

# Abraham Lincoln: Civics Teacher

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“That we may so act, we must study, and understand the points of danger.”

– From Abraham Lincoln,

“Fragment on the Constitution and Union”

Considering the criteria used by Landy and Milkis to measure presidential greatness, Abraham Lincoln certainly made the mark. During the Civil War, Lincoln took “aggressive action in the face of crisis without full-fledged consultation and guidance from the people.” Lincoln led the nation through its most important “surrogate constitutional convention” in its history. He pursued “extensive and arduous enterprises for the public benefit.” And, long before he became President, Lincoln took on the role of educator, time and again using his polished and persuasive rhetoric to “take the public to school” [1]. When Americans needed a lesson to explain what dangers lurked, should they lose their reverence for laws, he provided it. When Americans needed a lesson to recall the wisdom of their republican founding, he taught it. In his early writings, before the Senate campaign of 1858, Lincoln relied on the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to provide supporting evidence for those lessons. Later, as President, Lincoln turned almost exclusively to the Constitution to prove his point. After Lincoln established a course for freeing the enslaved with the Emancipation Proclamation, he once again used the Declaration and the Constitution as his canonic texts. Finally, in the Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln relied primarily on biblical language and allusion to provide the foundation for one final lesson on the meaning of the Civil War.

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The continuity revealed in Lincoln's writings is that he remained true to his values. He despised slavery; he believed firmly in the rule of law; he held a strict interpretation of the Constitution; he was concerned about the narcotic effect of the strong exercise of executive power; he was measured and patient; he espoused temperance and prudence. Abraham Lincoln's driving ambition to do something for which he would be remembered served as an underpinning for provocative rhetoric long before the election of 1860. The Lyceum Address and the Speech at Peoria, Illinois were two of the instances where Lincoln combined reason and passion, cajoling Americans to attach themselves to the Constitution and the rule of law, and revere the founding principle of equality as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. In the Lyceum Address, Lincoln asserted

Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well-wisher to this posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others. As the patriots of seventy-six did to the support of the Declaration of Independence, so to the support of the Constitution and Laws, let every American pledge his life, his property and his sacred honor; – let every man remember that to violate the law, is to trample on the blood of his father, and to tear the character of his own, and his children's liberty...let it be written in Primers, spelling books and in Almanacs – let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in the legislative halls... let it become the political religion of the nation.

In his Speech at Peoria, Illinois in 1854, Lincoln proclaimed that his “ancient faith teaches him that ‘all men are created equal’.” He identified the equality principle as the, “leading principle – the sheet anchor of American republicanism.” In this three-hour long speech, Lincoln decried the Kansas Nebraska Act and gave a lengthy history lesson on Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence. He said, “Away back of the Constitution, in the pure, fresh breath of the revolution, the State of Virginia and the National congress put that policy in practice” that prohibited slavery in the new territories. Calling on Americans to remember the glory of the republican past and the founders' intentions

regarding slavery, Lincoln said

Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it. Let us turn and wash it white, in the spirit, if not the blood, of the Revolution. Let us turn slavery from its claims of “moral right,” back upon its existing legal rights, and its arguments of “necessity.” Let us return it to the position our fathers gave it; and there let it rest in peace. Let us readopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices and policy, which harmonize with it...let all Americans—let all lovers of liberty everywhere—join in the great and good work. If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have so saved it, as to make, and to keep it, forever worthy of the saving. We shall have so saved it, that the succeeding millions of free happy people, the world over, shall rise up, and call us blessed, to the latest generations.

These civics lessons were grounded in Lincoln’s own understanding of the relationship between the equality principle, the Union and the Constitution though he would not succinctly articulate that understanding until 1861 in what is called his “Fragment on the Constitution and Union.” Using the metaphor “apples of gold in pictures of silver,” Lincoln illuminated the relationship in this way:

The assertion of that principle, at that time, was the word, “fitly spoken” which has proved an “apple of gold” to us. The Union, and the Constitution, are the picture of silver, subsequently framed around it. The picture was made, not to conceal, or destroy the apple; but to adorn, and preserve it. The picture was made for the apple—not the apple for the picture. So let us act, that neither picture, or apple, shall ever be blurred, or bruised or broken.

That this fragment did not make any appearance in the public writings of Lincoln suggests that he was prepared to patiently wait and prudently judge when to move forward towards the realization of the founding principle.

After becoming President, Lincoln tended almost exclusively to use the Constitution as his primer. Perhaps Lincoln refrained from using the more radical rhetoric concerning equality in the Declaration because of the dire situation of

the looming war. The language of Lincoln's First Inaugural Address supports this idea. In the address, the Constitution was Lincoln's constant refrain. He asserted that he had "no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so and I have no inclination to do so." Elsewhere in the address, Lincoln used these phrases to drive home the point that he would uphold the Constitution: "consistently with the Constitution, . . . plainly written in the Constitution," "no purpose to construe the Constitution or laws by any hypercritical rules." Lincoln, though, could not let the opportunity pass to remind Americans that the "Union is perpetual, confirmed by the history of the Union." That the Union "is much older than the Constitution" and that as a nation, we have been a Union since 1774 and have continuously reaffirmed our intentions to remain a Union in the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation and that we wrote and ratified the Constitution "to form a more perfect Union." He did not give voice in the First Inaugural to the founding principle, which in his own words "is the principle of "Liberty to all"—the principle that clears the path for all—gives hope to all—and, by consequence, enterprise, and industry to all[2].

The Final Emancipation Proclamation issued in January, 1863 was the embodiment of Lincoln's understanding of the relationship between the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The horrors and longevity of the war and Lincoln's careful preparation and education of the public made it possible for Lincoln to take his longed-for next step. Within the document itself, Lincoln felt compelled to remind the public whereby he had the authority to issue the proclamation.

I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, by virtue of the power in me vested as Commander-in-Chief, of the Army and Navy of the United States in time of actual armed rebellion against authority and government of the United States, and as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion. . . declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States. . . are and henceforward shall be free.

Later that year in The Gettysburg Address, Lincoln once again invoked his holy grail. The opening line of The Gettysburg Address made a direct reference to the Declaration of Independence and Lincoln's founding principle. "Four

score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” He concluded his remarks with a reference to the government created under the Constitution of the United States, “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” Though the war was not over, Lincoln proclaimed that slavery had ended. His apples of gold were intact, even though the frame of Union was broken. Lincoln’s work was not done, the crisis had not ended, but slavery had been put on the path of extinction, as intended by the founding fathers.

Despite his belief that he would not be re-elected in 1864, Lincoln was returned to office by an impressive electoral decision of 212-21. The war was winding down, victory belonged to Lincoln and the Union. The frame would be restored and hopefully revitalized in the coming years. On March 5, 1865 Lincoln gave his Second Inaugural Address, in which he made no predictions for the future other than voicing his “high hopes.” Lincoln’s fellow Republicans may have expected an address that clearly praised their victory and lambasted the south for their transgressions. Lincoln might have used the occasion to lay out a logical reconstruction of the crises that led to the war based on the failure of the people to remain faithful to the founding principle, the Union and the Constitution. Instead, Abraham Lincoln used the occasion to explain what he had come to accept as the cause of the war. Eschewing his most favored and revered documents, Lincoln chose a different lesson book, the Bible. Lincoln reminded all Americans that they “both read the same Bible and pray to the same God” [3]. He explained further that

It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been fully answered. The Almighty has His own purposes. “Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.” If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which in the providence of God, must needs come, but which -

having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributions which the believers in a living God always ascribe to him?"

Lincoln went on to say that he hoped the war would soon end, but that it would continue if God willed it to continue. He then offered to the American public a mantra for the post war nation.

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.

Lincoln turned the occasion of his second inauguration into a lesson that would speak to all Americans who had come through the Civil War, regardless of their understanding of the phrase "liberty to all," regardless of their previous interpretation of states' rights in the Constitution. Perhaps the horrors of the war had left Lincoln without explanation, bereft of the ability to make another argument or search for evidence to support it. Lincoln helped us resolve our crisis. He expunged slavery, tamped down our sectionalist tendencies and finally, helped us to embrace our union in a more perfect form. Like a patient teacher, Abraham Lincoln poked and prodded the public to develop a moral consciousness that would make retaining slavery impossible by the end of the war. His ability to so passionately lay before his audience "cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason," in meticulously crafted arguments, provided the American public the most fundamental lesson in civic responsibility.

## References

- [1] Landy and Milkis. *Presidential Greatness*. University Press of Kansas, 2000.
- [2] Lincoln, Abraham. *Fragment on the Constitution and Union*, January 1, 1861.
- [3] Lincoln, Abraham. *Second Inaugural Address*, March 4,.