



Lincoln Lore

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Mary Jane Hubler, Editorial Assistant. Published each month by the
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A Progressive Admiration: Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln

The Progressive Era was a great period for American historical writing. The two most learned Presidents since Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, occupied the White House in this age of reform. Both men were historians. The historical discipline was becoming more professionalized every day. With the deaths of the contemporary writers who knew Abraham Lincoln personally — William H. Herndon, Ward Hill Lamon, Isaac N. Arnold, John G. Nicolay, and John Hay — Lincoln scholarship was becoming more critical and objective. One of the masterpieces of Lincoln literature, Lord Charnwood's biography, appeared near the end of the era. A Republican and Progressive, Albert J. Beveridge, would soon bring writing on Lincoln into the mainstream of professional historical scholarship.

The greatest spur to the study of Lincoln in this period was the celebration of the centennial of his birth in 1909. To this factor, one must surely add Theodore Roosevelt's interest in the life of the Sixteenth President. It was a lifelong interest inherited from his father. Although Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., had married into a Georgia slaveholding family, he was an ardent Republican. He apparently met the President and Mrs. Lincoln while he was in Washington in 1862, working to establish a system whereby allotments for soldiers' families could be deducted from their pay before all the money went into the hands of corrupt sutlers and liquor peddlers. The elder Roosevelt served on the United States Allotment Commission in New York and performed considerable work for the common soldiers and their families. He knew Nicolay and Hay well.

Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., though a young man during the Civil War, chose to hire a substitute for his army service rather than to enlist. Some have speculated that his son later exhibited great zeal for combat out of embarrassment at his father's course during the war. The father certainly influenced the son in more direct ways. From his father, the future President gained an admiration for the Republican

party, a penchant for trying to help the common man, and a keen interest in Abraham Lincoln.

Roosevelt's view of Lincoln changed with time. Before the turn of the century, his admiration of the Sixteenth President was conventional for a budding Republican politician with a sense of history. Roosevelt considered slavery "a grossly anachronistic and un-American form of evil," and he naturally admired the man who ended it. He hated "the professional Abolitionists." They were the sort of people who always agitated about something and, in the case of slavery, they happened for once to be correct. Roosevelt thought that the ultimate extinction of slavery had been a certainty, but it might have taken another hundred years without the Civil War. In sum, he liked Lincoln's moderation.

Around the time of the Spanish-American War, when Roosevelt was Assistant Secretary of the Navy, he had a

rather special interpretation of Lincoln's life. "I feel that in this age we do well to remember," Roosevelt told the Republican Club of New York on Lincoln's Birthday in 1898, "... that Abraham Lincoln, who prized the material prosperity of his country so much, prized her honor even more, that he was willing to jeopardize for a moment the material welfare of our citizens that in the long run her honor might be established." A jingoist critique of men who valued the stock market more than the national honor followed and was aimed at the many businessmen who had little enthusiasm for American imperialism.

Early in Roosevelt's career, Lincoln appears to have been his second choice among historical heroes. George Washington was, "not even excepting Lincoln, the very greatest man of modern times," Roosevelt told Henry Cabot Lodge in 1884. Almost a decade later, he was still describing Washington as the "greatest of Americans" and an exemplar of the sort of national greatness forged by "feats of hardihood, of daring, and of bodily prowess." Hunting in his youth had made Washington a great man.

Later in his life, Roosevelt was careful to link the two



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FIGURE 1. Theodore Roosevelt.

men's names in public utterances. He referred always to "the two greatest statesmen this country has ever had." He never said publicly that he preferred the one or the other. Like his friend Henry Cabot Lodge, Roosevelt was also a great admirer of Alexander Hamilton, but Hamilton was far too anti-democratic in political sentiment to be very quotable by an active politician. Roosevelt, however, professed to see a lot of Hamiltonian Federalism in Lincoln:

He [Lincoln] seized — half unwittingly — all that was best and wisest in the tradition of Federalism; he was the true successor of the Federalist leaders; but he grafted on their system a profound belief that the great heart of the nation beat for truth, honor, and liberty.

Roosevelt despised Thomas Jefferson. He thought "the worship of Jefferson a discredit" to his country, and the more he studied Jefferson, the more profoundly he distrusted him. He was "the most incapable executive that ever filled the presidential chair," but he "did thoroughly believe in the people, just as Abraham Lincoln did." For a man who detested Jefferson, Lincoln was a crucial link to America's liberal tradition. The more liberal and reform-minded Roosevelt grew, the more interested he became in Lincoln. Neither the conservative Hamilton nor the bland Washington could supply that vital impulse.

As early as 1885, Roosevelt criticized a Supreme Court decision which favored conservative interests by referring to Lincoln's critique of the Dred Scott decision. Most often, however, it was Lincoln's practicality and moderation which appealed to Roosevelt. In 1900 he told a correspondent that, even though Lincoln was one of the two greatest Americans, he had made mistakes. Appointing Simon Cameron as Secretary of War and making General Ambrose E. Burnside commander of the Army of the Potomac were big mistakes, but Lincoln had to work with the materials at hand to achieve his goals. He could not, for example, accomplish anything by ignoring Cameron's influence in Pennsylvania. "If Lincoln had not consistently combined the ideal and the practicable," Roosevelt concluded, "the war for the union would have failed, and we would now be split in half a dozen confederacies."

When, as President of the United States, Roosevelt faced a serious anthracite coal strike in 1902, he recalled reading Nicolay and Hay's history of the Lincoln administration and took inspiration from their depiction of the Sixteenth President as a resolute man badgered by contradictory advice from extremists on both sides. What Roosevelt liked best about Lincoln in this period of his life was his strong conception of the Presidential office. Roosevelt had "a definite philosophy about the Presidency," he told Henry Cabot Lodge in 1908. "I think it should be a very powerful office, and I think the President should be a very strong man who uses without hesitation every power that the position yields." In fact, he called this the "Jackson-Lincoln theory of the presidency," and he contrasted it with "the Buchanan principle of striving to find some constitutional reason for inaction." As he neared the end of his second term in 1908, Roosevelt pointed to Washington and Lincoln as strong Presidents who acted in a disinterested way as the people's Presidents. He still mentioned Washington with Lincoln, but Lincoln was the really important figure in justifying Roosevelt's active conception of the Presidency. He had said years earlier that Lincoln "was the first who showed how a strong people might have a strong government and yet remain the freest on earth."

William Howard Taft was Roosevelt's handpicked successor, but his conception of the Presidential office was far different from Roosevelt's. The restless ex-President quickly moved into sharp opposition to Taft's brand of Republicanism. Roosevelt's view of Lincoln moved with him steadily to the left. At Ossawatimie, Kansas, in 1910, Roosevelt declared that property should be the servant and

not the master of America, and he legitimized his radical doctrine by quoting from Lincoln's first annual message to Congress:

Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration.

At the Lincoln birthday banquet of the Republican Club of New York in 1911, Roosevelt spoke on "Abraham Lincoln and Progressive Democracy." He was no longer celebrating the moderate President Lincoln, who had mediated between the extremists during the Civil War. Now he hailed Lincoln for meeting "the problems of the present, not by refusing to use other methods than those that had solved the problems of the past, but by using the new methods necessary in order that the old principles could be applied to the new needs." This progressivism, Roosevelt insisted, made Lincoln "the real heir of George Washington."

Roosevelt still could not muster any enthusiasm for Thomas Jefferson, who inspired other liberal reformers in this era.

The founders of our Government, the men who made the Constitution and who signed the Declaration of Independence, tended to divide into two groups, those under Hamilton, who believed in a strong and efficient government, but who distrusted the people; and those under Jefferson, who did not believe in a strong or efficient government, but who in a certain sense did trust the people — although it was really distrust of them to keep the government weak. And therefore for decades we oscillated between the two tendencies, and could not develop the genuine strength that a democracy should have until Abraham Lincoln arose, until he and the men with him founded the Republican party on the union of the two ideas of combining efficient governmental force with genuine and whole-hearted trust in the people.

Roosevelt supported increasingly liberal reform ideas, including the recall of judicial decisions. In criticizing the Supreme Court, the ex-President invoked Lincoln's denunciation of the Supreme Court of Roger B. Taney and the Dred Scott decision. Roosevelt repeatedly linked his New Nationalism and his third-party candidacy for the Presidency on the Progressive ticket with the heritage of Abraham Lincoln.

All this was too much for the living link to the Sixteenth President, Robert Todd Lincoln, to swallow. Though he rarely engaged in public disputes over the meaning of his father's life, Robert, a Taft Republican, felt that he had to answer Theodore Roosevelt. The resulting public letter from Lincoln's son is a remarkable document which testifies to the changes in the Lincoln family's political beliefs over the years.

The Government under which my father lived was, as it is now, a republic, or representative democracy, checked by the Constitution which can be changed by the people, but only when acting by methods which compel deliberation and exclude so far as possible the effect of passionate and short-sighted impulse. A Government in which the checks of an established Constitution are actually, or practically omitted — one in which the people act in a mass directly on all questions and not through their chosen representatives — is an unchecked democracy, a form of Government so full of danger, as shown by history, that it has ceased to exist except in communities small and concentrated as to space. A New England town meeting may be good, but such a Government in a large City or State, would be chaos.

As I understand it, the essence of Mr. Roosevelt's proposals is that we shall adopt the latter form of Government in place of the existing form. This, in simple words, is a proposed revolution, peaceful perhaps, but a revolution.

Robert thought that such a revolution would "surely... lead to attempted dictatorships."

Robert not only disagreed politically with the form of government he thought Roosevelt was promoting but also believed that Roosevelt was in error in asserting that there were Abraham Lincoln texts which supported such doctrine. "President Lincoln," said his son, "wrote many letters, made many public addresses and was the author of many documents. I do not know of the existence in any of them of a word of censure, or of complaint of our Government, or of the methods by which it was carried on." Roosevelt's proposal for the recall of judicial decisions brought a specific response:

His [Lincoln's] attitude toward the Dred Scott decision is urged as in support of the pernicious project for the recall by popular vote, of judges and of judicial decisions. He thought it an erroneous decision, but his chief point in reference to it was not its error, but that it indicated a scheme, and was a part of it, for the nationalization of human slavery. He never suggested a change in our government under which the judges who made it should be recalled, but said that he would resist it politically by voting, if in his power, for an act prohibiting slavery in United States territories, and then endeavor to have the act sustained in a new proceeding, by the same court reversing itself.

Finally, Robert interpreted the Gettysburg Address for Roosevelt by asserting that, when Lincoln "prayed (if I may use the word) that 'Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth,' he meant, and could only mean, that government under which he lived, a representative government of balanced executive, legislative and judicial parts, and not something entirely different — an unchecked democracy."

The great irony, if not tragedy, of this misunderstanding between Robert T. Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt was that both men sincerely revered Abraham Lincoln's legacy and that both were quite knowledgeable about him. To be sure, Roosevelt said always that Lincoln and Washington were the greatest men our republic had produced. Even when he spoke at the dedication of Gutzon Borglum's Lincoln statue in Newark in 1912, Roosevelt complimented the people of Newark for commemorating "in fit form one of the two greatest statesmen that this country has ever had." It seems as though it was almost a political effort always to mention Lincoln and Washington together. Sectionalism may have been strong enough and Lincoln's image partisan enough still to necessitate paying homage to a Virginia hero as well.

Lincoln grew more "progressive" over the years in Roosevelt's view, and he apparently grew progressively more important for Roosevelt. In private utterances, Roosevelt seemed less reluctant to mention Lincoln without at the same time recalling Washington's memory. Close association with John Hay, who served as Secretary of State under Roosevelt, certainly increased his interest in Lincoln. After Hay's death in 1905, Roosevelt told Lyman Abbot:

John Hay's house was the only house in Washington where I continually stopped. Every Sunday on the way back from



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FIGURE 2. Robert Todd Lincoln.

church I would stop and have an hour's talk with Hay. We would go over foreign affairs and public business generally, and then I would usually get him to talk to me about Lincoln — for as you know, Lincoln has always meant more to me than any other of our public men, even Washington.

That same year, Hay had sent Roosevelt a ring to wear at his inauguration as President of the United States.

DEAR THEODORE:

The hair in this ring is from the head of President Lincoln. Dr. Taft cut it off the night of the assassination and I got it from his son — a brief pedigree.

Please wear it tomorrow; you are one of the men who most thoroughly understand and appreciate Lincoln.

I have had your monogram and Lincoln's engraved on the ring.

Longas, O uitinam, bone dux, ferias Praestes Hesperiae

Yours affectionately

JOHN HAY

In Roosevelt's *Autobiography*, written in 1913 at the height of his Progressivism, he recalled Hay's gift:

John Hay was one of the most delightful of companions, one of the most charming of all men of cultivation and action. Our views on foreign affairs coincided absolutely; but, as was natural enough, in domestic matters he felt much more conservative than he did in the days when as a young man he was private secretary to the great radical democratic leader of the '60's, Abraham Lincoln. . . . When I was inaugurated on March 4, 1905, I wore a ring he sent me the evening before, containing the hair of Abraham Lincoln. The ring was on my finger when the Chief Justice administered to me the oath of allegiance to the United States; I often thereafter told John Hay that when I wore such a ring on such an occasion I bound myself more than ever to treat the Constitution, after the manner of Abraham Lincoln, as a document which put human rights above property rights when the two conflicted.

Shortly before he gave his address on Lincoln in Hodgenville, Kentucky, on the hundredth anniversary of Lincoln's birth, Roosevelt told his son, Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., "Lincoln is my great hero, as you know, and I have just put my heart into this speech."

Theodore Roosevelt did much to keep Lincoln in the public eye. As Roosevelt changed over time, so did his image of the Sixteenth President. At first he celebrated the practical moderate who injected popularity into the party of strong government. Later, Roosevelt invoked the image of a radical democrat who kept the country's vital principles alive by inventive applications of them to a changed political environment. Through it all, Roosevelt's degree of interest in Lincoln grew in intensity. Even though publicly he was careful to tout Lincoln and Washington together as America's two greatest heroes, in private he admitted, "For some reason or other he [Lincoln] is to me infinitely the most real of the dead Presidents." Washington gained only a sort of obligatory fealty from Roosevelt. He never engaged Roosevelt's rhetorical attention as Lincoln did. Theodore Roosevelt admired Washington as a statue, but he admired Lincoln as a man.

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by Mary Jane Hubler

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1979-22

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Pamphlet, flexible boards, 10 1/2" x 7 1/2", 141-220 pp., illus., price per single issue, \$3.00.

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Sale Number 4315/Important Lincolniana/With Other American Historical/And Financial/Autograph Letters And Documents/The Roy P. Crocker Historical Document Collection/of the Lincoln Savings and Loan Association/ Sold By Order Of The Board Of Directors/Donald W. Crocker, President/Exhibition/Friday, November 23, 1979, to Tuesday, November 27.../Galleries open.../and Monday.../Public Auction/Wednesday, November 28, 1979, at 10:15 a.m. and 2 p.m./Sotheby Parke Bernet Inc. 980 Madison Avenue, New York NY 10021/212-472-3400 Book Department: 472-3592/[Printed by Cosmos Press, New York City, New York. Published by Sotheby Parke Bernet Inc. Photographs by Sotheby Parke Bernet Photography Dept.]

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LOUIS A. WARREN LINCOLN LIBRARY AND MUSEUM, THE

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