I am profoundly grateful to Lew Lehrman, Dick Gilder, and Gabor Boritt for establishing the prize, and to the members of the jury and as well as the board of the Gilder-Lehrman Institute for awarding it to me. It is a great honor to join the ranks of the many distinguished historians who have won the prize over the past two decades, among them my mentor, the late David Herbert Donald.

I became a Lincoln scholar in large part because David Donald took me under his wing when I was a freshman at Princeton. As a student in his course on the Civil War and Reconstruction, I was mesmerized by his brilliant lectures and his scintillating leadership of the small class discussion group that I attended. He invited me, along with some other students, to his house for dessert, coffee, and conversation. At the beginning of my sophomore year, he informed me that he had arranged to have me appointed as his research assistant (a scholarship student’s position normally reserved for upperclassmen). He made a flattering prediction about my future career and said that he wished to play a part in it. Needless to say, I was overwhelmed. He had just won a Pulitzer Prize for the first volume of his biography of Charles Sumner; I was to help conduct research for the second volume of that biography. It was a heady assignment for a callow youth of twenty.

After my sophomore year, he took a position at Johns Hopkins. I stayed on at Princeton for my junior and senior years and then followed him to Baltimore to pursue a Ph. D. under his tutelage. If he had been a medievalist, I would probably be writing about the Middle Ages today. Those of you who are familiar with his work on Lincoln and with mine will have noticed that we disagree on many points, but though we did not see eye-
to-eye about our sixteenth president, I remain deeply grateful to him for all that he did for me in my student years.

While I am on the subject of gratitude, I fear that time does not allow me to acknowledge my indebtedness to many librarians, fellow scholars, and others who have helped me over the years, but I feel compelled to express heartfelt thanks to some people here tonight who deserve special mention. From Connecticut, there is my fiancée of twenty-two years’ standing, the lovely Lois McDonald, who has made my life rich and full, and without whom I could not have accomplished what I have been able to accomplish since we met in 1987. You may wonder why we have been engaged for such a long time. The answer is simple: we are waiting for the infatuation stage to pass so that we might gain a more realistic view of our long-term prospects.

From Manhattan, there is my brother Lloyd, along with his handsome seeing-eye dog, Kemp, and our good friend Barbara Backer. He has been my best friend and most reliable booster since we were youngsters growing up in suburban Washington, D.C. He is the ideal older brother, a constant source of invaluable support, encouragement, and laughter.

Our sister, Sue Coover, is here with her husband Ed; they have been my secret weapon as a Lincoln scholar, putting me up for long stretches in their home in Chevy Chase, Maryland, just outside of Washington. My friends in the Lincoln field complain that it is not fair that I can stay for weeks on end with the Coovers for free while they have to pay exorbitant hotel bills in order to have access to the Library of Congress and the National Archives. Without the Coovers’ generous and warm hospitality over many years, I could not have conducted extensive research at those repositories.
From Massachusetts, my daughter Jessica is also with us. To me she has been the functional equivalent of Willie Lincoln, the child who gave his father so much pleasure and was such a boon companion to him. I have been fortunate to have her as a daughter, just as Lincoln counted it one of his great blessings to have Willie as a son.

Speaking of Lincoln, you may be wondering what could possibly justify the publication of such a long biography, after all that has been written about him by an army of previous historians. A quarter of a century ago, when I began working on my first Lincoln book, I assumed that nothing new factually could be said about him but that fresh interpretations of the well-established facts of his life could be offered. To my amazement, I found a great deal of new information about Lincoln’s life, mostly in newspapers, manuscript collections, and public records. To discover such fresh information required sifting through countless collections of personal papers, numerous unpublished documents in public archives, and endless reels of microfilmed newspapers. In conducting research in those sources, I came to think of myself as something like Samuel Johnson’s definition of a lexicographer: a harmless drudge.

Time does not allow for adducing many examples of that fresh information, but I would like to share with you a couple of dramatic finds I made in the Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress. Everyone who writes about the subject of Lincoln and race quotes an 1876 speech in which Douglass asserted that Lincoln “was not, in the fullest sense of the word, either our man or our model. In his interests, in his associations, in his habits of thought, and in his prejudices, he was a white man. He was preeminently the white man’s President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men. . . . In all his education and feeling he was an American of the Americans.”
Imagine my surprise when I stumbled across a speech in Douglass’s handwriting, dated June 1, 1865, which contained the following language: “No people or class of people in the country, have a better reason for lamenting the death of Abraham Lincoln, and for desiring to honor and perpetuate his memory, than have the colored people.” Compared “with the long line of his predecessors, many of whom were merely the facile and servile instruments of the slave power,” Lincoln made an impressive record which entitled him to be considered “in a sense hitherto without example, emphatically the black man’s president: the first to show any respect for their rights as men . . . . He was the first American President who . . . rose above the prejudice of his times, and country.” Douglass illustrated his point by citing his own personal experience: “it was my privilege to know Abraham Lincoln and to know him well. I saw and conversed with him at different times during his administration.” Douglass considered the president’s willingness to consult with him on public affairs significant: “He knew that he could do nothing which would call down upon him more fiercely the ribaldry of the vulgar than by showing any respect to a colored man.” Douglass noted that “Some men there are who face death and dangers, but have not the moral courage to contradict a prejudice or face ridicule. In daring to admit, nay in daring to invite a Negro to an audience at the White House, Mr. Lincoln did that which he knew would be offensive to the crowd and excite their ribaldry. It was saying to the country, I am the President of the black people as well as the white, and I mean to respect their rights and feelings as men and as citizens.” Once inside the President’s office, Douglass felt at ease, for Lincoln “set me at perfect liberty to state where I differed from him as freely as where I agreed with him. From that first five minutes I seemed to myself to have been acquainted with [him] during all my life . . .
. He was one of the very few white Americans who could converse with a negro without anything like condescension, and without in anywise reminding him of the unpopularity of his color.”

The phrase “emphatically the black man’s president” leapt off the page, since it contrasted so strikingly with the well-known phrase “preeminently the white man’s president.” The speech is not included in any of the editions of Douglass’s speeches, much to my surprise. (James Oakes, who two years ago won the Lincoln Prize for his excellent study *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics*, finally gave that speech the attention it deserved.)

Several months after delivering his June 1, 1865, speech, Douglass again spoke in glowing terms of Lincoln in another address that does not appear in any edition of Douglass’s public utterances. In it, Douglass voiced profound respect for the martyred president’s second inaugural address, particularly the passage which dealt with God’s reason for allowing the war to go on so long and to be so bloody: “The Almighty has His own purposes. ‘Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.’ If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? 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 until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of 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 it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’”

Douglass speculated about the policies that Lincoln would have adopted if he had not been murdered: “The last days of Mr. Lincoln were his best days. . . . Had Mr. Lincoln lived, we might have looked for still greater progress. Learning wisdom by war, he would have learned more from Peace.” Referring to Lincoln’s last public speech, delivered on April 11, 1865, Douglass said: “Already he had expressed himself in favor of extending the right of suffrage to two classes of colored men; first to the brave colored soldiers who had fought under our flag, and second to the very intelligent part of the colored population [of the] South. This declaration on his part though it seemed to mean but little meant a great deal. It was like Abraham Lincoln. He never shocked prejudices unnecessarily. Having learned statesmanship while splitting rails, he always used the edge of the wedge first—and the fact that he used this at all meant that he would if need be, use the thick as well as the thin. He saw the absurdity of asking men to fight for a Government which should degrade them, and the meanness of enfranchising enemies and disenfranchising friends. He was a progressive man, a humane man, an honorable man, and at heart an antislavery man. He had exhausted the resources of conciliation upon the rebels and the slaveholders and now looked to the principles of Liberty and justice, for the peace, security, happiness, and prosperity of his country. I assume therefore, had Abraham Lincoln been spared to see this day, the negro of the South would have more
than a hope of enfranchisement and no rebels would hold the reins of government in any one of the late rebellious states. Whosoever else have cause to mourn the loss of Abraham Lincoln, to the colored people of the country his death is an unspeakable calamity.”

Unlike Douglass, one member of Lincoln’s audience on April 11, 1865, did fully appreciate the significance of the president’s remarks -- a young actor named John Wilkes Booth. When Booth heard Lincoln endorse limited black suffrage, he turned to his companions and snarled: “That means nigger citizenship. Now, by God, I'll put him through. That is the last speech he will ever make.” Three days later, he carried out his threat. Lincoln was assassinated not because he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, not because he endorsed the Thirteenth Amendment, but because he called for black voting rights. Therefore it seems to me appropriate that we consider Lincoln as much a martyr to black civil rights as Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers, James Reeb, Viola Liuzo, Micky Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, James Cheney, or any of the other champions of the civil rights movement who were killed in the 1960s.

Before closing, I would like to share with you the final paragraph of my book, thus sparing you 1600 pages of reading: “Lincoln speaks to us not only as a champion of freedom, democracy, and national unity but also as a source of inspiration. Few will achieve his world historical importance, but many can profit from his personal example, encouraged by the knowledge that despite a childhood of emotional malnutrition and grinding poverty, despite a lack of formal education, despite a series of career failures, despite a miserable marriage, despite a tendency to depression, despite a painful midlife crisis, despite the early death of his mother and his siblings as well as of his sweetheart
and two of his four children, he became a model of psychological maturity, moral clarity, and unimpeachable integrity. His presence and his leadership inspired his contemporaries; his life story can do the same for generations to come.”

A rising young pianist, Jonathan Biss, recently wrote that he felt it was a great “honour to have lived, and to continue to live” with Beethoven’s music. It was also, he added, a great “responsibility. Playing Beethoven compels you to make yourself a better musician, a better person. I have tried; I shall keep trying.” I feel the same way about Lincoln. To conduct research and to write about him is both an honor and a responsibility. It compels you to try to be a better historian and a better human being. I have tried; I shall continue to try.