

Friends of the Lincoln Collection Essay:

157 years ago, entrenched in a Civil War that threatened the very foundation of American democracy, the United States proved to the world the power of its republic as the country effectively conducted an election despite a war ravaged between its own. 157 years later, plagued by a global pandemic that has taken over 350,000 American lives, halted the economy to a stop and incited societal division like never before, the United States has since been faced with an election not unlike that of 1864. It is these parallels between the national landscape of 1864 and today that cannot be overlooked—that serve as both a solutions manual for our leaders of today as well as a cautionary tale for the fate of America that could be if the American people—both leaders and citizens alike—allow polarization to suffocate the heart and lungs of democracy.

Up for re-election in 1864, President Abraham Lincoln faced a feat many considered unattainable: a second term as commander-in-chief. With the Civil War raging on, President Lincoln was, in the eyes of many, held responsible for the over 65,000 Union soldiers killed in the summer of 1864 alone. Not to mention that his Democratic opponent, General George McClellan, condemned the controversial Emancipation Proclamation and openly discussed the possibility of peace once again with the South.

It is at this point in history that one must pause; that one must allow themselves to compare that of the past with that of the present....Up for re-election in 2020, President Donald Trump faced the similar feat of re-election with the lives of 350,000 Americans lost to COVID-19 pinned to his own administration....And this is where history should have repeated itself. Where our current leaders should have modelled those of our past.

“We can not have free government without elections,” President Lincoln voiced on the topic of the 1864 election. “And if the rebellion could force us to forego, or postpone a national election it might fairly to the have conquered and ruined us.” In dissecting this quote, one must contextualize the reality of Lincoln’s situation. Despite the almost certain loss of his presidency, President Lincoln considered the democratic process of voting paramount to the vitality of American democracy; *so, President Lincoln made it happen.*

With thousands of Union soldiers away from their places of residence and therefore physically unable to vote, many northern states passed new laws allowing soldiers to cast absentee ballots from the camps they were stationed at. From 1862 to 1865, 20 Union states allowed deployed soldiers to vote from the military camps at which they were stationed, effectively changing previous laws requiring in-person voting. Despite the obvious logic behind such a modification which simply strived for the political participation of all eligible voters—as with mail-in voting during the 2020 election—the issue quickly became polarized. Democrats, wary of substantial soldier

support for Lincoln, sought to disenfranchise thousands of military members from voting, complaining of Republican interference and accusing Republicans of trying to steal the vote.

Sound familiar?

In the age of COVID-19, voter disenfranchisement has risen to a new extreme despite the intrinsically democratic, jubilantly patriotic act that voting is. In a world forced to adapt to the new-normal that is a global health crisis, America's voting process undoubtedly should do the same. Despite the health risk posed to the elderly and those suffering with underlying health conditions, politicians have repeatedly undermined the integrity of mail-in ballots—the very ballots keeping the high risk out of harm's way. According to the CDC, Latino and Black Americans have been three times as likely to become infected with COVID-19 as their white neighbors with Black and Latino people nearly twice as likely to die from the novel coronavirus as white people. With these statistics in mind, it becomes clear that America owed it to its minorities to adapt its in-person voting to accommodate those more at risk. However simple of a notion, it reigns true that the greater the vote, the louder the voice of America is heard. As Jefferson once put it, “We do not have government by the majority. We have government by the majority who participate.” In allowing widespread mail-in ballots during the 2020 election, America empowered participation like never before—an astonishing 66.2% voter turnout, to be exact. The highest turnout in over *120 years*. No politician—no American claiming to bleed red, white, and blue—can argue with a process that enabled more citizens to safely exercise their right to vote. And yet that is exactly what the headlines read with claims of voter fraud, despite substantial evidence, spreading like wildlife in American rhetoric. In a 2017 study by the Brennan Center for Justice, voting fraud accounted for less than 0.0009% of all votes cast. *Statistically insignificant*. One cannot argue that our nation's current president feared the largely democratic, mail-in vote and therefore took to undermine its integrity.

It is precisely at this point in our nation's current lieu of events that we, most unfortunately, deviate from history.

“This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probably that this Administration will not be re-elected,” Lincoln penned in a memorandum signed by his administration in August of 1864. “Then it will be my duty to so cooperate with the Government 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 cannot possibly save it afterwards,” Lincoln finishes. Even staring dead into the eyes of defeat, Lincoln put the endurance of American democracy before his own ego penning the words of leadership, humility and true patriotism. Words we should have heard from our current president long before November 3rd. Words we are only just now hearing after an over 3-month long fight for the integrity of America's free and fair elections, culminated by an insurrection at the nation's capital.

America not only survived a Civil War, but conclusively conducted a national election its wake—an election that served as a testament to the vitality of American democracy. Both the parallels of today and 1864—an election in a time of national crisis and an adaption of the rules to maximize voter turnout—and the lack of parallels thereof—a leader who puts ego before democracy and the promise of a peaceful transition of power—leave the content of future American history books unknown.

One thing, however, Lincoln made certain, “America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.”

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