

History 211 History of US Elections
Discussion Transcript for September 10, 2020
Lincoln on Lincoln

Main Readings: Lincoln's Writings: The Multi-Media Edition

Nobody writes better about Lincoln than Lincoln wrote about himself. Yet you cannot read Lincoln on Lincoln simply at face value. Even "Honest Abe" sometimes lied or parsed his words in misleading fashion. This week, students tried to tackle the challenge of reading Lincoln between his own lines, by browsing selected documents.

The following selections come from student comments & questions.

EVOLUTION FROM CANDIDATE TO COMMANDER IN CHIEF

STUDENT COMMENT: "In the beginning of his political career through his first presidential campaign in 1860, Lincoln relied heavily on his humble beginnings to appear relatable to his constituents, as evidenced by his nickname, "The Railsplitter." In his first campaign statement from 1832, he writes that "I was born and have ever remained in the most humble walks of life. I have no wealthy or popular relations to me." This theme of modesty continues for years and is even found in his 1859 autobiographical sketch, he says "there is not much of me," a very humble statement coming from someone who likely knew he had, in reality, accomplished quite a bit for a mostly-self-taught farm boy. He was personable and approachable, and that attitude propelled him to the presidency almost single-handedly—or so it seemed. In reality, Lincoln's political approach slowly morphed into the shrewd dealings that often advanced politicians' agendas behind the scenes (and still do). Even as a former one-term Congressman in 1854, Lincoln was organizing covert political moves through placing misleading ads in the local paper for a Whig candidate, claiming he was not consulted on the issue of his nomination despite Lincoln having directly contacted the candidate. Similarly, in 1858, he attempted to work with Republicans to thwart potential voter fraud behind the scenes through the suggestion of hiring of a "detective." He had political connections that he used to his advantage, even if they were not quite "wealthy or popular relations." After he was elected President, Lincoln used his position of power to put force behind his words and actions, something he was unable to do as a humble local politician. In response to criticism from Sen. Johnson in 1862, Lincoln states that "I shall not surrender this game leaving any available card unplayed" – rather strong words compared to his first inaugural address, where he urged peace and thoughtfulness. He publicly downplayed the key position of slavery in the war in 1862, despite fully intending to issue the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. When he did so, he put the full force of his office behind it, invoking both his position as President and his standing as Commander-in-Chief of both the Army and Navy. Lincoln was immensely successful at using the circumstances of his positions to his advantage, constantly putting forth a public persona that attracted average voters while maintaining political dealings privately that did not compromise his personal beliefs and propelled him to ever higher positions of power."

HONEST ABE

STUDENT COMMENT: "After reading many of his speeches and letters, it is clear that Abraham Lincoln lives up to his moniker of 'Honest Abe'. Early in Lincoln's career, rumors are spread about his religious ideals. He could have just ignored these claims or released a broad statement on his support of religion, instead he released a statement which defined exactly what his views were. He stated that he was not a traditional Christian, yet still believed in some higher power. He knew that announcing any idiosyncratic religious beliefs could be political suicide, especially in rural 19th century America. Because of his compulsion to tell the public the whole truth even while knowing the risks, it is clear that Lincoln's honesty is something that defines him as an individual. In a later law lecture in the 1850s, he begins his speech by saying "I am not an accomplished lawyer" and then goes on to tell law students to "never stir up litigation" and never take payment in advance. He finishes by saying to the young men, "resolve to be honest at all events; and if in your own judgment you cannot be an honest lawyer, resolve to be honest without being a lawyer. Choose some other occupation". By advocating against practices that are common in law because of their dishonesty, Lincoln stands as a man who holds himself to a higher standard than the average lawyer. Lincoln was a very honest man, but he was by no means perfect. In a letter to a candidate named Richard Yates he shared the press release that the Whigs had prepared for his nomination which stated that he had not been consulted prior to being nominated. In this letter Lincoln asks for Yates' approval to run the announcement even though it is a complete lie. However, this lie is harmful to no one and is almost expected in the world of politics. Additionally, prior to an election for a local seat, Lincoln noticed a group of about 15 Irishmen who he feared would vote illegally. In a letter to Norman Buel Judd Lincoln conspires to hire a "detective" "who could at the nick of time control their votes". This scheme does not sound like a completely honest affair and would certainly not lend support for the nickname 'Honest Abe'. However, in totality, Lincoln seems to place honesty above most other traits and certainly does not tell lies maliciously. The name 'Honest Abe' is justified and is a testament to Lincoln's high personal and moral standards.

A SELF-MADE MAN...

STUDENT COMMENT: "The way for a young man to rise, is to improve himself every way he can, never suspecting that anybody wishes to hinder him. Allow me to assure you, that suspicion and jealousy never did help any man in any situation. There may sometimes be ungenerous attempts to keep a young man down; and they will succeed too, if he allows his mind to be diverted from its true channel to brood over the attempted injury." Abraham Lincoln wrote a letter to his law partner, William Herndon, on July 10, 1848, where he provided his advice on how to rise as a politician. Lincoln's quote emphasized how he was a self-made and self-invented politician who strived to improve himself and his reputation. From a young age, Lincoln believed he could achieve more, so he decided to teach himself how to write and read. Within Lincoln's autobiographical sketch from December 20, 1859, he described his scarcity of education but his ability to retain the rule of three: reading, writing, and arithmetic after one year of school. He valued his learning, and he pushed himself to continually keep improving, which is evident in his ability to become a self-taught lawyer. Lincoln's father

believed that Lincoln should have focused on working labor jobs and living a farm work life. However, Lincoln rebelled against the father's push for Lincoln to settle and instead wanted to pursue a life he deemed as successful."

STUDENT COMMENT: "This commitment to personal development was a central part of Lincoln's life at every step of the way and the fundamental philosophy that drove him. In a letter to his younger law partner William Herndon, Lincoln offered advice on how to advance in a political world that was difficult to ascend in. Lincoln said, "The way for a young man to rise, is to improve himself every way he can" (Letter to William Herndon). To Lincoln, you could not rely on others to lift you up or for circumstances to change, or even be satisfied with natural-born talents. Instead, one must be a self-made man, always pushing oneself to improve."

STUDENT COMMENT: "Abraham Lincoln was both self-made and self-invented in the time period leading up to his presidency. Allison Lorenz keenly points out that the distinction between a self-made and a self-invented individual is rooted in the context that the individual finds success within; such that, a self-made individual "attain[s] success in a system that already is established" while a self-invented individual finds success "in a new standard that... [they] have created." Looking collectively at Lincoln's experiences before his presidency, there are several moments that support the idea that he was self-made. Rather stereotypically, Lincoln did in fact built his career from the ground up being born into a poor family. Certainly, his later work as a lawyer is evidence of his success as a self-made man. At one point, he earned \$5000 (when he was working with William Herndon, prior to his presidency) for "successfully defending the Illinois Central Railroad," which was not only the highest amount he earned in his entire career but also the highest amount any lawyer had made during that time (Gienapp, 45). This certainly points to the fact that others would likely have identified Lincoln as having been an individual that worked hard to become successful in society. Aside from monetary success, however, comes Lincoln's educational success. He had minimal schooling opportunities as a child, yet he continued to persist and diligently sought out any and all ways in which he could expand his knowledge by reading, reading some more, studying, learning in every way possible for himself. This would be the foundation for his career and well-established practice of law in society, which ultimately would help him to become the self-made man that he was known as. He had learned what success meant within his society and had attained that success."

WITH SOME SELF-INVENTION, TOO...

STUDENT COMMENT: "While his childhood on the frontier certainly had an immense impact on the person that Lincoln became, in his writings it is clear that he is a self-invented man, at least in the time before he became president. This is most clear in his short autobiographical writing, not in the autobiography itself, but in his address to the newspaper he was writing to before his sketch began. He emphasized to the editor that "If anything is made out of it, I wish it to be modest, and not to go beyond the materials".

Here he was obviously aware of what he wanted his public image to be and was manipulating the press in order to accomplish this. Also to fit this narrative of a modest and reserved Lincoln, he states that "it must not appear to have been written by me". Lincoln's letter to John Johnston explaining why he would not visit his dying father also allows a few insights into how he was manufacturing his image. On a more private scale, he was trying to distance himself from the reality of what his childhood was. Lincoln offers a variety of excuses not to visit, some reasons more excusable than others, but perhaps the most telling one that he claims "if we could meet now, it is doubtful whether it would not be more painful than pleasant."

STUDENT COMMENT: "It would seem clear that Lincoln is a self-made man who worked tirelessly to achieve his goals, culminating in his ascendance to the presidency. This narrative is only complicated when one considers the reality that as most of us are, Abraham Lincoln too was self-aware. Surely honest, but aware of the power his reputation yielded, and the advantage it lent him in pursuing his self-described ultimate goal or "peculiar ambition". "[...] I can say for one that I have no other [ambition] so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition, is yet to be developed" (1832). In this statement lies self-invention. Lincoln seeks his fellow man's esteem and approval, and does so as "Honest Abe", a humble and grandfatherly-like authority figure. He is naturally a man of character but is entirely aware that his character is politically palatable, and thus markets it."