<u>James B. Conroy's Acceptance of the Lincoln Prize, April 19, 2017</u>

Two years ago, as a finalist for the Lincoln Prize and a lawyer among historians, I felt as if I had crashed this party. Now I am in shock, and half expect to be told, like the producers of *La La Land*, that someone opened the wrong envelope. So much for Scott Fitzgerald's remark that there are no second acts in American lives. To Mr. Gilder, Mr. Lehrman, Dr. Borritt, Dr. Basker, the other members of the board, and the Lincoln Prize jury, I can only say how honored I am, and it's too late to change your minds.

I am proud to share the honors with six other authors -- my fellow Hoya, Doug Edgerton, for *Thunder at the Gates* (perhaps Doug will tell you what a Hoya is); Rodney Davis and Doug Wilson, who have more than earned their special award; D. H. Dilbec, who explored the oxymoronic challenge of humane war; Chandra Manning, whose insights on the refugee experience arrive at a time when we need them; and Charles Strozier, who told the moving story of Lincoln's closest friendship.

Diane Brennan deserves our thanks for managing this operation. If Diane had been running Lincoln's White House, the war would have been over six months sooner.

I am grateful as well to no less than five Lincoln Prize Winners who helped me escape the law. The late David Donald encouraged my first book, *Our One Common Country*, about the Hampton Roads Peace Conference; Allen Guelzo recommended it in the *Wall Street Journal*; Harold Holzer reviewed it kindly and wrote a blurb for *Lincoln's White House*; Michael Burlingame contributed the scholarship that accounts for half the endnotes; and Doug Wilson has been pointing me in the right direction for the book I am working on now about the President's House in Jefferson's time. I am also grateful to Paul Escott, who supported and advised me from the start, and James Cornelius, who

read *Lincoln's White House* in manuscript, endorsed the book, and invited me to speak in Springfield.

I would not be here without my literary agent, Alice Martell, who pushed me into the publishing world against its better judgment; my first editor, Janice Goldklang, who taught me how to write a book; Jon Sisk, who edited *Lincoln's White House*; and Rowman & Littlefield, who published it.

I am proud to be joined tonight by my daughter, my son, my daughter-in-law, and my wife, who made it all possible in more ways than one. I am sure she agrees with Lady Northumberland, the London hostess who let it be known in 1763 that she "would as soon have a raven in her house as an author."

I grew up in Bridgeport, Connecticut, 60 miles from here and a million miles from the Union League Club. It was there that I read and reread a paperback edition of Jim Bishop's bestseller *The Day Lincoln Was Shot* until the binding fell apart. I didn't know it was micro-history, but I knew it was what I wanted to do, though the dream was deferred for fifty years. As many of the kids who grew up with me did, I fell in with the wrong crowd, made some bad decisions, and ended up in law school.

As luck would have it, litigators learn some skills that historians need -- how to sift conflicting evidence, search a dozen worthless documents to find a single gem, figure out when a witness is lying -- but my depth in historiography is shallow. Only weeks ago, Michael Burlingame introduced me in Springfield as a writer in the school of Empathetic History, which was news to me. I felt like the merchant in Moliere's play who was flattered to learn he'd been speaking in prose all his life and didn't know it.

As every author knows, the hardest part of writing a good book may be picking a good subject. Hundreds of able scholars have explored the great issues of Lincoln's life and times. They needed no help from me. My simple goal was to resurrect his White House. Searching the primary sources for every passing comment that people might have dropped as they wrote about more important things, I tried to reconstruct it brick by brick -- its state of the art gaslight and its faulty upstairs heat; the friendships that bound its staff and the frictions that ground their teeth; its crimson silk upholstery and its undershot spittoons; the pride that united its servants and the bigotry that divided them; its undistinguished art and its world class music; what Lincoln was like to work for and what sort of pen he used; how he squeezed the little speeches out of men passing through his receiving lines with his right hand crushing theirs and his left at the small of their backs; how his desk struck his cousin as worth "about six bits." My motive was sheer curiosity, which is not a shameful thing, but also to see and hear what he saw and heard as he pulled up his bright blue socks and saved the Union.

But it *was* an empathetic view, and not a reverential one, that drew me to Lincoln's White House, for there I found an imperfect human being like the rest of us, often disappointed and occasionally disappointing, who typically hit the mark and sometimes hit the skids and was all the more inspiring for his faults. It was not a mythological hero who led his country through its existential crisis but a troubled, awkward, melancholic man, more gifted than most of humanity but every bit as flawed. He sits on his marble throne at the foot of Memorial Bridge despite his flaws and shortcomings, not because he had none, and in spite of his mistakes, not because he made

none. History does no service to a people in search of leaders by canonizing or even beatifying him. He surely never acted like a secular god.

In the midst of a civil war, he spent thousands of tedious hours with ordinary men and women who came to him for help. "The Beggars' Opera," he called it, and waved away the critics who called it a waste of his time. "They don't want much and they get but little," he said, "and I must see them." He received them with "a gentle patience," according to his brilliant young aide John Hay, an "astonishing patience" in the view of William Stoddard, who vetted his incoming mail. Whenever a man goes clean crazy, Stoddard said, he sits down and writes a letter to the President of the United States.

But Lincoln could be impatient too, sometimes peevish on a bad day. When a disappointed job seeker called him unjust, Lincoln took him by the collar and physically threw him out. Another man told him it would be easy to do what he wanted. "Oh, I know that," he said, "and so it would be easy for me to open that window and shout down Pennsylvania Avenue, only I don't mean to do it just now." When two gaunt women begged him to free their draft-dodging husbands he mocked their Irish brogues and turned them down flat. When he denied the same relief to a jailed rebel's wife, she told him he would help her if he understood her need. "No I would not," he said. "I am under no obligation to provide for the wives of disloyal husbands." Then he asked her coldly if her husband had the consumption. She replied that he did not. "Well," Lincoln said, "it is the only case. Nearly all have the consumption."

He was capable too of despair. His friend Dr. Anson Henry was sitting in the White House library when Lincoln came in with a telegram from Chancellorsville and staggered to a chair, his face as gray as the wall. After a cry of anguish he suddenly got

up and left. Dr. Henry burst into tears, not from the news of defeat but from Lincoln's devastation. The office work went on after a fashion, Stoddard said, "very much as things are done in any other family when there's a coffin in the house."

Stoddard worked late that night, after everyone but he and the President had left what Lincoln called "the shop." Both of their doors were open, "for the night was warm." In a silence so deep that Stoddard could hear his watch tick, a repetitive creaking came across the hall as Lincoln paced alone. When the pacing stopped past midnight, the silence made Stoddard put his letters down. And then it started up again. Stoddard went home at three. He paused at the top of the steps, and "the sentry-like tread continued."

Lincoln knew insecurity too, as his friend Noah Brooks could see when the celebrated Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz turned him into a star-struck boy. After Agassiz left his office, the Commander in Chief said to Brooks, "I wasn't so scared after all, were you?"

Lincoln impressed Agassiz as much as Agassiz impressed him, but some other Eastern sophisticates found his artlessness downright comic. In 1864, the historian George Bancroft, who had met him three years earlier, came through a White House receiving line with a brushed set of fierce white muttonchops. "[Lincoln] took me by one of his hands," Bancroft wrote the next day, "and trying to recall my name, waved the other a foot and a half above his head and cried out, greatly to the amusement of the bystanders. 'Hold on -- I know you, you are -- History, History of the United States -- Mr. -- Mr. Bancroft, Mr. George Bancroft,' and seemed disposed to give me a hearty welcome."

A year after the President's death, Bancroft delivered a condescending memorial address to a joint session of Congress that complimented Lincoln's modesty. Hay called the speech "a disgraceful exhibition of ignorance . . . Bancroft and the rest of that kid glove set know no more of [Lincoln] than an owl does of a comet, blazing into his blinking eye."

"It is absurd to call him a modest man," Hay said. "No great man was ever modest. It was his intellectual arrogance and unconscious assumption of superiority that men like Chase and Sumner could never forgive." After Lincoln heard the news of the death of Edward Everett, the famous orator who had spoken without notes for two hours at Gettysburg before the President read his three-minute address, he looked around his office in a comical way, as if afraid of being overheard, and told Noah Brooks that Everett was overrated.

There were worse peccadillos than these on display in Lincoln's White House, and blunders better known to most of you than me, and I think it is a mistake to portray him as a saint. When people see his imperfections, the virtues that put him on Mount Rushmore become more human too, and "the better angels of our nature" give us hope.

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