

## Is Lincoln a Good Model for Presidential Leadership?

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### ***(ORAL PRESENTATION NOT FOR CITATION)***

There is a lot to like about Lincoln. Perhaps too much. Lincoln's leadership stands out on so many dimensions that it is hard for anyone with an interest in the American presidency, or in America politics in general, to resist his example. By the same token, the abiding promise of a leader like Lincoln -- the national faith he inspires in the saving grace of a great leader -- gives me pause. I believe that faith has made it easier for us to indulge the extraordinary claims of contemporary presidents and to accept an enormous concentration of power in the office of the presidency itself. So I would like to pose the question directly: Is Lincoln a good model for presidential leadership?

Well, why not? Lincoln holds out to us the whole package. We admire the attributes of his character, his tactical political skills, the political principles he articulated, his dogged determination to see the fight through, his ability to extract something of enduring value from national calamity and unprecedented human carnage. Lincoln overcame great difficulties; he affirmed the potential for national regeneration. Scholars today argue about which of these elements was the most important: was it the promulgation of a new vision of the nation that made Lincoln great, or was it his pragmatic, close-to-ground maneuvering through the political thicket? The truth, of course, is that it was a rare combination of many different things. And it is precisely because Lincoln's greatness turned so closely on an advantageous meshing of character with circumstance, of skill with vision (not to mention the high stakes and the contingencies of success) -- it is precisely because Lincoln's greatness joined elements so

singular and arresting -- that it has proven to be a rather unreliable guide for thinking about the American presidency more generally.

Many have looked to Lincoln to figure out what makes a leader great, or to say what political leadership in America should be like. Some have sought to draw from Lincoln a list of standard techniques that all leaders might constructively employ. My favorite example of the invocation of Lincoln as a universal model comes from a recent address given by one of our most famous presidential historians on “The 10 qualities that made Lincoln Great” (Kearns-Goodwin). She was speaking at, of all things, a convention of the Society for Human Resources Management, and no doubt, the task of making the great liberator relevant to those engaged in the modern arts of “human resources management” presented some special challenges. Bringing lessons from Lincoln to an audience of that sort would prompt anyone to reach for an all-purpose guide to best practice. But as might be predicted such a universalized Lincoln boils down to vacuous formulas and generic banalities: This Lincoln communicated his goals effectively; he shared credit and accepted blame; he kept a sense of humor; he knew how to relax; he controlled his emotions. You get the idea. I suppose Lincoln exhibited these traits, among others. But this universalized Lincoln has no political stance. These techniques can be deployed to render the exercise of power acceptable for anyone; they fill out a self-help manual for the modern manager. Models like these seem harmless enough, but they sidestep the distinctive challenges posed by political leadership, presidential leadership in particular, and Lincoln’s leadership most of all.

In my remarks today I will take a different approach. I will not try to draw from Lincoln an ideal type of political leadership, or a paradigmatic form of statesmanship.

Even if we could agree on the features of the ideal that Lincoln represents, I am not sure that we would want every president to emulate it. Lincoln transformed America. Do we really want every president to do that? I do not think that political leadership presents the same test for each incumbent, and because there is no standard test, I think we should be wary blanket prescriptions and trans-historical models. More important, I think, is the practical historical question: how have powerful political actors, animated as they have been by their own concerns, employed Lincoln's example? With what effect have they employed it? How has Lincoln's example informed the presidency and the polity in which we live?

Beginning with his benighted successor, Andrew Johnson, every president has found something to take from Lincoln's example. That alone should make us wary of the practice. Everyone has claimed a piece of Lincoln, but if we look at what they have done with the office in his name, it seems pretty clear that Lincoln's greatness is lost in the pieces. I would go further. Understandable though it may be, this compulsion to employ the most extraordinary of American presidencies as our exemplary president, this compulsion to make a rule of the exception, is not just wrong headed, it is hazardous. Invoking Lincoln as the model brings to mind a venerable warning repeated by John Locke in *The Second Treatise*: "the reigns of good princes have always been most dangerous to the liberties of their people: for successors, managing the government with different thoughts, draw the actions of those good rulers into precedent."

Taking Locke's warning as my point of departure, I would like to consider three particular problems that have been encountered in drawing the exceptional case into a general political prescription: The first is a problem presented by Lincoln's political

stance; the second is a problem presented by Lincoln's constitutional stance; third, is a problem presented by Lincoln's ideological stance. In considering each of these problems, I will call attention to the uses of Lincoln made by political actors in particular historical period, the formative period for modern American government. I will consider some leading progressives at the turn of the twentieth century who appealed to Lincoln as a guide and tried to draw his words and deeds into precedent.

Lincoln was very much on the minds of political actors at this time. They invoked his example repeatedly. For them, Lincoln was not a distant figure clouded by the mists of time. His example seemed to speak directly to what they themselves were trying to achieve, to the possibilities they saw for building a new American state. Their quest for a Lincoln model speaks to us in a very practical way in this regard, for these reformers were engaged in an extended, broad-ranging, and ultimately successful campaign to recast the office of the presidency itself. They were out to create a new *system* of government, one that would be more presidency-centered and executive led. Lincoln bolstered their confidence in pursuit of this vision. Their thinking about Lincoln commands our attention because they were ones who set our modern forms. It seems to me that the problems inherent in using Lincoln as a model are most readily apparent in their efforts to recast the presidency itself in his image.

Of the three problems I have outline, the problem presented by Lincoln's political stance is perhaps the most obvious. For how are we to pin Lincoln down politically? Models need definition and precision if they are to be followed. They are not useful unless they can be generalized, and for that reason, they tend to run roughshod over subtlety and purposeful vagueness. But what happens when we strip Lincoln's political

stance of its studied ambiguity, when we try to characterize it as one thing or another? Aren't subtlety and ambiguity the very things that made Lincoln's political stance work so brilliantly? When Lincoln asserted that his paramount object was to save the Union and that he would do whatever was necessary to save it, was he sidelining the issue of slavery or pressing the claim that he could, under the dire circumstances at hand, free the slaves unilaterally and on his own authority? We know Lincoln as a man of deep commitment and high principle, but we also know that he was a savvy politician who crafted his leadership stance with a keen sensitivity to the unique problems of sectional division, civil war, and a prospective reunification. This presents would-be model makers with a riddle of contrary elements.

Consider Theodore Roosevelt. There has been no more ardent an advocate of Lincoln's example. But what attracted Teddy Roosevelt to Lincoln was not subtlety or ambiguity; it was clarity, strength and determination in the exercise of power. *Roosevelt's* Lincoln tapped the fearsome capacities of the presidential office and harnessed them to a higher morality. He seized the occasion "to make a long stride along the path of justice." Faced with the choice between settled forms and political insurgency, Lincoln, like Roosevelt himself, would chose political insurgency. Faced with the choice between peace and righteousness, Lincoln, like Roosevelt himself, would chose righteousness. TR's Lincoln sang the Battle Hymn of the Republic; he stood at Armageddon and battled for the Lord. The model is principled and self-confident. It is muscle-flexing and outward-reaching in its attitude. It projects the image of the great president as an activist, animated by transformative ideas and wide ambitions; one who is thoroughly convinced of their virtue as well as their necessity. The Lincolnian leader stands, in TR's words,

“ready to strike at white heat the mighty blow.” I am afraid that this has become an all too common view of the proper disposition of the American president in political affairs.

Contrast this view with that of another leading progressive, Woodrow Wilson. Wilson was determined to claim Lincoln’s example for the resurgent unionism of the defeated South, and his Lincoln could not have been more different than TR’s. What made Lincoln great, in Wilson’s view, was his circumspection and his moderation, his subordination of abstract ideals to the fine arts of consensus building. Wilson did not look to Lincoln for a firm display of commitment. In his model, Lincoln “eschewed generalities and sweeping declarations of principle.” He “listened to all the voices of the nation while refusing to speak for any one of them.” In Wilson’s view, great leaders like Lincoln seek out practical terms of agreement; they look for what Wilson called “the common meaning of the common voice.” Lincoln’s “cool judicious tone and purpose in national affairs was,” Wilson wrote, “deeply disquieting to all who loved drastic action.” In contrast to TR’s Lincoln, Wilson’s had no love of power or glory. He had no higher purpose than reunification. When Wilson wrote of justice as a Lincolnian ideal, he spoke of Lincoln’s determination to protect the South, to remain mindful of “those who stood to suffer the greatest loss.” Lincoln, Wilson observed, had lived in both sections of the nation, and he had come “to understand the South as no other Northern man of his generation.” His prescription for leadership was, as Wilson saw it, to make “as little of the antagonism and as much of the community of interests as possible.”

We may recognize something of Lincoln in TR’s model and something of Lincoln in Wilson’s model. We may also recognize some of the very things we complain about in our contemporary presidents, in George W. Bush on the one side and Barack Obama on

the other. Each model extracts from Lincoln elements that may be fit into a general prescription for national political action. But what these models gain in clarity they lose in partiality. While it is pretty clear what each recommends, the recommendations themselves make it harder to see how the elements can be combined, or how such a combination can be readily imitated. Each alone seems to draw a line against the other. At the same time, each alone seems to rob Lincoln of much of his appeal. Lincoln was neither the armed zealot that stirred TR's imagination nor was he the ecumenical consensus-builder that comforted Wilson. Lincoln was a little bit of each, and that is a hard act to follow. In the final analysis, models so wide ranging in their prescriptions offer no real constraint. On this count, as on the others, Lincoln does not provide a guide; he merely provides a justification.

Let me now turn to a second, and more serious, problem with employing the Lincoln model. This is the constitutional problem. Lincoln acted at the outer boundaries of presidential power, and that alone should make us wary about turning his example into a model. Coming into office under the most extraordinary of circumstances, he claimed for the presidency prerogatives about which the Constitution was, at best, ambivalent. Faced with the ultimate national security crisis and in command an unprecedented war effort, Lincoln crafted his stance toward the Constitution with the same sensitivity and subtlety that we find in his political stance. As political scientist Benjamin Kleinerman has recently detailed, he tried to avoid having his actions drawn into precedent, and he consistently upheld the authority of the other branches to determine the legitimacy of the extraordinary measures he was taking to meet the emergency. Lincoln seems to have understood that if every president took the same license with constitutional limits that he

did, soon we wouldn't have a Constitution at all. But Kleinerman is prompted to salvage these subtleties of Lincoln's constitutionalism precisely because latter day presidents and latter day advocates of presidential power have found them so easy to exploit, and where Kleinerman is intent on saving Lincoln from those who have in latter years invoked his example, my guess is that future incumbents will continue to invoke it for the license it appears to afford them.

Those who began recasting the office of the presidency around the turn of the twentieth century were less attuned to Lincoln's respect for the Constitution than to his constitutional ambivalence. These reformers were particularly attracted to Lincoln's subordination of constitutional particulars to a set of higher national purposes. Lincoln seemed to support their own more direct and categorical criticisms of the Constitution, their view that its intricate, internal controls on power were impediments to meeting new demands for national action, impediments to political adaptation to changing conditions, impediments to social progress. They sought to loosen those formal constraints on power and to elevate what they perceived as the Lincolnian promise of programmatic solutions to problems of the day. They sought to routinize Lincolnian possibilities in a new form of rule, to routinize Lincoln's vision of national progress for a new progressive America. Lincoln inspired them to refashion the federal government for greater executive independence, executive initiative and executive direction; to build a "modern presidency" that would operate more or less continuously at the outer boundaries of its powers and treat constitutional strictures with a wink and a nod.

On this score, Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt were pretty much on the same page. Writing as a political scientist in the aftermath of the Civil War and

Reconstruction, Wilson blasted the very idea of a formal, written Constitution. He dubbed the Framers' handiwork a "grievous mistake," an impediment to peaceful, adaptive change. He saw the Civil War itself as evidence that their great experiment in checking power had been misguided, and that such experiments are destined to fail. Wilson celebrated Lincoln as a man of the people who spoke not for the Constitution as it was but for the new America that was rapidly outgrowing the original governmental design. Wilson's Lincoln attended to evolving needs of the organic nation. Drawing general lessons from Lincoln's transformative techniques, Wilson prescribed a paradigmatic shift away from checks and balances toward a presidency-centered government more firmly anchored in social realism and more fully attentive to public opinion.

More influential than Wilson himself in crystallizing this new thinking was his protégé at Princeton, Henry Jones Ford. Ford's book, the *Rise and Growth of American Politics*, became a guide for political scientists and progressive reformers alike. At the heart of this manual was Ford's distillation of the "Jackson-Lincoln" model for the exercise of presidential power. As Ford summarized the Jackson-Lincoln model, the power of the presidency was not constitutional power; it was the power of the people "breaking through the constitutional form." As Ford saw it, Jackson and Lincoln demonstrated the capacity of the presidency to clear the constitutional thicket and wrench government away from the entrenched interests that blocked national action and national development. Jackson and Lincoln had, in Ford's view, elevated the presidency into the primary vehicle for asserting the sovereignty of the people. Ford promoted this Jackson-

Lincoln model as an indigenous solution to the problem of keeping American government abreast of social change.

By the time Theodore Roosevelt claimed a place for himself in the “Jackson-Lincoln school,” it was pointedly juxtaposed against a disgraced Buchanan-Taft school of narrow adherence to law and constitutional stricture in the exercise of power. Lincoln exemplified TR’s assertion that the president was the steward of the nation, the singular representative of the people as a whole. This “stewardship theory” held that the president was free to do anything on behalf of the people that the Constitution and the laws did not explicitly forbid; there was no need to find specific authorization for actions the president deemed “imperatively necessary for the nation.” The apparatus of our modern presidency was built on these conceptual foundations. It is an office designed to push the limits. It is an office that operates in a state of constitutional indeterminacy, an office which Lincoln’s example is invoked to justify. By the time the apparatus of the modern presidency was fully institutionalized, presidential stewardship had become difficult to distinguish from presidential supremacy plain and simple. Richard Nixon’s assertion that “when the president does it, that means it’s not illegal” is now infamous. But the uncomfortable fact is that Nixon followed up that statement with a disquisition on Lincoln’s constitutionalism and Lincoln’s example.

I hesitate to draw too much from the Lincoln-Nixon connection because it is as easy to slough off the low points in presidential history as it is risky to overvalue the high points. The problem with the Lincoln model for presidential leadership is not simply that it has given license to unilateral action for incumbents with lesser motives, that it has allowed them to invoke extra-constitutional prerogatives in the defense of national ideals

and national security. The problem I am trying to get at here is more systemic and institutional. It is that the Lincoln model inspired the development of an entirely different governmental system, one that was designed less to check ambition than to release it. The original Madisonian system allowed for great leadership but did not count on it; our new presidency-centered system anticipates greatness and leaves us perennially disappointed. In December of 1864, having won re-election and on the verge of winning the war, Lincoln openly acknowledged to the Congress that the powers he had exercised were extraordinary. He looked forward to a day soon when the Constitution would resume its normal operations. But Lincoln's brilliant display of the uses of power pointed us down a slippery slope. Today, presidential prerogative has been made integral -- indeed central -- to the everyday operations of government. The "modern presidency" is an institutional form premised in no small part on the idea, the aspiration, that Lincolnian leadership could become the new normal, that the exceptional performance of the nineteenth century could be made a rule for our time and that, I think, left us dangerously exposed.

Finally, I would like to raise some questions about the portability of Lincoln's ideals. Just as I think there is no easy way to extrapolate a model from Lincoln's political stance, and no safe way to extrapolate a model from his constitutional stance, I think we encounter serious problems in extrapolating a clear model from his ideological stance. In the circumstances of his time, Lincoln did something quite remarkable: he harnessed the cause of freedom to the cause of nationalism. Moreover, he did this in a uniquely inspiring way, one which stamped the virtue of nationalism on the American self-image. Even in his own time, however, many resisted the case he presented. They instinctively rejected the insinuation behind Lincoln's assertion that a house divided against itself

cannot stand, that the nation had to be all one thing or all the other, that America required a principled unity to survive. Those who resisted Lincoln's message argued, not without justification, that the constitutional system had been purposefully designed to protect different ways of life. The South in particular heard Lincoln's charge not as a call for national unity but as a call for national uniformity. If we hear Lincoln's nationalism as a defense of freedom against slavery, they drew from Lincoln an abiding sensitivity to the connections between nationalism, militarism, and imperialism, connections which the office of the presidency makes all-too-easily.

It did not take long for the tables to turn. In the next Great War, with the entire world in the grips of nationalism, militarism, and imperialism, Woodrow Wilson tried to make alternative connections and to dissociate the values Lincoln had fused into a robust national identity. This southern president offered a "peace without victory," self-determination of peoples, the equality of states, the elevation of a community of nations over the power of nations. He spoke of a new world, in which continued adherence to received thinking would stifle freedom rather than promote it. The thrust of Wilson's thinking about nationalism and freedom was very different from Lincoln's, it has different roots in American thought. More importantly, it eyed different problems; it spoke to the challenges of a new era. But whatever their merits, the principles Wilson enunciated were received by Lincoln's most ardent admirers as a threat. As they saw it, Wilson was transposing a distinctly southern voice into the voice of the nation, and they repudiated Wilson's accommodating sentiments on exactly those terms. Roosevelt renounced Wilson's search for a "peace without victory" as akin to "fighting the Civil War under Buchanan." Henry Cabot Lodge dismissed the principle of self determination of peoples

as a gloss on the right of secession. He reminded his fellow Republicans that Lincoln had led the nation through four brutal years of war to destroy that right. It was “pure hypocrisy” Lodge said, for the United States to defend a right of self-determination. In no small measure, Wilson’s attempt to articulate an alternative the Lincolnian synthesis and break the connection Lincoln drew between nationalism and freedom destroyed the progressive movement.

Lincoln’s fusion of nationalism with freedom worked brilliantly in his own time because it spoke for the nineteenth century’s only great democracy. Today, the democratic idea is more widely represented. The meaning of democracy has deepened. The proposition that ours is the world’s only real hope is less straightforward. So how are we to apply Lincoln’s ideas? Aren’t these applications likely to become even more bizarre and controversial in our own very different world?

Consider in this regard, an address entitled “Abraham Lincoln: Leader for All Ages” delivered by Ronald Reagan’s Attorney General, Edwin Meese. Meese drew the following lessons from Lincoln for America in the 1990s: Supreme Court decisions do not settle constitutional issues and national unity demands steadfast vigilance against the claims of multiculturalism. I can see how this comes out of Lincoln, but what I take from that is that Lincoln’s ideas are best admired at a distance and in their own place. No doubt, one could respond to Meese by drawing other, quite different lessons from Lincoln and simply exclaiming “I like *my* Lincoln better.” But I am not sure where that gets us. Lincoln told us to think anew, to set aside received dogmas and to speak clearly in our own voice to the situation and the problems at hand. That is the model we should be emulating, the one that recognizes the risks of getting entrapped in models.

The celebration of great presidents has aided and abetted the rise of presidentialism in America, and in our time, with the dangers and limits of presidentialism in full view, the more prudent course might be focus less on the great leaders of the past than on what we have left behind in our efforts to recast the office of the presidency in their image. I am thinking in particular of the auxilliary systems of control that operated to hold them accountable. A robust system of local participatory organizations formed the foundation of Lincoln's presidency, and these organizations approached Lincoln with far less reverence than we do today. They held Lincoln responsible for the conduct of the War, but they insisted that his authority and his resources all came from them, that they, no he, held the power of the state and the power of the nation. I think we would do well to recapture that sentiment, and in so doing, to reclaim the wherewithal to hold our presidents in harness.