

*Abraham Lincoln:*  
*A Man for the Ages*

A blend of mirth and sadness, smiles and tears;

A quaint knight errant of the pioneers;

A homely hero, born of star and sod;

A Peasant Prince, a masterpiece of God.

Essay written by

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*On February 11, 1861,*

the most unpopular man ever elected President of the United States waited at the Springfield railroad station to say farewell to his friends. Although a drizzling rain was falling, more than a thousand friends and acquaintances gathered. Quietly, Abraham Lincoln spoke to them:

My friends, no one not in my situation can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place and the kindness of these people, I owe everything. Here I have lived for a quarter of a century and have passed from a young man to an old man. Here my children have been born, and one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when or whether I may ever return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that divine being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me, and remain with you, and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell.”

Four years and two months later, Abraham Lincoln returned to Springfield, but in body only – carried in a casket. On the Saturday following Good Friday, 1865, thousands of sermons had to be laid aside as of no use for that Easter Sunday. Clergymen who thought they were all set with appropriate messages for the special season suddenly found themselves unprepared. New sermons had to be written, for tragic news had just arrived: President Lincoln was dead.

In great stone cathedrals of the cities, in little cabin churches at country crossroads, in hospital chapels and navy ships, in outdoor army camp services, Easter Sunday sermons became memorials to the martyred President.

Leading newspapers and journals said that beyond any doubt there never had been a man on earth whose death had brought, in all countries, such quick, deep and genuine sorrow. The bullet fired by the crazed actor John Wilkes Booth had done more than pierce the skull of a human being. It had crushed the spirit of an entire nation which had looked to that murdered individual as its steady leader in an unsteady time.

One Richmond, Virginia, minister labeled Lincoln's assassination as "the most serious crime ever committed against the South." As his last heartbeat flickered at 7:00a.m., Saturday, April 15, 1865, there passed from the scene that so many needed him, one who has never been equaled as an example of the greatest and best in true Americanism. Secretary Stanton, standing and seeing Lincoln go by, said, "Now he belongs to the ages."

It is as a man for the ages, a man for his own age, for our age, and for all ages, that we listen to Lincoln today. And what are his credentials for that role? Carl Sandberg, his biographer, provided perhaps the best clue in his address to Congress in 1959 on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. He began:

Not often in the story of mankind does a man arrive on earth who is both steel and velvet, who is as hard as rock and as soft as drifting fog; who holds in his heart and mind the paradox of terrible storm and peace, unspeakable and perfect.

That is why Lincoln is a man for the ages, because the life of every age, ours included, is just that weird mixture of heartache and happiness of tension and conflict which Lincoln's life incarnated. But in his encounter with this weird mixture, which is life, Lincoln maintained that remarkable balance that made the tension tolerable and the conflict creative. The last best hope for some of us is that we might approximate that same balance for the living of our days.

To that end, let us listen to this man who set such a glorious example.

For one thing, we find in Lincoln a remarkable combination of uncompromising conviction and abounding compassion. Too many attractive people have no convictions they will not readily compromise. Too many persons with convictions carry about them a rigidity that makes them quite unattractive. Lincoln combined conviction and compassion.

His faithful law partner, Bill Herndon, testified to the first ingredient. "Mr. Lincoln," he wrote, "was not appreciated in this city (of Springfield), or rather the want of popularity here, rose out of two grounds: first, he did his own thinking, and second, he had the courage of his convictions and he boldly and fearlessly expressed them.

It did not take long for his political associates to discover this characteristic. He was a member of the Illinois legislature at the age of twenty-seven with a group of eight other legislators known as the "long nine" because all of them were over six feet tall and weighed more than two hundred pounds. Lincoln had been working on the passage of a bill to move the State Capital from Vandalia to Springfield. He was told that certain members of the legislature would vote for his bill if he would give his vote to a measure he had thus far opposed on principle. It was past midnight of the second night session when Lincoln, weary and worn from withstanding the constant political pressure upon him, rose to give his final answer:

You may burn my body to ashes and scatter them to the winds of heaven. You may drag my soul down to the regions of darkness and despair to be tormented forever, but will never get me to support a measure which I believe to be wrong, although by doing so I may accomplish that which I believe to be right."

Thus spoke the man of steel. Instead of being hard and cruel that same man had a compassion seldom encompassed in any one human frame. Listen to this passage from one of his love letters:

Whatever woman may cast her lot with mine, should any ever do so, it is my intention to do all in my power to make her happy and contented; and there is nothing I can imagine that would make me more unhappy than to fail

in the effort. I know I shall be much happier with you than the way I am, provided I saw no signs of discontent in you...

Most dramatically, this velvet tenderness was manifest in his military pardons. Thousands of appeals came to Lincoln from soldiers involved in military discipline. Each appeal was, as a rule, supported by a sheaf of letters from influential persons. One day a single sheet came before him having no supporting letters attached.

“What!” exclaimed the President, “has this man no friends?” “No, sir, not one,” said the adjutant.

Then said Lincoln, “I’ll be his friend.”

Naturally the President could not treat all the thirty thousand court martial cases he handled exactly alike. He pardoned as many as he could, dealing kindly with all. In one case Lincoln writes, “This life is too precious to be lost.” On another case he displayed his famous sense of humor when he wrote across the paper, “If this man had more than one life, I think a little hanging would do him good.” On another case he wrote, “We will not hang this young private -- it might scare him to death.” His humor pervaded all of his life.

Steel and velvet, strong conviction and vast compassion in an effective combination -  
- this is the first thing Lincoln speaks to us if we listen.

Just as remarkably, Lincoln combines two other ingredients that the superficial people of every age have urged to be incompatible: realism and idealism.

Perhaps we will never know how factual or fictional is the oft told story concerning Lincoln’s earliest repudiation of slavery. You know how it goes. As a young man, he stood with fellow pilots on a flat boat at New Orleans near a slave block, and he became disgusted with the crude manner of buying and selling of human beings as slaves, and he said, “Boys let’s get away from this. If I ever get a chance to hit that thing, I’ll hit it hard.”

Whether he said it or not, he did hit it hard. Primarily, however, Lincoln's was not a direct attack upon slavery as an institution, but the inevitable consequences of his relentless pursuit of freedom and fulfillment for human beings as individuals, a release of the vast future of the whole family of man – this was his consuming ideal. “To keep the jewel of liberty within,” as he put it. That was his dedication.

In Illinois he expressed that faith,

Most governments have been based practically on the denial of the equal rights of men. Ours began by affirming those rights. They said some men are too ignorant and vicious to share in government. Possibly so, said we, and by your system you always keep them ignorant and vicious. We propose to give all a chance. We expect the weak to grow stronger, the ignorant wiser, and all better and happier together. We made the experiment.

As far as Lincoln was concerned, the war between the States could be justified only on the grounds that it insured the successful continuance of that experiment. When Congress assembled July 4, 1861, with the war already three months old, he said:

This is essentially a people's contest. On the side of the Union, is a struggle for maintaining in the world that form and substance of government, whose leading object is to elevate the condition of men – to lift artificial weights from all shoulders – to clear the path of laudable pursuit for all and to afford all an unfettered start and a fair chance in the race of life.

Later at Gettysburg he was to add the eloquent postscript: that this Nation, under God, shall have a new birth of

freedom; and that the Government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.

But this lofty idealist was also a practical politician and realist. The rights he espoused throughout his life he was quite ready to claim for himself. He was no more willing to be shoved around by others than to shove others around. At age twenty-seven, as a candidate to succeed himself in the State Legislature, he clashed with George Forguer. Forguer was a lawyer who had switched from Whig to Democrat and had been rewarded with a political plum – the office of register of land at \$3,000 a year. He had subsequently built for himself an elegant frame house on which he had erected the first lightning rod ever seen in that part of Illinois, something so new and different that people came for miles to see. As Carl Sandberg tells the story, “After a speech in the courthouse by Lincoln, Forguer took the platform saying the young man who had just spoken was sailing too high and would have to be taken down, and he was sorry the task devolved on him. Then he made what was termed a “slasher-gaffer” speech. Lincoln stood with folded arms, stepped to the platform, made a quiet argument in reply, and then a stormy finish.

I desire to live, and I desire place and distinction; but I would rather die now than, like the gentleman, live to see the day I could change my politics for an office worth \$3,000 a year, and then feel compelled to erect a lightning rod to protect a guilty conscience from an offended God.”

With less humor, but even more force, Lincoln answered those who attacked, not him, but the liberties and Union he loved. Is it possible to be more blatantly realistic than he was in the simple opening of the “House Divided” speech?

If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge just what to do and how to do it.

Bucking a Congress that was clinging to outgrown traditions he said,

The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate for the stormy present. We must think anew; we must act anew; we must disentrall ourselves.

Justifying his massive and unprecedented seizure of power (perhaps more than other presidents in our history) by which he ignored Congress, Lincoln seemed to set aside

the Supreme Court and roughed up the Constitution in pursuit of the war. Lincoln wrote lines in a letter to A.B. Hodges that perfectly portrayed the idealist-realist combination:

My oath to preserve the Constitution, imposed upon me by the duty of preserving by every dispensable means that government, that Nation, of which that Constitution was the organic law. Was it possible to lose the Nation and yet preserve the Constitution?

And then he answers his own question:

By general law, life and limb must be protected; yet often a limb is amputated to save a life, but a life is never wisely given to save a limb. I felt that measures otherwise unconstitutional might become lawful by becoming indispensable to the preservation of the Constitution through the preservation of the Nation.

This unprecedented usurpation of power proved safe enough in the person of Abraham Lincoln, for he combined, in unbelievable effective balance, two other ingredients superficially judged incompatible: a sincere sense of humility with an equally rugged sense of destiny.

Running for his first office he said: "It is possible I have already been more presuming than becomes me." Asked about his ambition he replied,

I have no other ambition so great as that of being Truly esteemed by my fellowmen, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. I was born and ever remain in the most humble walks of life. I have no wealthy or popular relations to recommend me. 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."

Before he was nominated for the presidency, he wrote a friend, "I must, in candor, say I do not think myself fit for the presidency."

After he was elected, he told an audience in Rochester, "I am not vain enough to believe that you are here from any wish to see me as an individual, but because I am, for the time being, a representative of the American people."

In his message to Congress in December, 1862, he wrote,

I do not forget that some of you are my seniors,  
nor that many of you have more experience than  
I in the conduct of public affairs, yet I trust that in  
view of the great responsibility resting upon me,  
you will perceive no want of respect to yourselves,  
in any undue earnestness I may seem to display.

From this “undue earnestness” some of his colleagues were painfully to learn their serious mistake as interpreting this man’s humility as an indication of weakness. Secretary Seward was one of a large group of individuals who, in the early days, were convinced that a man so willing to admit his limitations of learning and experience must be a man who could be easily bent any way they wanted to bend him. Had they conferred with Billy Herndon, Lincoln’s law partner, he would have told them otherwise. He once wrote to one of them,

When on justice, right, liberty, government and  
Constitution, union, humanity, then you may all stand  
aside; he will rule then and no man or set of men can  
move him. This is Lincoln and you mark what I say. You and  
I must keep the people right; God will keep Lincoln right.

Lincoln wanted God to do just that. At the time of his first nomination, Lincoln placed his trust in God: “I know that His hand is in it. If He has a place and work for me, and I think He has, I believe I am ready.” This sense of being under order to the Almighty Lincoln carried with him throughout his entire administration. He set an example of a man with a profound religious sense of responsibility and faith.

The ultimate dimension of his sense of involvement with some plan of Providence can be measured best of all, perhaps, by his famous warning to the Congress of his day. If you listen carefully, you will hear words that are just as relevant to you and to me:

Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history. We will be  
remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance  
or insignificance can spare one or another of us. The fiery  
trial through which we pass will light us down in honor  
or dishonor to the latest generation.

But now, if you would hear, in summary fashion, this same complex of seeming contradiction all wrapped up in one person -- conviction and compassion, idealism and realism, humility and destiny – then listen once more in closing to those famous last words of his second inaugural:

Fondly do we hope. Fervently do we pray that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet if God wills that it continue, unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still must it be said: the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right: let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and orphans; to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

Steel and velvet, indeed, hard as rock and soft as drifting fog – holding in his mind and heart the paradox of terrible storm and peace unspeakable and perfect. Such were the qualities that turned the most unpopular man ever elected President of the United States into a Man for the Ages – our age and all ages.