

LINCOLN LORE

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MR. AMERICA — HIS STATURE

Athletes who have achieved the highest distinction possible in their respective line of sports have acquired the courtesy title, Mister—usually abbreviated, Mr.—in conjunction with the type of physical effort in which they have excelled. Hence, George Mikan becomes Mr. Basketball. While our candidate for Mr. America was six feet four inches tall, we are not thinking of his stature in the terms of cubit measure, nor his title as indicative of physical stamina, although he might enjoy the distinction of being our all-American President, when his achievement as an athlete is considered. We are trying to emphasize the oft expressed opinion that Abraham Lincoln is the Master American or Mr. America when it comes to interpreting, by his own life and works, the fundamentals of the American system.

Woodrow Wilson prepared for the February issue of *Forum* magazine in 1894 a monograph entitled "A Calendar of Great Americans." He was then professor of jurisprudence and political science at Wesleyan University. Born in Virginia, educated in the south, practicing law for a period in Georgia, and an ardent Democrat in politics, whatever compliment he might have paid to Abraham Lincoln could not be attributed to a provincial viewpoint, or political bias.

In the introductory paragraph of this interesting discussion Mr. Wilson states, "The great Englishmen bred in America, like Hamilton and Madison; the great provincials, like John Adams and Calhoun; the authors . . . like Asa Gray and Emerson, and the men of mixed breed like Jefferson and Benton, must be excluded from our present list." . . . He continues, "There is an American type of man, and those who have exhibited this type with a certain unshakeable distinction and perfection have been great 'Americans'." John Marshall and Daniel Webster are set forth by Mr. Wilson as characters in which there is a type of genius distinctly American, and Benjamin Franklin is presented as one of the first men to "exhibit the American spirit with an unmistakable touch of greatness and distinction." Washington is also presented as "thoroughly American . . . building states and marshalling a nation in a wilderness." Henry Clay he describes as "an American of a most authentic pattern" and concludes that "there was no man of his generation who represented more of America than he did." Andrew Jackson, according to Wilson "was altogether of the west." Grant he felt was "a great American general" and "Sam Houston, Patrick Henry and Robert E. Lee are none the less great Americans because they presented only one cardinal principle of national life." Among the poets truly American, Lowell and Curtis in Wilson's opinion "must find an eligible place in the list."

Wilson presents Abraham Lincoln as "the supreme American of our history" or Mr. America in our language, and concludes his analysis of Lincoln's character supporting this claim with this tribute:

"The whole country is summed up in him: the rude Western strength, tempered with shrewdness and a broad and humane wit; the Eastern conservatism, regardful of law and devoted to fixed standards of duty. He even understood the South, as no other Northern man of his generation did. He respected, because he comprehended,

though he could not hold, its view of the Constitution; he appreciated the inexorable compulsions of its past in respect of slavery; he would have secured it once more, and speedily if possible, in its right to self-government, when the fight was fought out. To the Eastern politicians he seemed like an accident; but to history he must seem like a providence."

When one tries to support the position of Woodrow Wilson that Mr. Lincoln is Mr. America and when an attempt is made to review some of the superior qualities which allowed Lincoln to earn this distinction, there is a tendency to classify such an approach as eulogistic. On the other hand, if one takes issue with Mr. Wilson and presents opinions detrimental to Mr. Lincoln's fame, he becomes a realistic, objective, historian, in the terminology of many reviewers.

It is almost phenomenal that among the 40,000 pages of manuscripts in the Lincoln collection in the Library of Congress, that as far as the writer has observed, no single statement detrimental to Lincoln's character has been discovered. There is no indication that the collection had been scrutinized at any time for the discarding of unfavorable documents. While it may be shown that Lincoln was not always correct in his deductions, one has yet to present a duly authorized record that would question his personal integrity or reveal any double dealing with man or group.

The modern tendency is to bring great men down to our own level and while we do not literally cut off the heads of those who dare to rise above the masses, figuratively speaking, we follow that procedure. There seems to be a general tendency to search with microscopic attention for any evidence that might be so construed as to challenge an accepted noble characteristic. On the other hand, whole reams of documentary evidence might be ignored if the contents supported only commendable traits.

The historian who enters the field of research paying some attention to evidence that is constructive which may add to the stature of an individual all ready well accepted, may not receive many complimentary notices. He is more likely to be charged with rubbing out the wrinkles and polishing up his heroes, although he may submit facts to substantiate his objective presentation.

Abraham Lincoln's growth "in the hearts of his countrymen" did not stop with his assassination, but his untimely death was not primarily responsible for his towering personality. Though we may admit that martyr's monuments are more impressive than ordinary markers, Abraham Lincoln's immortality was assured long before the assassin's bullet reached him. The First and Second Inaugurals, the Emancipation Proclamation and the Gettysburg Address, were not enlarged by the work of the assassin, and the characteristics which set Lincoln apart from his fellows were not magnified by his demise. The thesis, that Lincoln's fame rests on his being removed from the scene of action just at the right time, is a conclusion which cannot rest on any reasonable premise. Abraham Lincoln was Mr. America in his day, he was Mr. America in Woodrow Wilson's day, and he is Mr. America in our day.