

# LINCOLN LORE

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## THE DEBUNKING OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

The war effort has caused much emphasis to be placed on the inspirational value of our historical heritage and the necessity of keeping alive the achievements of the illustrious men who have contributed to our well-being and our advancement as a nation. There seems to be a concerted effort among the leaders in the field of elementary education to give American History an even more prominent place in our scholastic curriculum.

There is, however, an increasing effort on the part of many recognized historians to remove from our biographical studies of great Americans any tributes which would imply it was possible for some men to rise above the usual standards of excellency. The reciting of heroic episodes that would stimulate the emotions is not encouraged and the cold, dry facts chronologically compiled do not always contribute to the inspirational value of our biographical literature. In an attempt to remove all the "cherry tree stories" from the pages of American histories there has been a leveling off of all human interest episodes that would shoot up above the commonplace.

There seems to be a tendency among realists in the field of biography to crown with distinction a writer who attempts to discredit a prominent historical figure. On the other hand, an effort to support or supplement statements of appreciation and approbation about these statesmen who have served us well, brings upon the author of such sentiments the disrepute found in the term "eulogist."

The method usually followed in debunking a character is to magnify, out of all due proportion, some insignificant incident which may have been far below the level of the individual's usual behavior. The tendency is to pull the hero down to the level of humanity in general, or to humanize him, so to speak. Such a procedure is just as far afield from the true historical prospective as the flattery by any eulogist who fails to recognize the shortcomings of his favorite.

Another approach, less violent, but more subtle than that of the out and out debunker, is the attempt to discredit the work a statesman has done, by referring to his achievements as nothing more than an artificial build-up by his admirers. It is in this field that most of those, who would depreciate the works of Lincoln, have labored, until they would have the world believe that the fame of Lincoln was achieved by his friend's eulogies after his death.

One of the most recent Lincoln books entitled, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis* by David M. Potter, and published by the Yale University Press makes some statements about Lincoln's traditional obscurity in 1861 and the alleged misguided writers who have contributed to the Lincoln legend, which invite comment.

The opening sentences of the chapter in the Potter book dealing more directly with Abraham Lincoln are here quoted verbatim:

"Despite the stature which Abraham Lincoln afterward assumed, he was, until he entered the White House, simply a lawyer from Springfield, Illinois—a man of great undeveloped capacities and narrowly limited background. He was far more fit to become than to be President.

"This fact may seem too obvious to justify notice, and, indeed, it would be, were it not for the fact that the Lincoln legend has obscured the shortcomings of the man,

and has glossed over the periods of his life during which he groped and blundered. . . ."

We very much question the ability of Mr. Potter to understand Mr. Lincoln's attitude toward any question of importance, if he looked upon Abraham Lincoln at the time he delivered the First Inaugural Address, as just "simply a lawyer from Springfield, Illinois." Mr. Potter might have been gracious enough to have called Lincoln one of the outstanding lawyers of the entire West, and that would have been a true comment of his standing in his profession, to say nothing of his recognized leadership in the field of politics which was even then of national significance.

Lincoln's First Inaugural Address compared with some other state papers delivered on like occasions gave no evidence of a "narrow, limited background." A year before he "entered the White House" he delivered a speech at Cooper Union in New York, and William Cullen Bryant on introducing Mr. Lincoln said, "It is a grateful office I perform in introducing to you at this time an eminent citizen of the West whom you know, whom you have known heretofore only by fame." In commenting on Lincoln's address one New York editor wrote, "No man ever before made such an impression on his first appeal to a New York audience."

Certainly the two principals in the Lincoln-Douglas debates were not unknown to the American people. *The Rochester (N.Y.) Democrat* for November 10, 1858, states, "Mr. Lincoln has now a reputation as a statesman and orator, which eclipses that of Douglas." William J. Bryan called the Lincoln-Douglas contest "the most remarkable series of debates known to history." While Lincoln lost the senatorship, he won the debates, as the Republican representatives favoring him, polled 4,144 more votes than the representatives favoring Douglas. Surely over two years before Lincoln "entered the White House" he was something more than "simply a lawyer from Springfield, Illinois."

Without the knowledge of Abraham Lincoln his name was placed before the first Republican Convention held at Philadelphia in 1856, as a nominee for the vice-presidency, and without any organized effort on his part he received 110 votes, running second to Dayton, who won the nomination. This was four years before he "entered the White House." Lincoln had served a term in Congress previous to the debates, which fact alone should allow him to be recognized in 1861 as something more than "simply a lawyer from Springfield, Illinois."

Mr. Potter deals harshly with practically all the historians who have written appreciatively about Lincoln and have followed what he calls "the misleading perspective of hindsight." Evidently he places among the eulogists those "writers whose minds are colored by this knowledge of the end," referring to Stanton's statement, "Now he belongs to the ages." Mr. Potter feels these writers are so preoccupied with justifying or discrediting Lincoln's ultimate course that they ignore the plain evidence of his earnest efforts to avoid that course altogether.

What prompted Mr. Potter to portray Abraham Lincoln at the time he "entered the White House" in 1861 as "simply a lawyer from Springfield, Illinois," it would be difficult to ascertain, unless the statement was prompted by some kind of "bias."