



# Lincoln Lore

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## “THIS EXPRESSES MY IDEA OF DEMOCRACY”: A REVIEW OF *LINCOLN ON DEMOCRACY*

by Matthew Noah Vosmeier

During the Lincoln presidency, Noah Brooks, a journalist for the *Sacramento Daily Union* and friend of the Lincolns, wrote about the daily activities of the White House, and observed that:

Lincoln always composed slowly, and he often wrote and rewrote his more elaborate productions several times. I happened to be with him often while he was composing his message to Congress, which was sent in while Sherman was on his march through Georgia. . . . The President's message was first written with pencil on stiff sheets of white pasteboard, or boxboard, a good supply of which he kept by him. These sheets, five or six inches wide, could be laid on the writer's knee, as he sat comfortably in his armchair, in his favorite position, with his legs crossed.<sup>1</sup>

As Brooks observed him, Lincoln was preparing the Annual Message to Congress of December 6, 1864. However easily his prose came to him, Lincoln, as Harold Holzer notes, “meticulously researched” speeches for fear of saying “foolish things,” and he honed a “gift for precise, powerful writing” (p. xxxii). His work paid off, for the final products of Lincoln's writing are often appreciated outside of their immediate contexts; for their ideas as well as for their style — their simplicity, efficiency of language, logic, and clarity. Three months later, for example, Lincoln would deliver his Second Inaugural Address, which the editors of *Lincoln on Democracy* consider “one of Lincoln's most polished, sophisticated efforts, perhaps the greatest of all his speeches” (p. 340). Noting that “all knew that this interest [slavery] was, somehow, the cause of the war,” Lincoln articulated in simple and elegant language his understanding of the events of 1861: “Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would *make* war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would *accept* war rather than let it perish. And the war came” (p. 341).

Brooks' description of the President is appealing, because it enables us to imagine Lincoln as he worked. We can see Lincoln sitting comfortably, concen-

trating, and carefully crafting his address. In this particular message, Lincoln encouraged Congress to pass his “proposed amendment of the Constitution abolishing slavery throughout the United States,” which the House of Representatives had earlier rejected. To convince the members of Congress, Lincoln reminded them that in the national canvass held one month before, the voters had elected a new Congress, which Lincoln warned, “will pass the measure if this [Congress] does not.” This message to Congress, which the *New York Tribune* called “straightforward and business-like,” is perhaps not the most memorable of Lincoln's addresses, but it does indicate Lincoln's reliance on the “voice of the people”:

It is not claimed that the election has imposed a duty on members to change their views or their votes, any further than, as an additional element to be considered, their judgment may be affected by it. It is the voice of the people now, for the first time, heard upon the question [of the abolition of slavery] (p. 336).

Lincoln's eloquence and firm commitment to liberty and popular government are evident in *Lincoln on Democracy*, a work published in 1990 by Harper Collins, and edited and introduced by Governor Mario M. Cuomo and Harold Holzer, with an afterword by Frank J. Williams. This is an anthology of Lincoln's writings dating from 1832 to 1865, divided into seven chronological sections. Lincoln's ideas about liberty and democracy are presented from the time he was a young Whig advocating internal improvements, to senatorial candidate warning against the extension of slavery, to Republican speaker expounding the advantages of a system of free labor “*under which laborers CAN strike when they want to*” (p. 176), and finally to President proclaiming emancipation and preserving the Union. In addition, each period of Lincoln's life is introduced with an essay by one of seven Lincoln scholars: Gabor S. Boritt, William E. Gienapp, Charles B. Strozier,



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 1. A photograph of Abraham Lincoln taken on February 9, 1864, by Anthony Berger of Brady's Gallery in Washington.

Richard Nelson Current, James M. McPherson, Mark E. Neely, Jr., and Hans L. Trefousse. These historians place Lincoln in historical context, describing his developing ideas on economic and political liberty, views that called for all to have "an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life" (p. 223).

That Lincoln's ideas, written about nineteenth-century America, still have relevance in the late twentieth century, is shown by the story of the origins of this book. In the Preface, Governor Cuomo explains how a visiting group of Polish educators inquired of him whose writings would exemplify popular government and provide guidance for their emerging eastern European democracy. He suggested the works of Abraham Lincoln, but then discovered that no single published collection existed, either in Polish or in English, that specifically concerned Lincoln's ideas on liberty and popular government. To keep his promise to the teachers, Governor Cuomo and a gathering of Lincoln historians began the task of compiling this collection, which has now also appeared in Polish as *Lincoln O Demokracji*, and which attempts to connect the Polish "struggle for freedom with our historic respect for liberty and democracy" (p. xxvii).

For the most part, these texts are found, sometimes as part of longer texts, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, the eight-volume set edited by Roy P. Basler and others and published by the Abraham Lincoln Association, the purpose of which is to have Lincoln's writings comprehensively gathered. Governor Cuomo notes, however, that the index to *The Collected Works* does not include the word "democracy," and so, in selecting and organizing the texts for *Lincoln on Democracy* around this theme, the editors have made Lincoln's thoughts about self-government readily accessible. As well, readers can gain further insight into Lincoln's ideas by viewing the texts in relation to each other.

Thus, *Lincoln on Democracy* is more than a reference work, or compilation of writings. In fact, a strength of the book is that the selected texts are not narrowly limited to the idea of "democracy" as "popular government," but rather are intended to show Lincoln's ideas in general about life and work in the American republic; that somehow political liberty and self-government ought to go hand-in-hand with equality and advancement in a country that could offer seemingly unlimited economic opportunities to ordinary people. For example, in one of Lincoln's best-known statements, probably dating from 1858, Lincoln defines democracy in terms of social relationships: "As I would not be a *slave*, so I would not be a *master*. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy" (p. 121). In a speech two years later, in New Haven, Connecticut, Lincoln again looked at the North's free-labor system, and said rather directly that "When one starts poor, as most do in the race of life, free society is such that he knows he can better his condition" (p. 176). Other texts bear less directly on this idea, and show how Lincoln applied it in his personal life. In a letter to John D. Johnston in December 1848, Lincoln implies that the opportunity to advance should not be rejected, and exhorts his step-brother to work to sustain himself:

You are not *lazy*, and still you *are* an *idler*. I doubt whether since I saw you, you have done a good whole day's work, in any one day. . .

You are now in need of some ready money; and what I propose is, that you shall go to work, "tooth and nails" for somebody who will give you money [for] it. . . Now if you will do this, you will soon be out of debt, and what is better, you will have a habit that will keep you from getting in debt again. . . (pp. 41-42).

Similarly, *Lincoln on Democracy* includes items such as Lincoln's "Notes for a Law Lecture," which are only peripherally related to "democracy," but tell something of Lincoln's notions about work. In these notes, probably written in 1850, Lincoln encourages prospective lawyers to work diligently, to be honest, and to discourage litigation, for "there will still be business enough" (pp. 45-46).

In addition to the editors' presenting these Lincoln texts, they have strengthened *Lincoln on Democracy* by organizing it chronologically, rather than thematically, for, taken as a whole, it becomes something of an intellectual biography. In the introduction, Harold Holzer points out that Lincoln "was a politician, not a philosopher," but that "running like a silver thread through the fabric of his public utterances and private letters

was the core sentiment that . . . democracy was dear to him" (p. xxxiv). Though Lincoln admired and worked for democracy, he never wrote down any comprehensive philosophy. He advocated the progressive fulfillment of the ideals of equality embodied in the Declaration of Independence, but did not believe that it was possible to bring about those ideals immediately, or as Gabor Boritt puts it, "he learned to practice the art of the possible" (p. 7). Because of this book's organization, then, readers can see how Lincoln responded to questions and crises of liberty and democracy over time. Too, readers can see that, as he developed his understanding of the workings of a democracy, he articulated that understanding in increasingly confident and compelling ways.

For example, Lincoln's early writings remind us that he began his political career as an inexperienced twenty-three-year-old. After he entered the active and accessible political world of Jacksonian America, Lincoln would learn that reliance on the democratic system required him not only to "practice the art of the possible," but also learn to accept personal disappointment. Addressing the people of Sangamon County, Illinois, in 1832, Lincoln awkwardly announced his candidacy to the state general assembly:

Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition. Whether it be true or not, I can say for one that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed by my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition, is yet to be developed. . . My case is thrown exclusively upon the independent voters of this county, and if elected they will have conferred a favor upon me, for which I will be unremitting in my labors to compensate. But if the good people in their wisdom shall see fit to keep me in the background, I have been too familiar with disappointments to be very much chagrined. Your friend and fellow-citizen, A. LINCOLN. (p. 10).

With this unsure appeal to the electorate, Lincoln began a political career that would end thirty-three years later, after his reelection to the presidency, an event he presumably took as a gratifying sign of the people's esteem. Although defeated in his first election, Lincoln remembered it as an important moment in his life. When he wrote his 1860 campaign "Autobiography," he recalled that the 1832 election was "the only time I have been beaten by the people" (p. xlvi). In his final campaign, in 1864, Lincoln's confidence wavered, he once concluded that "it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected." Yet he knew that if the causes of Constitution and Union were to be credible, the political system would need to operate. He therefore resigned himself "to so co-operate with the President elect, as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such ground that he can not possibly save it afterwards" (p. 329).

Lincoln had suffered defeats during his political career, as in the race for the United States Senate in 1858, but then it was the state legislature that chose Stephen A. Douglas, and not the popular vote of the people. Nevertheless, that election was important, both for Lincoln's reputation, and for the development of his political ideas. Though saddened by the loss, Lincoln himself recognized that his debates with Douglas had given "me a hearing on the great durable questions of the age," and even if he were forgotten, he had "made some marks which will tell for the cause of liberty long after I am gone" (p. 104). More than that, the debates of 1858 started Lincoln toward national prominence, giving him a reputation for public speaking, for effectively arguing Republican ideas, and for his understanding of American democracy.

Though Lincoln's understanding of democracy was grounded in the ideals of 1776, it developed in an antebellum America that had a lively political culture, and that experienced both the problems and rewards of a growing population and expanding economy. Lincoln became a Whig, and his early writings reflect a concern for his party's economic principles. Stylistically, they tend to include more of the "decorated oratory" and less of the "lean, muscular eloquence" of his later writings (to use the adjectives Don E. Fehrenbacher applied to Lincoln's famous Young Men's Lyceum Address of 1838).

In addition to Lincoln's defenses of Whig economic principles, the editors have included several documents regarding Lincoln's

views concerning "the right to rise up," in the sense of political or social revolution (p. 35). Particularly interesting are those which discuss an American view of democratic revolutions in Europe, such as those of 1848. In 1852, when the Hungarian freedom fighter Lajos Kossuth visited America, a meeting in Springfield, at which Lincoln spoke, adopted a resolution voicing support for Kossuth, as well as for "the patriotic efforts of the Irish, the Germans and the French, who have unsuccessfully fought to establish in their several governments the supremacy of the people" (p. 50).

*Lincoln on Democracy*, too, includes several of Lincoln's early thoughts about slavery. Although Lincoln had spoken against slavery in the Illinois General Assembly as early as 1837, when he sponsored a resolution stating that "the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy," he developed one of his "most persuasive early arguments" against slavery's extension during the controversy over Texas annexation:

It is possibly true, to some extent, that with annexation, some slaves may be sent to Texas and continued in slavery, that otherwise may have been liberated. To whatever extent this may be true, I think annexation an evil. I hold it to be a paramount duty of us in the free states, due to the Union of the states, and perhaps to liberty itself (paradox though it may seem) to let the slavery of the other states alone; while, on the other hand, I hold it equally clear, that we should never knowingly lend ourselves directly or indirectly, to prevent that slavery from dying a natural death — (pp. 14, 30-31).

Lincoln's best-known expressions concerning democracy and liberty come from the period after his rise to leadership in the Republican Party, and to the presidency. Retiring from Congress in 1849, with the deepening crises of the 1850s, Lincoln reentered politics to speak against the extension of slavery, and in the process of giving speeches, he was able to test, elaborate, and polish

arguments that he found effective. The editors of *Lincoln on Democracy* have included texts from several speeches that were delivered in the Lincoln-Douglas debates, as well as the Cooper Union Address of 1860, which introduced him to eastern Republicans. Readers will also find those works which have made Lincoln's words famous, such as the Emancipation Proclamation, and perhaps the two most famous speeches of the Civil War, known as much for their beauty as for the ideals, the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address.

Yet, included, too, are many lesser-known pieces, including letters to friends and political leaders, fragments from public addresses, speeches from his tour in 1860, and responses to White House serenades. These, too, are appropriately chosen, providing insights into Lincoln's thoughts, as well as his responses to questions of liberty and democracy, and government policy in wartime, that are perhaps not found in the other, better-known writings.

Although most of these texts have been available to Lincoln students for many years, by choosing them broadly around this theme, and from the course of Lincoln's political life, the editors of *Lincoln on Democracy* have provided a useful and engaging collection of Lincoln's beliefs about liberty and self-government, for American students, as well as for future Polish students of Lincoln.

#### FOOTNOTE

1. Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia*, pp. 37-38; David C. Mearns, *The Lincoln Papers: The Story of the Collection with Selections to July 4, 1861*, 2 vols. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1948), 1:41.



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 2. This painting, by Dean Cornwell, shows Lincoln in 1863 at work in his study at the White House.

**GETTYSBURG CIVIL WAR INSTITUTE:  
WHY THE SOUTH LOST THE CIVIL WAR  
SCHEDULE OF EVENTS, JUNE 23-29, 1991**

**SUNDAY, JUNE 23**

1:00-10:00 P.M. Registration and Reception

**MONDAY, JUNE 24**

9:30 A.M. Jim McPherson, "Why Did the Confederacy Lose?"

1:30 P.M. Gary Gallagher, "Why? Generals"

3:45 P.M. Ellen Abrahamson, "Wilderness: Then & Now"

8:00 P.M. Andy Trudeau, "Bloody Road South: the Wilderness"

**TUESDAY, JUNE 25**

	<b>WILDERNESS</b>	OR	<b>BALL'S BLUFF</b>
6:30 A.M.	Departure: Tour of the Wilderness with Wil Greene and Don Pfanz; supported by Andy Trudeau, Warren Wilkinson, and Wally Heimbach	8:30 A.M.	Byron Farwell, "Ball's Bluff"
		10:00 A.M.	Departure
		11:00 A.M.-3:00 P.M.	Tour of Ball's Bluff with John Divine and Ed Raus
6:00 P.M.	Dinner	6:00 P.M.	Dinner
7:00 P.M.	Wil Green, "APCWS: An Update"; Lincoln Prize Lecture: Warren Wilkinson, "The 57th Massachusetts Volunteers at the Wilderness: Stories of Soldiers Who Were There"	8:30 P.M.	Bill Ridinger, "The Boys Who Fought at Home: Gettysburg Men Who Helped Save Little Round Top"

**WEDNESDAY, JUNE 26**

9:30 A.M. Bob Engs, "Why? Black Americans"

1:30 P.M. Gettysburg Tours:  
Bill Hanna, "Gettysburg"  
Bill Ridinger, "The Meade-Sickles Controversy"  
Scott Hartwig, "Problems of Command: Gettysburg, Second Day"  
Paul Shevchuk, "Little Round Top"  
Roy Frampton, "The Soldiers National Cemetery"

8:00 P.M. Repeat of Wilkinson and Ridinger lectures from Tuesday (for those who were on the "other" tour)

**THURSDAY, JUNE 27**

8:00 A.M. Reid Mitchell, "Why? Common Soldiers"

10:00 A.M. All day trip to: U.S. Army War College with Col. Rick Eiserman **OR**  
Gettysburg Battlefield with Ed Bearss (first come, first served)

8:00 P.M. Harold Holzer, "The Lincoln Family"

**FRIDAY, JUNE 28**

9:30 A.M. Archer Jones, "Why? Strategy"

1:30 P.M. Lincoln Prize Laureate Lecture: Ken Burns

6:00 P.M. Banquet

*For information, write the Gettysburg Civil War Institute,  
Campus Box 435, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania 17325.*