

LINCOLN LORE

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WAS LINCOLN A DICTATOR?

The fate of Mussolini, first of the present day "power" men to collapse, has raised the question about the status of Abraham Lincoln, who often has been cast in the roll of a dictator by his contemporaries and who still retains that ignominious title in the thinking of some schools of American historians. There may be those who can find parallel situations in which it appears as if Mussolini and Lincoln responded in like manner to like stimuli, but the overwhelming contrasts which characterize these two individuals should minimize any similarity which might unwittingly appear.

It was in ancient Rome, where first a chief magistrate was appointed with dictatorial power to meet a crisis. Mussolini differed from his predecessors in that he attempted to extend the initial emergency indefinitely. Reviewing the regime of the Italian dictator it is evident that these five characteristics—ambition, egotism, jealousy, vengeance, and self-aggrandizement—were dominant in his behavior, and they are usually distinguishing traits in the habits of most men who aspire to imperious authority. Against this background, when we observe the well recognized qualities of Abraham Lincoln, we hesitate to associate him with modern dictators. Possibly we can find in his own words and acts some examples of his reaction toward the characteristics, so clearly evident in the defunct ruler of Italy.

Ambition

Lincoln was ambitious to succeed in whatever he undertook. This much must be granted any man of worth. At the close of the senatorial campaign in 1858 he made a speech at Springfield in which he used these words:

"Ambition has been ascribed to me. God knows how sincerely I prayed from the first that this field of ambition might not be opened." He then admitted that he claimed "no insensibility" to political honors, but qualified his personal ambition by this remarkable affirmation:

"Today could the Missouri restriction be restored, and the whole slavery question be replaced on the old ground of 'toleration' by necessity where it exists, with unyielding hostility to the spread of it, on principle, I would, in consideration, gladly agree, that Judge Douglas should never be out, and I never in, an office, so long as we both or either, live."

Egotism

No one with aspirations to exercise dictatorial powers would proceed very far without an exaggerated opinion of himself and in this Mussolini excelled.

If there is one characteristic above all others in the life of Lincoln which has stood out in bold relief, it is his humility. To one who wanted an autobiographical sketch for campaign material, he replied, "There is not much of it, for the reason, I suppose that there is not much of me." After he had been nominated for the presidency he commented that his name was "the humblest of all whose names were before the convention." After the 1860 election, upon referring to the great task which had fallen on him, he mentioned he had been raised to his high office "without a name, perhaps without a reason why I should have a name." Surely no one would allow Lincoln to be placed among the egotists.

Jealousy

One of the most noticeable traits of Mussolini was the apparent jealousy he displayed when any of his fellow countrymen gave unusual displays of talent, whereupon, they were quickly removed to obscurity. It is true of all types of dictatorships that actual genius is discredited and replaced by mediocracy, largely because of the dictator's fear of a rival competitor and the possible usurpation of his powers.

Ambitious men were present in Lincoln's cabinet and

those who were his political rivals were appointed to responsible offices. This is sufficient proof that he was free from jealousy. It was Lincoln who remarked with reference to his first ranking military leader, "I will hold McClellan's horse if he will only bring us success."

On the very night of Lincoln's election to the presidency for a second term, he was called upon for a speech. After stating that he was chiefly grateful to the people for the confidence in him, displayed by their votes, he said, "If I know my heart, my gratitude is free from any taint of personal triumph . . . It is no pleasure to me to triumph over anyone."

Vengeance

Jealousy and fear often drives dictators to visit vengeance on all who oppose their policies and fail to subscribe to their philosophy. Vengeance is the very life's breath of a dictator. Especially in times of military activity the sword is not spared in mowing down resistance within the state. As early as 1862 it was evident that Lincoln did not intend to introduce the spirit of vengeance into the great war. He wrote, "I shall do nothing in malice. What I deal with is too vast for malicious dealing."

A rumor was circulated in the South that Lincoln had "a purpose to enslave or exterminate the whites of the South." This would have been the procedure of a dictator of the modern world. Lincoln in a letter to General McClelland referred to the rumor as follows, "I believe you can be my personal witness that no man is less to be dreaded for undue severity in any case."

In his instructions to General Rosecrans with respect to the punishment of certain prisoners, he wrote, "I wish you to do nothing merely for revenge, but that what you may do shall be solely done with reference to the security of the future."

It will be recalled that when Lincoln was asked, while at City Point, by General Sherman what to do about the capture of Jefferson Davis, Lincoln told a story which indicated he would like to see Davis slip out "unbeknownst like." If a dictator had been in the shoes of Lincoln we wonder what Jefferson Davis' life would have been worth. Lincoln in the midst of a great war could truthfully express his feelings in these words. "With malice toward none, with charity for all." This is not the language of a dictator.

Self-Aggrandizement

The great crowds which greeted Lincoln on his way to the inauguration would seem to have been sufficient incentive to stir up any personal ambition which may have been lying dormant in his being, but his reaction was just the reverse. At Cleveland where an enthusiastic reception had been tendered him he remarked, "I would not have you suppose that I think this extreme earnestness is about me. I should be exceedingly sorry to see such devotion if that were the case." At another grand reception he said, "I am unwilling on any occasion that I should be so meanly thought of as to have it supposed for a moment that these demonstrations are tendered to me personally."

At a time when the interests of the government were at low-ebb, Lincoln stated, "I shall be glad to resign my trust at the appointed time to another pilot more skillful and successful than I may prove."

On December 15, 1863 Lincoln wrote a letter to Dr. Thomas Cottman in which he discussed reconstruction measures in Louisiana and offered suggestions for establishing and maintaining the national authority. Then he concluded with this interesting observation. "I go no further than this because I wish to avoid both the substance and the appearance of dictation."

If there is any attitude of mind demonstrated in the behavior of Abraham Lincoln in private, political, or public life that would allow him to be associated with the dictators of the modern day, it has been obscured by the more dominant traits of his character, so free from ambition, egotism, jealousy, revenge and self-aggrandizement.