



LINCOLN PRIZE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

In 1876, a bizarre gaggle of small-time hoodlums attempted to plunder the elaborate tomb the National Lincoln Monument Association had built for Abraham Lincoln's body in Springfield's Oak Ridge Cemetery. The plot failed. The comic-opera burglars got only so far as tugging the coffin out its marble sarcophagus before the Secret Service, who had been tipped off to the plot, closed in. But the custodian of the Tomb, J.C. Power, decided to take no more chances. Power had the coffin moved into a storage room in the Tomb, and later buried the coffin at another safe spot within the Tomb's precincts. Visitors who streamed into the Tomb past the repaired (but vacant) sarcophagus thereafter were assured by an earnestly deceitful Power that, no, Lincoln's body was quite safe, no, it had not been removed from the Tomb, and no, it had not been lost. Only in 1887, when the state of Illinois took over guardianship of the Tomb, did Power agree to exhume the coffin and bury it in a brick vault underneath the floor where the mockingly-empty sarcophagus still stood. But in 1899, settling and cracking in the vault forced yet another exhumation. Suspicious Springfielders demanded that Lincoln be reburied in a special vault in the heart of town (where, presumably, they could be sure of where he was). But the Lincoln family demurred, and this time, Lincoln was reburied in the Tomb in a steel and concrete cage under a simple marble monument: ABRAHAM LINCOLN, 1809-1865. The missing Lincoln was now securely fixed. Or was he? The rumors of Lincoln's disappearance have a certain metaphorical attraction for Lincoln biographers. And given the low state of biography's reputation as a genre, the metaphor has acquired an increasingly darkened aspect. Stanley Fish, occupying the high ground of literary critic, assured us only recently that biography is little more than "a collection

of random incidents"; biographers "can only lie, can only substitute their own story for the story of the announced subject." Just as deconstructed texts are said to have no author, deconstructed biographers stand exposed as having no subjects, except perhaps the biographers themselves, in the unfortunate style of Edmund Morris.

Lincoln was such an elusive, deliberately reticent man, that Lincoln biography has many moments which would seem to provide all the demonstration Fish could need. In May, 1865 (after Lincoln's body had arrived in Springfield for its first, temporary burial), John Locke Scripps wrote to William Herndon:
"Not eloquence, nor logic, nor grasp of thought - nor statesmanship, nor power of command, nor courage - not any or all of these have made him what he is - but these, in the degree in which he possessed them, conjoined to those certain qualities composed in the term character, have given him his fame - have made him for all time to come the great American Man."

It scarcely occurred to Scripps to mention what Lincoln was or did or looked like, the way he walked, the twang with which he spoke. Lincoln was already well on his way to becoming a symbol, an image. Nor was Scripps the only one of Lincoln's contemporaries to find that, so to speak, the body was gone. In 1866, Leonard Swett wrote Herndon, "I would like to have you write me what the skeleton was with Lincoln. What gave him that peculiar melancholy? What cancer had he inside? You may send it by express, and as soon as I read it, I will express it back to you. I always thought there was something but never knew what." But it was too late even then. Not even Herndon could say for sure. Lincoln had already passed into the ranks of the missing.

Outside the great speeches and debates of the 1850s and the state papers of his four-year presidency, most of what we know and prize about Lincoln is purely hearsay. In an administration of great diary keepers - Benjamin French, John Hay, Salmon Chase, Gideon Welles - Lincoln never jotted more than a few lines of self-reflection. In an age of incessant autobiography - Grant, Sherman, John Sherman, McClellan, Schurz, Davis, Stephens - Lincoln was cut down in mid-career and left no construction of his own life more substantial than some cue notes for two campaign biographies. Constantly in public life from 1832 until his death, he nevertheless managed to be "not a social man, not being 'hail fellow well met,'" recalled Herndon. Even in his adopted town of Springfield, "Mr. Lincoln was not appreciated in this city, nor was he at all times the most popular man among us." Elizabeth

Edwards, his sister-in-law, put it with all the accumulated acrimony of in-laws: "I knew Mr. L[incoln] well - he was a cold Man - had no affection - was not Social - was abstracted." Biographies of such a man must send certainty off in a balloon; otherwise, everything one might say about this impenetrable man softens to a mush of perhapses and probablies.

This is what makes us so incredulous at the relentless appearance of every new Lincoln biography -- not that we think there is nothing more to say, but that we dread the possibility that there is no containment to what can be said. We actually know more about Lincoln than almost any of his contemporaries, thanks to Herndon and his fellow informant-gatherers, Josiah Holland, William Thayer, Allan Rice, and so on. But the parts of that early life do not always fit together neatly with the later president. He was "always a Whig in politics," but his presidency had no choice, in the face of civil war, but to renege on the pledge of Whiggish governmental minimalism. He claimed in 1864 that he was "always opposed to slavery," but there is no record before 1854 that he ever gave more than the most tepid support to anti-slavery activism, and he shared in the proceeds of the litigation of his father-in-law's estate, including slaves, during the same years that he was most active in opposing slavery's extension. (In fact, the litigation in Fayette County, Kentucky, over Robert Todd's estate was not concluded until 1862, when Lincoln was about ready to opt for emancipation). There are even oddities within that pre-presidential life. Henry Clay was his "beau ideal of a statesman," but Lincoln deserted Clay in 1848 to stump New England for Zachary Taylor, to the horror of both Clay partisans (who thought 1848 was clearly going to be Clay's triumph year) and anti-slavery New Englanders, since Taylor was a Southerner, a slaveholder, and (worst of all in the Whig lexicon) a "military chieftain" not unlike the hated Andrew Jackson. Taylor rewarded Lincoln pretty handsomely, with the governorship of the Oregon Territory, which should have assured Lincoln's political future and given him (as it gave his friend, Edward Baker, who migrated to the West Coast in search of political fortune) a short cut to the Senate. All of this, unaccountably to the Whig leadership, Lincoln turned down, chiefly because of his wife's manic unwell. This gave Lincoln the appearance of uncertainty and ineptitude in politics, something of which he was painfully self-conscious, but which he managed, with a certain relish, to turn to terrific advantage. Nothing is more characteristic of the people Lincoln came up against, from Stephen Douglas in 1858 to Alexander Stephens

in 1865, than their fatal habit of over committing themselves, on the assumption that Lincoln was a tin weathervane they had only to breathe upon. "Those who know him speak of him as a person of positive ability," snorted Charles Sumner two weeks after Lincoln's nomination for the presidency, "But I think it is admitted that he has very little acquaintance with Govt. & is uninformed on Foreign Affairs." Finding Lincoln inexperienced in Washington political infighting and policymaking, old hands like Sumner and William Seward confidently stepped up to assume command and found themselves suddenly shortened by several inches. Confederate top hats assumed he could not last or could not govern, and laughingly dithered away all the advantages of the first year of the Civil War, waiting for a favorable tide that never came back in. Democrat generals like McClellan convinced themselves that they were the embodiment of what every management consultant thought success should look like, only to find themselves replaced, outmaneuvered, or outright dismissed by this uncredentialed "gorilla." They all should have known better. Leonard Swett remembered that even on the circuit, Lincoln could turn others' underestimation of him to devastating advantage. "Any man who took Lincoln for a simple-minded man would very soon wake up with his back in a ditch."

Lincoln's great talent was his capacity to see the end of any situation; and having seen it, not to fixate on the means of getting to that end. Swett recalled that Lincoln would give away seven points in a case to the opposing counsel, and then turn and hang him before the jury on the eighth. Lincoln could see what, in the long view, was critical in the case, and cheerfully handed over the rest to his puzzled and over armed opponent. As president, Lincoln's goal was national reunion, plain and simple; and knowing that, he was free to do what only those who know their ultimate goal are free to do, to step back, step aside, step around. Swett claimed that Lincoln had shown him a small notebook in the White House in which he kept running tallies of industrial production, livestock, enlistment rates, always calculating forward, always letting the particular pieces no one paid attention to individually come together in his logical mind's eye as the inevitable shape of the future. It is only the leader who is unsure, who has no confidence in inevitability, who can never afford to take his eyes off the road in front of him. Fellow citizens, he wrote to Congress in December, 1862, we cannot escape history. ...As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthral ourselves, and then we shall save our country. In our

poll-tormented political life, disenthraling ourselves - from popular itches, from popular culture, from the General Will - is precisely what our experts assure us we must never do.

The one exception to this flexibility was in the area where he was most signally ignorant, which was military strategy. Apart from his single brief stint in the militia during the Black Hawk War, Lincoln displayed none of his contemporaries' blustering fascination with military life. To the contrary, he shared the general fear of the Whigs that the U.S. Army was the leather-bound preserve of the Democratic Party, and especially the Southern Democrats who so often ran the War Department, and until, he pitched onto Ulysses Grant, he felt compelled to exercise constant suspicion of his commanders. In the case of George McClellan, that suspicion was well-justified. McClellan came as close as MacArthur to outright insubordination as a commander has ever come to a civilian Commander-in-Chief, and heart-stoppingly close to the opportunity for a military coup and some kind of Thermidorean reaction to emancipation. But for much of the war, Lincoln did not have much alternative to these wet-firecracker generals. "Most of the West Point men were democrats," he observed, with some accuracy. The few sallies into military strategizing which he made himself were strictly amateurish. His advice to the shot-addled Joe Hooker in mid-June, 1863, to make "Lee's Army, and not Richmond" the "true objective," was undoubtedly the most lethal counsel he could have dispensed to a 19th-century army commander. It was, in the end, the capture of the South's great cities, not the pursuit of its armies, which brought the Confederacy into the dust. Nothing really began to go right for the Union militarily until Lincoln found a general who would let him let go of military affairs.

Lincoln's long suit was politics, not war. Lincoln loved politics, and even more, gloried in the play of political ideology and political language. Robbed by poverty and rural loneliness of the chance for collegiate education (even then the great ticket to respectability), Lincoln nevertheless "read hard works - was philosophical - logical - mathematical" and managed to make himself (according to John Todd Stuart) "an Educated Man in 1860 - more than is generally known." Joshua Speed thought Lincoln's "Mind [was] of a metaphysical and philosophical order," and Herndon noticed that his partner feasted chiefly on the marrow of 19th-century political economy: "Mill's political economy, Carey's political economy, McCullough's political economy, Wayland and some others." Reading like this would make a Whig of anyone, and it certainly made one of Lincoln. "He was as stiff as a man

could be in his Whig doctrines," Stephen Logan described him in the 1840s; and twenty years later, even after the Whig party had disappeared, Lincoln's domestic policy agenda would provoke one Democratic congressman to disgustedly remark Lincoln "belongs to the old whig party and will never belong to any other."

But Lincoln belonged to more than the Whig party. And on this point, despite the many ambiguities of the man, Lincoln could not be farther from the uncertain, atomized expectations of modern literary theory, for he belonged, despite all the restraints of his family's ancestral Calvinism, to the free-thinking Enlightenment, to John Locke and to reason and to the universality of certain self-evident and inalienable truths about human nature. What he loved in the Declaration was not some Leveller egalitarianism which liberated Americans from the Constitution, but a foundationalism about all human nature which made the Constitution possible in the first place. "Half our people have come from Europe," Lincoln said in 1858, "German, Irish, French and Scandinavian." Give them the Constitution alone and it would appear as little more than a procedural rulebook. But "when they look through that old declaration of independence," they find principles that run deeper than any temporal identification with nationality or race.

They find that those old men, say, 'we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,' and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men...and that they have a right to claim it as though they were...flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration.

Past identities no longer held claim on the American people, not because identities are willful self-constructions, but because a set of political truths had been encoded in the Declaration which transcended the force of particularity and allowed the Constitution to become operative over them all.

The Confederacy and its Calhounite ideologues were the single greatest doubt ever posed to the Enlightenment project in American life. To reason they opposed passion and the will; to John Locke they opposed romantic hierarchy and herrenvolk democracy; to universality, they opposed the diversity of states' rights. But they also opposed Abraham Lincoln, and they lost. Lincoln may not have been a great general, but he had the Calhounites dead in his sights when he said that the war was really about two visions of America, one built around national unity and the unity of human nature, and the other around division and the incommunicableness of human

difference. "This issue embraces more than the fate of these United States," he wrote to Congress at the onset of the war,

It presents the question, whether discontented individuals, too few in numbers to control [the] administration, according to organic law, in any case, can always, upon the pretences made in this case, or on any other pretences, or arbitrarily, without any pretence, break up their Government, and thus practically put an end to free government upon the earth.

For the first time since Lincoln's death, we are witnessing an exhumation, not of a missing Lincoln, but of a silenced and defeated Calhoun, in the confident contention that the American Republic has never been, and was never intended to be, a single nation. No longer does it seem that Americans can lay aside race or ethnicity and speak with the same voice about the self-evidence of liberty and freedom. Once, this denial was what we looked upon as an exotic aberration, as the province of white supremacists or three-ulcer anarchists, unreconstructed but culturally insignificant. That confidence has vanished. With unwitting but eerie resonance of the grave, patient, cunning South Carolinian, the teaching of our history no longer shares reason's old universal confidence, or its ability to shrug off particularity in the search for the universal humanity of the Declaration. With Calhoun -- the sepulchral Calhoun, eyes glittering in the night of our cultural confusion -- we defend particularity by appeals to self-esteem, asserting with the certitude of ignorance that all the arrangements of reason are but disguises for power, all history but narratives of oppression.

Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President, for which, with thanks to all of you tonight I receive the Lincoln Prize, was written in many ways as an essay contra mundam on this last disappearance of Lincoln. For whatever else Lincoln was, he was a universalist, and actually more of a universalist on human nature than Jefferson, better at reading the Declaration and better at understanding the implications of John Locke. At the time of his death, one hundred and thirty-five years ago this month, that universalism was in the ascendant everywhere in the West. He did not live to see the beginnings of the decay of confidence in reason and universality, a decay now so extended that Lincoln's most central ideas have to be trivialized into clichés to remain palatable. Easier, more disposable, more frightening ideologies have come in its place, mocking the specks in the eye the eye of reason, while ignoring

the beams in their own eyes.

Herbert Wells Fay, who succeeded Power as custodian of the Tomb, used to say that the single most -asked question among visitors was whether Lincoln was really still buried beneath the Tomb's 102-foot obelisk. There is no reason to doubt any longer that such is indeed the case. But the persistence of the question is a mark of how shocking the notion of a loosened Lincoln is, even a century later, and of the skepticism we harbor about the assurances of bureaucrats. I would like to believe that such skepticism may also conceal a hope that Lincoln, or at least his ideas, may still be abroad in the land.