



Lincoln Lore

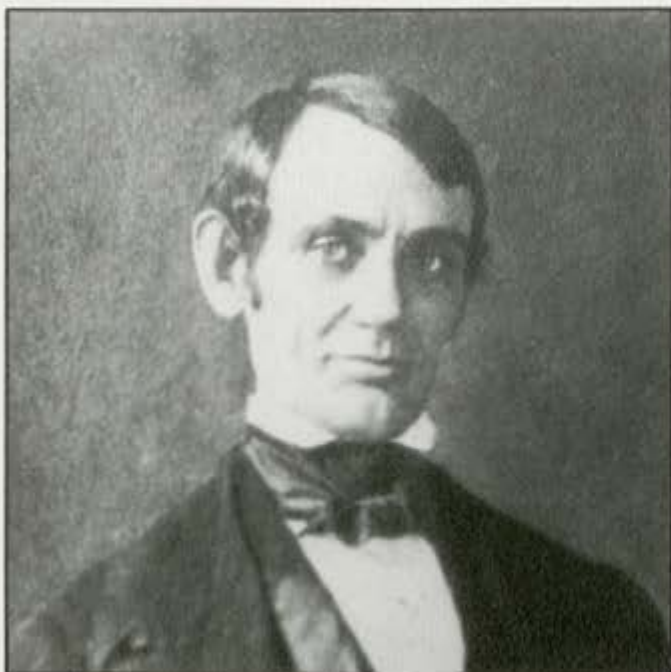
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LINCOLN'S LYCEUM SPEECH AND THE ORIGINS OF A MODERN MYTH

Abraham Lincoln's address before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, delivered January 27, 1838, is fast becoming one of the most famous of his speeches. It has long enjoyed some fame, though historian Albert Beveridge as late as 1928 had to correct the date given the speech by Nicolay and Hay in Lincoln's collected works. Beveridge then called attention to Lincoln's address as "the most notable of his life thus far and, in fact, for many years thereafter."



The address was entitled "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," a worrisome prospect in Lincoln's view because of recent outbreaks of lawless mob violence in unrelated incidents across the United States. In an oft-quoted admonition, the young Illinois legislator said: "Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap — let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; — let it be written in Primmers, spelling books, and in Almanacs; — let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the *political religion* of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars."

After this classic law-and-order warning, Lincoln then delved into the problem of ambition. With the heroic work of the generation of the revolutionary fathers completed, there seemed to be little left for the man of genius to do. Merely perpetuating their works was an unromantically tepid goal, and there was danger, therefore, that some ambitious person of genius might find heroic satisfaction only in destroying the

work of the fathers. Lincoln's final warning then invoked "Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason" as a bulwark against the passion that was useful only in revolutionary times. He hoped to see this reason embodied in "general intelligence, [sound] morality and, in particular, a reverence for the constitution and the laws."

Although he called dramatic attention to this speech in 1928, Beveridge failed to say specifically why the speech was so "notable." Other historians would attempt to say why later.

James G. Randall, in the first two volumes of his famous Lincoln biography, issued in 1945, found his protagonist "already definitely Lincolnian in epigrammatic force" when he spoke before the Lyceum. He praised Lincoln's address by saying it was "as good a speech against Fascism, or elements characteristic of Fascism, as was ever delivered."

This was high praise in 1945, of course, but not destined to prove very useful for later generations of historians. When Benjamin F. Thomas referred briefly to the speech in his fine 1952 biography of Lincoln, he interpreted it, not as a ringing denunciation of fascism, but as proof of Lincoln's interest in the slavery question and of his caution in addressing it. Lincoln denounced mob rule before his Lyceum audience but did not specifically dwell on the anti-abolition mob that had



murdered Elijah Lovejoy in Alton about eleven weeks before Lincoln spoke.

In 1960 Reinhard Luthin, in his solid biography entitled *The Real Abraham Lincoln*, characterized the Lyceum address as Lincoln's "first speech of distinction." What Luthin liked about the speech was its unusual lack of partisan purpose or party rhetoric (until the publication of Gabor S. Boritt's *Lincoln and*

the *Economics of the American Dream* in 1978 most historians thought of Lincoln as a narrow partisan in his Whig years).

By 1960, then, modern scholars had agreed at least on the fact that the speech was somehow significant. They disagreed as to what the precise significance was: Beveridge was silent on that point, Randall thought of it as a principled denunciation of mob rule, Thomas admired its politic savvy, and Luthin pointed to its transcendence of the categories of ordinary partisanship. None seems to have found in it profound clues to Lincoln's hidden character. These biographies all stopped to deal with this early speech in a respectful way, but the biographies more or less resumed where they had left off before dealing with the speech. This would not always be so.

Back in 1954 literary critic Edmund Wilson had published an essay destined to have great influence on Lincoln scholarship: it was called "Abraham Lincoln: The Union as Religious Mysticism." In the article Wilson argued that "Lincoln's view of the [civil] war as a crisis in American history and his conception of himself as an American leader" both "emerge[d] very early." This was a remarkable statement and only the first of many to follow in the brief essay. Wilson seemed to challenge the one point on which the biographers agreed, namely, that the Lyceum speech was exceptional, that it somehow stood out among what were then thought to be Lincoln's unexceptional early utterances. Instead of a rather ordinary politician, about thirty years old, Wilson found in the Lincoln who stood before the Young Men's Lyceum audience what other biographers could not at this stage, a self-conscious leader.

The other thing Wilson found, of course, must have been a mirage. How could Lincoln's "view of the war as a crisis in American history" have emerged before 1861? This is a meaningless statement, but Wilson prided himself on being a journalist as well as a literary critic, a serious writer who nevertheless reached a broad audience, and a charitable reader must allow him the sort of anachronistic slip of the pen which occasionally creeps into articles written against magazine deadlines.

Wilson sought to prove Lincoln's self-conscious charisma by lengthy quotations from the Lyceum address stitched together with a little pop-psychology. In the speech Lincoln said that the heroes of America's revolutionary beginnings satisfied their ambitions in service to the exciting cause of overthrowing British rule. The generations that followed would have their ambitions too, but with "this field of glory harvested," they would not find satisfaction in the mere maintenance of an edifice erected by older heroes.

Towering genius [Lincoln continued] disdains a beaten path. . . . It scorns to tread in the footsteps of any predecessor, however illustrious. It thirsts and burns for distinction; and, if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves, or enslaving freemen. Is it unreasonable then to expect, that some man possessed of the loftiest genius, coupled with ambition sufficient to push it to its utmost stretch, will at some time, spring up among us? And when such a one does, it will require the people to be united with each other, attached to the government and laws, and generally intelligent, to successfully frustrate his designs.

Immediately after quoting these lines, Wilson concluded: "Now, the effect of this is somewhat ambiguous: it is evident that Lincoln has projected himself into the role against which he is warning them."

Wilson, in fact, explained no ambiguity but instead clinched his assertion that Lincoln thought of himself as the very threat against which he warned by quoting from Lincoln's later speech against the Sub-Treasury (December 26, 1839), which concludes thus:

The probability that we may fall in the struggle ought not to deter us from the support of a cause we believe to be just; it shall not deter me. If ever I feel the soul within me elevate and expand to those dimensions not wholly unworthy of its Almighty Architect, it is when I contemplate the cause of my country, deserted by all the world beside, and I standing up

boldly and alone and hurling defiance at her victorious oppressors.

After this, Wilson concluded: "The young Lincoln, then, was extremely ambitious; he saw himself in a heroic role." In truth, that is not exactly what Lincoln said in the two passages from different speeches. The heroism he allowed himself to aspire to in the second speech was patriotism in standing by his country even when her oppressors were victorious. This is not at all the amoral heroic role warned against in the first speech. Lincoln "projected" himself in the second passage into a role in which, "alone and hurling defiance," he defied the sort of oppressor he warned against in the first. There is no ambiguity in this (and no "projection" in the perverse psychological sense). Lincoln warned against ambitious oppressors in the first and in the second he allowed himself to dream melodramatically of defying oppression to the last.

There are far more serious problems with the rest of Wilson's analysis of Lincoln, and it will delay coming to grips with them if this article quarrels at every step of the way as the previous paragraph did. Still, it seemed worthwhile at least to provide an example of the slippery nature of Wilson's famous essay. At no point can it be held in a tight grasp of logical comprehension, for it is not logical and in some places it is hardly even comprehensible.

After several interesting musings on other aspects of Lincoln's career, Wilson, at the end of the essay, returns to the theme of premonition by discussing Lincoln's famous White House dreams, that is, not his aspirations but the things which passed through Lincoln's head while asleep.

The night before Lincoln was murdered, he dreamed again of the ship approaching its dark destination. He had foreseen and accepted his doom; he knew it was part of the drama. He had in some sense imagined this drama himself — had even prefigured Booth and the aspect he would wear for Booth when the latter would leap down from the Presidential box crying, "*Sic semper tyrannis!*" Had he not once told Herndon that Brutus was created to murder Caesar and Caesar to be murdered by Brutus? And in that speech made so long before to the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield, he had issued his equivocal warning against the ambitious leader, describing this figure with a fire that seemed to derive as much from admiration as from apprehension — that leader who would certainly arise among them and "seek the gratification of [his] ruling passion," that "towering genius" who would "burn for distinction, and, if possible . . . have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves or enslaving freemen."

Once again, the charitable reader will allow some dramatic license to Wilson, though it is hard to imagine the old lawyer of Illinois' Eighth Judicial Circuit having any serious premonitions of his own death without writing a last will and testament (which, of course, Lincoln did not do). Finally, Wilson brings the curtain down with this stunning last line: "He must have suffered far more than he ever expressed from the agonies and griefs of the war, and it was morally and dramatically inevitable that this prophet who had crushed opposition and sent thousands of men to their deaths should finally attest his good faith by laying down his own life with theirs."

Bravo! the reader wants to shout, but as the lights come up and he walks away from this drama, it occurs to the reader once again that something slippery has happened on Wilson's stage. In the end, the "prophet" is the genius "who had crushed opposition and sent thousands of men to their deaths." But in the Lyceum address Lincoln had prophesied that a towering genius might arise who could satisfy ambition only by "emancipating slaves, or enslaving freemen." In fact, these are the only words that caused this passage from Lincoln's speech to catch so much later attention. Had he not, as a 29-year-old frontier legislator, mentioned emancipation in this speech, 25 years before accomplishing it himself as President of the United States, not much notice would have been taken of this part of the Lyceum speech. So, why did Edmund Wilson not bring down the curtain on his essay by saying, "it was morally and dramatically inevitable that this prophet who had

emancipated the slaves should finally attest his good faith by laying down his own life with theirs"? What Wilson did was unfair to Lincoln even by the terms of Wilson's own essay, but he did it for a reason — one which has not been called sufficiently to our attention heretofore. One might almost say that Wilson had a "hidden agenda" here. But, before examining Wilson's reasons for so depicting Lincoln, it is necessary to describe and explain the extraordinary fame enjoyed by Wilson's essay.

A landmark of its fame — and a good hunch would say a principal cause of its fame as well — was the prominence given the Lyceum speech and Wilson's interpretation of it in Harry V. Jaffa's *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, a book first published in 1959. There were more references in Jaffa's index to the Lyceum speech than to any other Lincoln utterance outside the speeches given in the debates themselves (there are, for example, over twice as many index entries for the early speech as for the Gettysburg Address). In fact, Jaffa devoted a full 50 pages of his 409 pages of text — well over ten percent of the book — to the Lyceum speech and the issues suggested by it. Although he disagreed with Wilson in some particulars, he did not in regard to the speech's proof of Lincoln's "conscious dedication to preparation for the crisis with which he one day grappled on so vast a scale." This, Jaffa goes on to say,

may disturb the image of the folklore Lincoln, the hero who resembles Everyman, fashioned from the clay of the common people, sharing their joys and sorrows, yet able to turn from the concerns of everyday life to discharge, with deeper wisdom, duties heretofore regarded as the province of kings and potentates. This is the Lincoln who is supposed to have written the Gettysburg Address on the back of an envelope as he rode from Washington. Yet a careful reading of the earlier deliverance will show that the ideas crystallized in 1863, in prose not unworthy of the greatest master of our language, had been pondered and matured full twenty-five years before.

The folklore Lincoln described here by Jaffa is precisely the enemy of Wilson's essay: it is Carl Sandburg's Lincoln. "There are," Wilson wrote, "moments when one is tempted to feel that the cruellest thing that has happened to Lincoln since he was shot by Booth has been to fall into the hands of Carl Sandburg." Wilson adds in telltale language: "It [Sandburg's biography of Lincoln] would . . . be more easily acceptable as a repository of Lincoln folk-lore if the compiler had not gone so far in contributing to this folk-lore himself. . . . Sandburg is incapable of doing justice to the tautness and hard distinction that we find when, disregarding legends, we attack Lincoln's writings in bulk. These writings do not give the impression of a folksy and jocular countryman swapping yarns at the village store or making his way to the White House by uncertain and awkward steps or presiding like a father, with a tear in his eye, over the tragedy of the Civil War."

Whatever his exact conclusions about the nature of Lincoln's political thought, Jaffa has granted Wilson a lot of ground. And he has given the greatest acknowledgment of the force of Wilson's argument by the sheer amount of space devoted in his book to his own analysis of the Lyceum address.

Eventually, others would make the Lyceum speech even more important, for one key ingredient to its future fame was missing in Professor Jaffa: a wide-eyed belief in psychoanalysis and in its usefulness when applied to dead men.

George B. Forgie's well-received *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age*, published in 1979, included an entire chapter on "Lincoln at the Lyceum: The Problem of Ambition in the Post-Heroic Age." In it the author attempted to explain the phenomenon of "projection" that Edmund Wilson had identified. Forgie contended that Lincoln's Lyceum address "probably proceeded from an intense self-consciousness about the progress of his own career." Characterizing Lincoln in the 1830s and 1840s as a bright young man whose early success was temporarily stymied, Forgie found illumination of Lincoln's psychological plight in the "Nobel Prize complex." This psychological theory attributes fairly deep depression to those who are conscious of their superior abilities, aim high, but fail in their early middle

age to attain the highest rewards. Thus the Lyceum speech "reflected . . . his personal problem with ambition." Lincoln needed the reassurance of a fantasy that he would some day slay the ambitious genius-tyrant who would otherwise destroy the work of the founding fathers. Then, one day, Lincoln found that enemy — or created him — in Stephen A. Douglas. Lincoln's "charges against Douglas accorded precisely with the dangers predicted in the Lyceum speech." He fit Lincoln's long-nurtured psychological needs so precisely that Lincoln made of Douglas a melodramatic villain.

Dwight G. Anderson followed Wilson's lead in a more literal-minded fashion. In *Abraham Lincoln: The Quest for Immortality*, published in 1982, Anderson also devoted his primary attention to solving the puzzle of the Lyceum speech as interpreted by Wilson. Reduced to its essentials, Anderson's argument went this way. Inspired by reading about George Washington in his early youth, Lincoln, as a member of Congress in the late 1840s, refused to tell a lie about the Mexican War and opposed it out of conscience. His "reward" proved to be political oblivion. Enraptured by this, Lincoln decided to reject Washington by wrecking the Union the father had created. Lincoln became, in Anderson's words, "demonic," a "Robespierre," a man who "acted from motives of revenge," and "a tyrant who would preside over the destruction of the Constitution in order to gratify his own ambition."

Anderson seems most literally in Wilson's tradition, though all the recent psychohistorians are heavily indebted to Wilson, because Anderson's Lincoln is like the Lincoln pictured at the end of Wilson's essay, crushing opposition and sending men to their deaths. In other words, Anderson depicts a genuine tyrant.

In truth, Wilson did not quite do that in his essay, not fully. He was to do it elsewhere, after 1954 and the publication of "Abraham Lincoln: The Union as Religious Mysticism." Wilson's "agenda" was as yet hidden from view at that early date, but, as he was to admit later, Wilson had been evading paying his income taxes for the better part of a decade by the time the Lincoln article appeared in a 1954 book of Wilson's essays. When in 1955, the famous critic told a lawyer that he had filed no income tax returns since 1946, he became aware of the severe penalties for such evasion. The state seemed to reach out to crush this naively impractical scribbler (as Wilson at times depicts himself in *The Cold War and the Income Tax: A Protest*, his 1963 explanation of his fraud). He found "the despotic IRS system" intolerable in a land of once free men, and the humiliation and limitation of freedom he suffered — including house arrest and being fingerprinted — caused him to regard the government in new ways.

By the time he got around to writing the introduction to the book which would make his Lincoln essay famous — *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War*, published by Oxford University Press in 1962 — Wilson was able to see precisely what kind of tyrant Lincoln became. The famous introduction to *Patriotic Gore* compared Lincoln to Bismarck and Lenin.

Each established a strong central government over hitherto loosely coordinated peoples. Lincoln kept the Union together by subordinating the South to the North; Bismarck imposed on the German states the cohesive hegemony of Prussia; Lenin . . . began the work of binding Russia, with its innumerable ethnic groups scattered through immense spaces, in a tight bureaucratic net. . . .

Each of these men, through the pressure of the power which he found himself exercising, became an uncompromising dictator, and each was succeeded by agencies which continued to exercise this power and to manipulate the peoples he had been unifying in a stupid, despotic and unscrupulous fashion, so that all the bad potentialities of the policies he had initiated were realized, after his removal, in the most undesirable way. . . . We Americans have not yet had to suffer from the worst of the calamities that have followed on the dictatorships in Germany and Russia, but we have been going for a long time now quite steadily in the same direction.

(To be continued)

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by Ruth E. Cook

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Book, paper, 9" x 6", 96 (8) pp., illus. Yearly membership dues include a subscription to this publication. Requests for information should be directed to Michael J. Devine, Secretary, Abraham Lincoln Assoc., Old State Capitol, Springfield, IL 62706.

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Pamphlet, paper, 11" x 8 1/2", 9 pp., illus. This series of booklets includes, The Great Seal of the United States, Washington's Inaugural Address of 1789, and the Bill of Rights, available as a set, price, \$10.00, from the National Archives Trust Fund, Washington, DC 20408.

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The Frontier/Years of/Abe Lincoln/In the Words of/His Friends and/Family/Richard Kigel/(Device)/Walker and Company/New York/[Copyright 1986 by Richard Kigel]

Book, cloth, 9 1/4" x 6 1/4", 227 pp., price, \$15.95. Requests should be directed to Walker and Company, 720 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10019.

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The Original and Three Great Historical Persons: Shakespeare, Lincoln, and Pestalozzi . . ./Laying Stress on Seeking for Pestalozzi's works./Dr. Mitsuo Kodama/At Gleeson Library Associates./Annual Meeting. University of San Francisco,/May 4, 1986/(Cover title)

Pamphlet, paper, 10" x 7 1/8", 16 pp. Limited to five hundred copies printed by Mitsuo Kodama, President of Meisei University, Tokyo, Japan.

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SCHWARTZ, THOMAS F. 1986-15

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