revolution in the South which the conciliatory Lincoln had blocked. Now, crowed Ben Wade, "there will be no trouble running the government."

But politicians of all parties were apparently startled by the extent of the national grief over Lincoln, and, politician-like, they decided to capitalize upon it. Democrats were, of course, under a handicap, but a surprising number of them now discovered that they had really heartily endorsed the Lincoln program. That vicious Copperhead sheet the *Chicago Times* discerned "indications of the last few days of [Lincoln's] life that he might command [Democratic] support on the close of the war," and Clement L. Vallandigham reported that even the peace men had begun "to turn toward Lincoln for deliverance."

The Republicans' claim to Lincoln was surely somewhat more plausible, and, being in a majority in Congress, they were able to make it good by staging a three-week funeral procession, witnessed by millions of persons, in which Lincoln's body was dragged by special train, to the accompaniment of mourning bells and wailing choirs, through the principal cities of the North. Democrat Charles Mason of Iowa thought the whole affair a political trick, like the "crafty skill of Mark Anthony [sic] in displaying to the Roman people the bloody mantle of Caesar."

Republican Radicals, he felt, in seeking a vindictive peace and a new social order for the South, wanted "to make...political capital out of the murder. They wish to strengthen their hands and brutalize the hearts of the Northern people till there shall be general concurrence in all measures of confiscation and extermination...."

That was precisely what the Radicals intended and did. Their Lincoln eulogies were carefully directed toward proving that Democrats had been in part responsible for Lincoln's death and toward demonstrating that Negro suffrage was necessary in order to prevent the traitors from returning to power. In his Lincoln oration in Boston, Charles Sumner, theorist for the Radical faction, carefully interjected a strong plea for Negro enfranchisement, which his party friends found "very cunning."

Meanwhile, a third contender for the Lincolnian mantle appeared in the person of Andrew Johnson, the new President. After a momentary aberration in which he seemed more radical than the Radicals, Johnson adopted a conciliatory policy toward the South, granting general amnesty and exacting neither confiscation of property nor Negro suffrage. All this in the eyes of the Radicals was bad enough, but he did it all in the name of Lincoln. William H. Seward, who continued as Secretary of State, assured all comers that the Johnson reconstruction plans "grew during the administration of Mr. Lincoln," and in his proclamations setting up provisional governments in the South, the President specifically referred to Lincoln's earlier actions as his precedents.

Republican Radicals were furious. Johnson they considered a traitor, all the more dangerous because he threatened to divert the idolization of Lincoln, so carefully fostered by the Radicals, into support of an anti-radical program. "Is there no way to arrest the insane course of the President...?" groaned Thaddeus Stevens.

There was a way, and it is not too much of an oversimplification to regard the ensuing struggle between President and Congress as a ghoulish tugging at Lincoln's shroud; both parties needed to identify Lincoln with their respective reconstruction programs. It was a vindictive quarrel, and shrill denunciation by the one faction provoked harsher abuse from the other. Johnson, publicly branding Sumner, Stevens, and Wendell Phillips as "opposed to the fundamental principles of this government," asked petulantly: "Are [they]...not satisfied...with one martyr? Does not the blood of Lincoln appease [their]...vengeance and wrath...?" And Ben Butler, speaking for the Radicals thus accused, replied by impeaching the President before the Senate: "By murder most foul ... [Johnson] succeeded to the Presidency, and is the elect of an assassin to that high office...." In the Republican national convention of 1868 it was openly charged that "the treachery of Andrew Johnson ... cost us the life of Abraham Lincoln."

The rival parties of the Reconstruction era were not, of course, historians quibbling over a footnote. They were politicians seeking power, and they invoked Lincoln's name to win votes. Among the Negroes of the South they knew that identification with Lincoln might assure a candidate of victory. In Lexington, South Carolina, for instance, the fall elections of 1867 were expected to be close, and Radicals felt that they must carry the entire Negro vote. Proudly the

ward heeler wrote Charles Sumner of their methods. The Republicans secretly printed their own ballots, to be distributed on the day of the election, which "were to contain a sign...and by it, we hoped to conquer." "I inclose a ticket," he continued, "and you will see the sign--no less than Abraham Lincoln, the martyr to Liberty--and no colored man dared refuse it--nor did one single one fail to vote it.... When our ticket distributors...showed their tickets with the face of Lincoln, their eyes beamed with gratitude, and one old worn out freedman exclaimed 'Tank God, I tought he would send you to us!'"

In the Northern states Republican use of the Lincoln symbol was somewhat more literate but scarcely less emotional. During the campaign of 1868, Edwin M. Stanton, whose conversion to Lincolnian views might be termed posthumous, swept his Pennsylvania audiences for Grant by reading the Gettysburg address. Then he said, tearfully: "That is the voice of God speaking through the lips of Abraham Lincoln...You hear the voice of Father Abraham here tonight. Did he die in vain?...Let us here, every one, with uplifted hand, declare before Almighty God that the precious gift of this great heritage, consecrated in the blood of our soldiers, shall never perish from the earth. Now--" and he uplifted his hands "all hands to God. I SWEAR IT!" After which his auditors all presumably went out and voted Republican.

II.

After Johnson was defeated, it seemed to be Lincoln and the Republican party, one and inseparable. Other parties, of course, could revere and admire Lincoln as a great American, but it was clear to the right-thinking that the Great Martyr was Republican property. In periodical campaign addresses Republicans invoked the Great Emancipator to bless the good cause and to smite the unrighteous. To some these terms might need definition, but not to Republicans. Lincoln, they were sure, would favor the high tariff, urge the annexation of the Philippines; oppose greenbackism, socialism, populism, and labor unions; fight the income tax; and assail the League of Nations and the World Court.

Every four years Republican hopefuls sought--and presumably secured Lincoln's endorsement. According to the campaign literature, Lincoln invariably bore marked physical or moral resemblance to the party's candidates, including such unlikely persons as William McKinley, William Howard Taft, and Calvin Coolidge. Year after year Republican politicians reviewed their party's lineage in Lincoln Day addresses that the world has little noted nor long remembered. One oration, however, deserves to be treasured--that of Warren G. Harding, commencing: "Destiny made Lincoln the agency of fulfillment, held the inherited covenant inviolate and gave him to the ages. No words can magnify or worship glorify." As W. S. Gilbert observes, "The meaning doesn't matter if it's only idle chatter of a transcendental kind."

The Lincoln cult in literature was closely connected with this party tradition. The laudatory Lincoln biographies--those of Holland, Nicolay and Hay, and the like--were written by men who firmly believed that, next to the dog, the Republican party was man's best friend. Orated George S. Boutwell, somewhat inaccurately: "The Republican Party gave to Mr. Lincoln the opportunity on which his fame rests, and his fame is the inheritance of the Republican party

When we set forth the character and services of Mr. Lincoln we set forth as well the claims of the Republican party to the gratitude and confidence of the country...."

Not until 1887 did the party formally begin holding annual rallies on February 12. By that time the outlines of the Lincoln portrait were fading in even the most tenacious Republican memory; and a yearly banquet offered the dual opportunity to retouch the portrait and to refill the party treasury. This useful custom rapidly spread, and today most major Republican congregations hold dinners on Lincoln's birthday. Every year these somewhat grim rites of early spring are reported in the newspapers, and drearier reading it would be hard to find. Take, for instance, the seventeenth annual Lincoln Day dinner of the New York Republican Club, held at the Waldorf-Astoria in 1903. Some five hundred men attended--their wives were segregated in those happy, bygone days--and ate the seven-course dinner. As the menu was in French, Lincoln probably could not have known what was served; and as the food, as is usual at banquets, was reported atrocious, he perhaps would not have wished to. Later the "handsomely gowned" women were permitted to join their spouses, electricity illuminated the figure of an elephant behind the speakers' table, and Lincoln's spirit was invoked to be present. The presiding officer read regrets from dignitaries unable to attend--Senators, Supreme Court Justices, party bigwigs. President Theodore Roosevelt wrote: "I feel that not merely the Republican Party, but all believers in the country, should do everything in their power to keep alive the memory of Abraham Lincoln." That was about the only nonpartisan note of the evening.

There followed--as always--addresses. The chief speaker was former Governor Frank S. Black of New York, chosen for his alleged resemblance to Lincoln. "There are subjects," he began, "upon which nothing new can be said"--but this did not deter him from continuing. His theme was the advantage of Lincoln's poverty. "The child may shiver in the fury of the blast which no maternal tenderness can shield him from, but he may feel a helpless tear drop upon his cheek which will keep him warm till the snows of time have covered his hair." His well-clad auditors, safe from the wintry blast, applauded. "It is not wealth that counts in the making of the world, but character....Give me the hut that is small enough, the poverty that is deep enough, the love that is great enough, and I will raise from them the best there is in human character." Again his hearers, who, after all, were considerably poorer for their attendance at this gathering, applauded the virtues of poverty.

After some minutes--a good many minutes--more of this, a Vermont judge spoke on Lincoln and Wendell Phillips. Then Congressman Cushman of Washington followed on "Abraham Lincoln and the Northwest," concluding: "And with no sordid thought of gain for myself or for my party, I say that it beats in every throb of my heart tonight that the greatest good, the grandest future, and the most immortal destiny of our nation lies [sic] with the Republican Party." Another Congressman then talked about "Lincoln's War Secretary," but his remarks have fortunately not been preserved. Late at night, in various stages of numbness the guests escaped, clutching their sacred relics of the reincarnation they had just witnessed--watch fobs showing Lincoln swinging a woodman's mallet.

III.

For decades the Republican claim to Lincoln so repeatedly asserted went virtually unquestioned. Although minor parties from time to time jeered that a McKinley or a Coolidge had hardly the physique for a rail-splitter, Democrats for the most part respected the Republican title. Grover Cleveland, for instance, making a tour of the Middle West in 1887, carefully avoided a stop at Springfield, Illinois, not because he lacked admiration for Lincoln but because he felt that the Lincoln shrines were Republican preserves. Woodrow Wilson did make Lincoln Day speeches--and to Democrats, at that--but he admitted the prior Republican claim by beginning: "I sometimes think it a singular circumstance that the present Republican party should have sprung from Lincoln, but that is one of the mysteries of Providence...."

In 1912, however, Lincoln became a partisan issue. Denying any wish to "treat [Lincoln's] name as a mere party symbol" President Taft claimed Lincoln as a regular who would never ally himself with Theodore Roosevelt's Progressives. "Lincoln knew no such word as insurgent," former Congressman Charles F. Scott echoed his chief, "for it never entered his mind to consider himself more important than his principles." But Theodore Roosevelt insisted that Lincoln was on his side: "The official leaders of the Republican party today are the spiritual heirs of the men who warred against Lincoln, who railed at him as a revolutionist,...who accused him of being a radical, an innovator, an opponent of the Constitution, and an enemy of property." By 1916, however, in Lincoln's name, Roosevelt urged his Progressive following to return to the regular party ranks; Lincoln had come home.

It was not until 1932 that another serious effort was made to raid the Republican closet and steal the stovepipe hat. Harassed Herbert Hoover, making the traditional pilgrimage to Springfield, likened himself to Lincoln in the dark days of 1864 and found victory over the depression just a matter of fighting it out on this line if it took all summer. Traditionally Democrats had regarded such oratory as an exclusively Republican prerogative, but now a new spirit had entered that party. James A. Farley piously announced himself "shocked" at Hoover's partisan use of the Lincoln symbol, and Gifford Pinchot declared that Lincoln in these sad days "would not get to first base" with the Republican party on "his platform of human rights." It was even suggested that campaigning Governor Franklin Roosevelt might make an address at Lincoln's tomb, a report that caused cries of "sacrilege" among Springfield Republicans, one of whom threatened an injunction to stop this Democratic outrage.

Mr. Roosevelt did not then speak as Lincoln's successor, but he was very shortly to assume the mantle of the Great Emancipator. In fact, he seemed to rummage through the clothes closet of American history and take his pick of garments. He understood what was meant by "the usable past." The notion that Lincoln was a Republican, President Roosevelt dismissed as an idea as outmoded as the horse and buggy, the balanced budget, and the nine-man Supreme Court. His was the new interpretation of history. "Does anyone maintain that the Republican party from 1868 to 1938 (with the possible exception of a few years under Theodore Roosevelt) was the party of Abraham Lincoln?" he queried. Lincoln he named along with Jefferson and Jackson and

Wilson (Henry Wallace was to add the prophet Amos and the Boston Tea Party mob) as a father of the New Deal.

Repeatedly the New Dealers urged their claim to the Lincoln tradition. Mayor Fiorello La Guardia was positive that present-day Republicans "have nothing in common" with Lincoln. Quite the contrary. Was it not Lincoln who said "the legitimate object of government is to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done, but cannot do for themselves, in their separate and individual capacities"? Mr. Roosevelt was so taken with this apparent justification of the New Deal's economic policies that he quoted the statement on at least three occasions. On specific issues Democrats cited Lincoln with devastating effectiveness. Republicans who reacted with horror to President Roosevelt's denunciation of the Supreme Court were reminded by Attorney General Homer Cummings that Lincoln had attacked the Court's Dred Scott decision, and when Mr. Roosevelt defended his court-packing scheme, he observed that Lincoln also had increased the number of Supreme Court justices.

Not surprisingly, most Republicans were irate at this Democratic effort to get in on their act. Very few would agree with Wendell Willkie, who deplored all partisan use of national heroes and in effect urged an armistice. "...Neither Mr. Roosevelt nor I myself are great men," he observed, in what was undoubtedly one of the worst guesses in recent history. "Neither of us has demonstrated any of the qualities of greatness ... [of] Washington or Lincoln Therefore, in the discussions of an issue of a campaign, ... it will do us no good to draw these historical illusions." (The printer spelled it so--a Democrat, no doubt.) "The question is ... What does he believe, and what do I believe?"

But most Republicans were not so willing to surrender their political treasure. The New Deal's claim to Lincoln was a dirty Roosevelt trick, they snarled. Year after year, during the dark New Deal days, Republicans continued to rally on Lincoln's birthday, and they "sacrificed thousands of banquet chickens to the memory of their patron saint and their speakers said Roosevelt was becoming a dictator." In 1939, for instance, Herbert Hoover was willingly recalled from an unwilling retirement to address the Waldorf Astoria dinner and to rebuke the Democrats for riding on the Republican range. "Whatever this New Deal system is," the ex-President snapped, "it is certain that it did not come from Abraham Lincoln." Other Republicans were positive that Lincoln would oppose the high income tax, social security, the court-reorganization scheme, aid to Britain, and a third term. Lincoln would especially have detested the un-Americanism of the New Deal, declared Colonel Robert R. McCormick of the Chicago Tribune. "Dictatorship threatens to engulf the liberties of the American people," the Colonel darkly warned. "A band of conspirators including one Felix Frankfurter, like Adolf Hitler, born an Austrian, impregnated with the historic doctrine of Austrian absolutism, plans to inflict this Oriental atrocity upon our Republican people. The Congress of the United States has been corrupted with bribes....Four billion eight hundred million dollars...has been appropriated to corrupt the electors. The unscrupulous...Jim Farley is at work behind the smiling mask of Franklin Roosevelt to bring the end of self-government in the world....In this grave moment, I recall to you these words of Abraham Lincoln...."

IV.

Despite these plaintive efforts to reclaim him, Lincoln was by now everybody's grandfather. No reputable political organization could omit a reference to the Great Emancipator, nor could the disreputable ones. The Communist party began holding Lincoln-Lenin rallies in February, and even today the party headquarters in New York is adorned with Lincoln's photographs. Neither the "Republican-Liberty League-Hearst combination" nor the Democratic party "whose main base is the reactionary Solid South," was the legitimate heir of Lincoln, claimed Earl Browder. "The times call again for a Lincoln, for a new party, for a new program." At the same time that he was a Communist, Lincoln was also a vegetarian, a socialist, a prohibitionist, a greenbacker, and a proponent of Union Now.

In the 1948 election, everybody was for Lincoln. Dixiecrats remembered that Lincoln, as a fellow Southerner, preferred letting the race problem work itself out. Henry Wallace's Progressives asserted that they were heirs of Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln. Thomas E. Dewey, according to his running-mate, bore a striking resemblance to Lincoln--spiritual rather than physical, one judges--and President Truman claimed that if Lincoln were alive, he would be a Democrat. Finally Lincoln has become a nonpartisan, nonsectional hero. It seems, as Congressman Everett Dirksen solemnly assured his Republican colleagues, that these days the first task of a politician is "to get right with...Lincoln."

Obviously all this ballyhoo has had something to do with the continually growing Lincoln legend, but it alone is not sufficient explanation. Other party greats have been cited and discarded. It is difficult to imagine anyone in the 1950's asking: "What would Charles Sumner do if he were here today?" One reason is that it is perfectly simple to ascertain what Sumner would do. Perhaps the secret of Lincoln's continuing vogue is his essential ambiguity. He can be cited on all sides of all questions. "My policy," he used to say, "is to have no policy."

A moralist may deplore Lincoln's noncommittal attitude, but it should be remembered that this fundamental opportunism is characteristic of major American political leaders from Jefferson to Franklin D. Roosevelt. Our great Presidents have joyously played the political piano by ear, making up the melody as they went. At only one time have rigid ideologists dominated our national government--the Sumners of the North, the Jefferson Davises of the South--and the result was near disaster. Today badly frightened if well-intentioned citizens are calling upon historians and teachers to draw up a rigid credo for Americanism, to teach "American values." To do so is to forget Lincoln's nonideological approach. In our age of anxiety it is pertinent to remember that our most enduring political symbolism derives from Lincoln, whose one dogma was an absence of dogma.

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Whether Lincoln was right that the assertion was new with Taney, there are countless scholars and partisans today who assert, like Taney and Douglas that "all men are created equal" could not really have meant "all men" of all races, given the fact of widespread American slavery in 1776. Since many who argue this way are, unlike Taney and Douglas, partisans of human rights, it is too bad that they throw away one of the best available arguments for the truth about human equality. Lincoln knew better, and said better, and deserved better in today's Wall Street Journal. Share on Facebook. Get our conservative analysis delivered right to you. No charge. Photos. Enter your new information and click on Save My Changes. Locked out of your account? Get help here. Subscribers can find additional help here. Not a subscriber? Subscribe today! Get Access to Print and Digital for \$23.99. Subscribe for Full Access. Get Access to Print and Digital for \$23.99. Subscribe for Full Access. Archive. Getting Right with Lincoln book. Read reviews from world's largest community for readers. Of the many presidents and founding figures of the United State... Start by marking "Getting Right with Lincoln: Correcting Misconceptions about Our Greatest President" as Want to Read: Want to Read saving...| Want to Read. Currently Reading. Read. Getting Right with Lin by Edward Steers. Other editions. Getting Lincoln Right. By David Dieteman. May 18, 2001. Tyler's service as a Confederate States Congressman is but one fact which must be noted in demonstrating that Jack Kemp, in his article "Getting Lincoln Right," gets Lincoln utterly wrong. Rather than provide a convincing argument to those persons, such as myself, who criticize Lincoln, Kemp has provided a piece of mere cheerleading. Kemp sets the tone by noting that he dislikes ad hominem attacks on Abe Lincoln. This revelation comes at the conclusion of the first paragraph, where Kemp discusses the works of Lerone Bennett and Joseph Sobran "two noted Lincoln critics."