

FRED GREENSTEIN – FOR 2011 WEPNER SYMPOSIUM

CHAPTER 6

ABRAHAM LINCOLN: CONSUMMATE LEADER

The ant [that] has toiled and dragged a crumb to his nest will furiously defend the fruit of his labor against whatever robber assails him. . . . The most dumb and stupid slave who has ever toiled for a master does constantly *know* that he is wronged. . . . Although volume upon volume is written to prove slavery a very good thing, we never hear of the man who wants to take the good of it *by being a slave himself*.

—Abraham Lincoln, Fragment on Slavery, circa April 1, 1854

I state my general idea of this war to be that we have the greater numbers, and the enemy has the greater facility of concentrating forces upon points of collision. . . . We must fail unless we can find some way of making our advantage an over-match for his; and this only can be done by menacing him with superior forces at different points at the same time.

—Abraham Lincoln, Letter to Major General Don D. Buell, January 13, 1862

With malice toward none; with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

—Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865

Abraham Lincoln and James Buchanan were light years apart in their political credentials. Lincoln entered the White House following a mere seven years as a state legislator and two years in the House of Representatives. Buchanan took office after five decades in public office, during which he served as a state legislator, member of both houses of Congress, and minister to both Russia and Great Britain. Yet Lincoln ranked first in a poll of historians on presidential performance, conducted in 2000, and Buchanan ranked last.¹

FORMATIVE YEARS AND POLITICAL RISE

Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809, in a log cabin in the Kentucky wilderness. Although his parents were illiterate, he educated himself, borrowing such books as *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Aesop's Fables*, and Parson Weems' biography of George Washington from his neighbors. He also was steeped in the imagery of the King James Bible, which is echoed in many of his speeches.

¹ The reference is to a poll of 58 historians conducted by C-Span in 2000. Meena Bose and Mark Landy, ed., *The Uses and Abuses of Presidential Rating* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2003), 21.

During Lincoln's childhood, his family moved from Kentucky to Indiana, and then Illinois. In 1831, he struck out on his own, settling in the Illinois hamlet of New Salem, where he lived for six years, working as a postmaster, surveyor, and clerk in a general store. Lincoln was much admired by his neighbors for his honesty, amiability, and willingness to lend a hand when people needed help. He also stood out for his exceptional height and strength. On one occasion, he won the respect of a gang of rowdy young men, who later became his political supporters, by wrestling with their leader.

Not long after arriving in New Salem, Lincoln announced his candidacy for the state legislature.² He then spent four months as a volunteer in the Illinois militia, which left him little time to campaign. Lincoln ran eighth in a field of thirteen, but he carried New Salem by 277 to 23 votes. Two years later when he was better known, Lincoln ran again, winning the first of four terms. All told, he spent eight years in the legislature, six of them as the Whig Party's whip.

In Lincoln's time, service as a lawmaker was a part-time occupation. Lincoln turned to the law as a source of income. Because there were no lawyers in New Salem, he read law on his own, working his way through William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* and other legal works. He was admitted to the bar in 1836 and entered into a series of partnerships.

Everyone who knew Lincoln recognized that he had a complex and elusive personality. He was ill at ease with women, particularly young women, and he periodically sank into deep depressions that were relieved by his sense of humor and love of storytelling. Lincoln once described humor and storytelling as the "vents of my moods and gloom."³ On one occasion, Lincoln broke off his engagement to his future wife, Mary Todd. The two were finally married on November 4, 1852.

The differences between the Lincolns were striking. As James McPherson notes, Lincoln was "disorganized, careless in dress, and indifferent to social niceties." Mrs. Lincoln "dressed expensively and lived by the strict decorum of Victorian conventions." He "got along with almost everybody," but she "quarreled with servants, workmen, merchants, and some of Lincoln's friends."⁴ It has been suggested that Lincoln's difficult marriage affected his political style by contributing to his forbearance.

Because the Whigs were in the minority in Illinois, Lincoln stood no chance of winning higher state office. He therefore set his sights on the congressional seat in his district. He helped broker an agreement in which the district's Whigs would rotate service in Washington. In 1846, it was Lincoln's turn. Lincoln's congressional service coincided with the Mexican-American War. Like other Whigs, he opposed the war, holding that

² Lincoln entered politics as a Whig, choosing the party that was most consistent with his own upward social mobility and remaining true to it until its demise in the 1850s. See Joel H. Silbey, "'Always a Whig in Politics': The Partisan Life of Abraham Lincoln," *Papers of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 8 (1986): 21–42. See also David Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

³ Joshua Wolf Shenk, *Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 116.

⁴ James M. McPherson, "Abraham Lincoln," American National Biography Online, <http://www.anb.org/articles/04/04-00631-article.html>.

President Polk had embarked on it under false pretenses in order to seize territory from a weaker nation.

As a new member of Congress, Lincoln had little impact on the other lawmakers, but he received attention in his home state for a series of resolutions he introduced that urged Polk to name the exact “spot” at which hostilities commenced, in effect challenging Polk’s claim that Mexico had “shed American blood on American soil.” Lincoln returned home at the end of his term and began to practice law with renewed energy. He also intensified his lifelong program of self-improvement, even poring through Euclid’s geometry to sharpen his powers of reasoning.

PATH TO THE PRESIDENCY

In the spring of 1854, Lincoln was drawn back into politics by the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, a measure designed by Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas, which, in effect, legalized slavery in portions of the United States where it had been forbidden since 1820. In the fall of that year, Lincoln set about taking Douglas to task for his sponsorship of the act. As Douglas traversed Illinois defending the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Lincoln dogged his footsteps, countering Douglas’ speeches and honing his own anti-slavery message.

Lincoln gave the most famous of a series of addresses on the morality of slavery that were to catapult him to the presidency in Peoria, Illinois, in October 1854. Declaring that he hated the Kansas-Nebraska Act because it left open the possibility that a state might opt for slavery, Lincoln made the following assertion:

I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables the enemies of free institutions . . . to taunt us as hypocrites . . . , causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity and especially because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the . . . principles of the Declaration of Independence.⁵

Lincoln then entered the running for U.S. senator from Illinois. (In that era, senators were chosen by a vote of the state legislature, and Lincoln had determined that the new legislature was likely to support an anti-Kansas-Nebraska Act candidate.) He later dropped out, throwing his support to a more electable candidate who opposed the act.

In 1858, Lincoln again ran for U.S. senator. This time his opponent was Douglas, who was seeking a third term. Addressing the first convention of the newly formed Republican Party, Lincoln took his text from the New Testament passage that “a house divided against itself cannot stand,” insisting that the nation could not endure half slave and half free. Douglas argued that Lincoln’s image of a house divided carried the implication that he was prepared to go to war with the South over the existence of slavery. Lincoln countered that he had no intention of seeking to eliminate slavery in the states where it already existed.

Lincoln’s newfound prominence bore fruit late in 1859. He was invited to address the congregation of the church of the New York clergyman Henry Ward Beecher. Knowing that a speech given from such a high-profile pulpit in the East would be bound to receive attention, Lincoln prepared carefully. As it turned out, Lincoln’s forum proved

⁵ Lewis E. Lehrman, *Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008).

to be Cooper Union, an innovative new school that admitted students without regard to race or gender.

Addressing a huge audience, Lincoln stressed the essential conservatism of the Republican Party and the consistency of its values with those of the nation's founders. He also focused his remarks on the immorality of slavery. Lincoln concluded by declaring, "Let us have faith that right makes might [and] in that faith . . . dare to do our duty as we understand it." The address was received with such great acclaim that Lincoln began to set his sights on the presidency.⁶

Lincoln's managers devised a strategy for winning the Republican nomination. Rather than attempting to win on the first ballot, their aim was to achieve victory when—and if—the convention reached an impasse. The strategy worked. Lincoln was nominated on the third ballot following a deadlock in which the four leading candidates cancelled one another out. In a similar dynamic, Lincoln won the presidency in a four-candidate race by winning an overwhelming majority of the electoral vote and a plurality of the popular vote.

LINCOLN IN THE WHITE HOUSE

By the time of his inauguration, Lincoln had made his cabinet selections. He chose (and in effect neutralized) his four rivals for the nomination. Lincoln selected William Seward to be secretary of state, Salmon Chase to be secretary of the treasury, Montgomery Blair to be postmaster general, and Simon Cameron to be secretary of war. His other choices were Gideon Wells of Connecticut as secretary of the navy, Edward Stanton of Ohio as secretary of war, and Caleb Smith of Massachusetts as secretary of the interior.

Much of Lincoln's inaugural address was devoted to reassuring the South that he had no intention of interfering with slavery where it already existed. "We are not enemies but friends," he declared, but he also described secession as "the very essence of anarchy." He concluded by declaring:

I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

Two days after his inauguration, Lincoln was informed that the besieged garrison of Fort Sumter, in the Charleston, North Carolina, harbor, was running out of supplies. He decided to resupply it, but to do so without the use of force. The onus would be on the South to initiate any violence that might ensue. On April 12, the Confederates commenced a bombardment. The Civil War had begun.

Lincoln's response was to place the nation on a war footing. He called 75,000 state militiamen into federal service, instituted a naval blockade of the South, and suspended the right of habeas corpus on the corridor between Philadelphia and Washington. He also called a special session of Congress for July 4, leaving himself

⁶ Harold Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech that Made Abraham Lincoln President* (New York: Simon & Shuster 2004).

almost four months during which he used his sweeping powers as commander in chief to conduct the war.

One of Lincoln's major concerns was with retaining Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, and Missouri in the Union. If these Border States had joined the South, they would have increased the fighting power of the Confederacy by half. Lincoln therefore took such actions as revoking a military order that would have freed the slaves in Missouri to avoid alienating its slaveholders.⁷ Lincoln had a longer run preoccupation with finding a sufficiently aggressive overall military commander. The need for such a military leader was made urgent by a steady string of Confederate victories from the firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861 through well into 1862. Between those dates, Lincoln relieved seven Union commanders before settling on Ulysses S. Grant.

Lincoln was the model of a hands-on commander in chief. He immersed himself in books on military strategy, experimented with personally leading the military effort, and enunciated the strategy that led to victory, insisting that the Union use its superior resources to press the Confederate forces on a wide front until it found a weak spot where it could break through.

In 1862, Lincoln decided that it would be necessary to free the slaves in the rebel states so that they would no longer be a Confederate asset. He then convened his cabinet and read a draft emancipation proclamation to it. Explaining that he had made up his mind on the substance of the matter, Lincoln requested advice on how best to carry it out. He accepted the recommendation of one of the cabinet members that he wait for a Union victory to avoid giving the impression of acting out of desperation.

On September 17, Union forces halted a Confederate invasion of the North in the Battle of Antietam. Treating the stalemate as a victory, Lincoln issued a statement that the slaves would be freed in any rebel states that did not rejoin the Union by the end of the year. None of the Southern states complied, and on January 1, 1863, he promulgated the Emancipation Proclamation. Freeing the slaves in the South had a profound international effect. A number of European powers had been considering convening a peace conference, which would have the effect of acknowledging the legitimacy of the Confederacy. Now that the aim of the Union was to end the morally objectionable institution of slavery, no more was heard of such a conference.

TURN OF THE TIDE

The Battle of Antietam was a harbinger of future Union victories. In July 1863, another Southern invasion of the North was blocked in the Battle of Gettysburg. In the course of 1864, Grant's forces fought relentlessly against those of Confederate General in Chief Robert E. Lee. Meanwhile, Philip Sheridan's army laid waste to the fertile Shenandoah Valley, and William Tecumseh Sherman's forces captured Atlanta and went on to march to the coast, laying waste to Georgia and driving on through the Carolinas.

Lincoln was re-nominated early in June by a nearly unanimous vote of the National Union Party. This was a name used by the Republicans to attract Democratic support. The Democratic candidate was General George B. McClellan, who Lincoln had relieved for failing to exercise leadership. Lincoln's running mate was Andrew Johnson of Tennessee, a leading pro-Union Southern Democrat. Lincoln was reelected with a

⁷ William Gienapp, "Abraham Lincoln and the Border States," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 13 (1992): 13-46.

margin of some four hundred thousand popular votes and 212 of the 233 Electoral College votes.

Lincoln's second inaugural address was steeped with religious imagery. "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray," he declared, "that this scourge of war may speedily pass away." Yet it might be God's will, he continued, that the conflict would not end "until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword."⁸

Lincoln had only six more weeks to live. During that time, he visited Grant's headquarters and the former Confederate capital of Richmond. On April 9, the war came to a close with the surrender of Lee to Grant at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia. On August 13, the Lincolns attended a theatrical performance at Washington's Ford's Theater. The actor and Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth entered their box and shot Lincoln at close range. He died the following morning without regaining consciousness.

There is no way of knowing with certainty what would have occurred if Lincoln had lived, but there can be no doubt that his death had profound consequences. It is plausible that if he had lived, the nation would have been spared the traumatic period of Reconstruction that followed the war.⁹ As it was, Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, reversed his policy toward the South, placing the former slave owners in power. Then the Republican radicals responded by enacting draconian policies. The cycle was completed in 1876, when the former slave owners were empowered, a state of affairs that continued until the civil rights enactments of the 1960s.

LEADERSHIP QUALITIES

Public Communication. Abraham Lincoln excelled in all of the qualities used here to assess leadership. In the realm of communication, he spent years honing the clarity of his rhetoric. It is instructive to compare Secretary of State William Seward's draft of Lincoln's first inaugural address with Lincoln's markup of it:

Seward

We are not, we must not be, aliens or enemies, but fellow-countrymen and brethren.

Lincoln

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies.

Seward

Although passion has strained our bonds of affection too hardly, they must not, I am sure they will not, be broken

Lincoln

Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.¹⁰

⁸ Ronald C. White Jr., *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

⁹ On Lincoln's commitment to a non-punitive policy to the former Confederates, see Ludwell H. Johnson, "Lincoln's Solution to the Problem of Peace Terms: 1864-1865," *The Journal of Southern History*, 34 (1968): 586.

¹⁰ Ronald C. White Jr., *A. Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2009), 393.

Once he was president, Lincoln adhered to the practice of the time: his typical way of communicating with the public was through well-timed open letters and comments to visiting delegations. He also occasionally left the capital to inspect troops and speak at patriotic assemblages.¹¹

Organizational Capacity. Lincoln's organizational methods were driven by his acute political instincts. They were unsystematic but effective. By making his rivals for the 1860 Republican nomination members of his administration, for example, Lincoln made it unlikely that they would criticize his policies. Lincoln was his own man. As we have seen, he made up his own mind on whether to emancipate the slaves, but he consulted his cabinet on *how* to do so.

Political Skill. Lincoln's political adeptness has been well described by the historian William E. Gienapp:

He was an extraordinary politician, able to work with men of diverse viewpoints on a broad range of issues. He displayed an uncanny feel for public opinion and was unrivaled in his ability to shape and influence popular feelings. He had the ability to assess character, to weight alternatives, and to clearly perceive the consequences of his actions.¹²

Policy Vision. Lincoln once declared that he was controlled by events and had no underlying agenda, but for most of his career, he was a dedicated Whig. As such, he supported policies designed to foster economic development. He also was an ardent opponent of slavery and at a deeper level held that human affairs are directed by a higher force.

Cognitive Style. Lincoln's earliest speeches are marked by the verbosity of much of the period's oratory, but he gradually pared his prose down until he was able to produce such a concise masterpiece as the Gettysburg Address. It was not out of character for Lincoln to have immersed himself in Euclid with a view to making his thinking more acute or to have engaged in a lifelong process of self-education.

Emotional Intelligence. Emotional intelligence was the anchor of Lincoln's political style. Despite his depressions, he was never intimidated by the presidency. Instead, he had the self-confidence that bespeaks a healthy personality. Michael Burlingame illustrates this in the closing passage of a book that explores Lincoln's troubled relationship with his father, his depressions, and similar matters. Despite all that, Burlingame concludes, Lincoln was a "model of psychological maturity."¹³

¹¹ David Herbert Donald, Jean H. Baker, and Michael F. Holt, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Norton, 2001), 444. On presidential travel in general, see Richard J. Ellis, *Presidential Travel: The Journey from George Washington to George W. Bush* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008).

¹² William E. Gienapp, "No Bed of Roses": James Buchanan and Abraham Lincoln: Leadership in the Civil War Era," in Michael J. Birkner, ed., *James Buchanan and the Political Crisis of the 1850s* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1996), 118.

¹³ Michal Burlingame, *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 362. The earliest psychobiography of Lincoln was L. Pierce Clark, *Lincoln: A Psychobiography* (New York: Scribner's, 1933). More recent examples include George B. Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979) and Charles B. Strozier, *Lincoln's Quest for Union: Public and Private Meanings* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

