

LINCOLN, WASHINGTON, AND FRANKLIN

Lincoln's inner world shaped his presidency and the conduct of the war, consequently also the nation. Here his words to a clergyman acquire particular depth: "If it were not for my firm belief in an over-ruling Providence, it would be difficult for me, in the midst of such complications of affairs, to keep my reason in its seat."¹ Lincoln's reason had supported his faith in his early days. Once he had acquired this grounding, it was faith that supported his reason at a time where trials oppressed him at the personal and national level.

At America's birth two towering individuals had supported its birth pangs. During the time of the Civil War, Lincoln was mostly supported by the civil institutions that the forefathers had devised and implemented. No other individual came close to matching Lincoln's stature and sharing his burdens.

Lincoln and Washington

Lincoln has abundantly been seen as a second Washington. First among these the judgment of poet and national moral authority Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Only Washington can compare with him." When Lincoln was re-elected, another poet, Longfellow, cried "The country will be saved!"

Lincoln foresaw that his responsibility in discharging his office would resemble those of Washington: Upon leaving Springfield for the capital, Lincoln declared: "I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington." Were it not for Lincoln's assured reputation for honesty and modesty, this could sound like an arrogant bravado.

Like Washington, Lincoln had all the physical and psychological endurance, stamina, and sheer willpower to face one challenge after the other without caving in to despair. Like the first president he also knew how to work with what has been called and made famous as a "team of rivals" in his cabinet. The rivalries of Jefferson and Hamilton were present between Salmon Chase and William Seward or in Edwin Stanton. Each one of them, at different points in time, presented direct, challenging ambitions to the president himself.

Can we not sense in Lincoln an initiatic strength of a previous lifetime? This would be confirmed in the president's commitment to promote the well-being of each of his cabinet members and their harmonious collaboration. Even when collaboration came to an end, the president did not indulge in personal vendettas. Salmon Chase, whose resignation he had accepted, became the Supreme Court chief justice, in whose presence the president proffered the oath of office.

¹ Susan B. Martinez, *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 256.

Like Washington, though not as directly, Lincoln was also the commander in chief on the military front. He did not operate on the front lines as did his predecessor. Nevertheless Lincoln was directly involved in selecting, choosing, promoting, or demoting the various generals and officers, until he could find a group of trusted initiative takers, who made the resolution of the conflict possible.

In his time journalists had started to call Lincoln "the second Washington." His political adversary, then friend, William Seward acknowledged, "Providence had raised [Lincoln] up for this emergency, as signally as He raised up Washington for ... our independence."² So did too Benjamin B. French in a poem he gave Mary Todd:

"So Washington's and Lincoln's names
Twined in a wreath shall be,
One gave a Nation to the world
The Other keeps it free."³

An inadvertent irony of fate brought the two individuals close: their birthdays, February 12 for Lincoln and February 22 for Washington. For a time, and/or varying according to places, Presidents' Day has come to be seen as the joint celebration of the two presidents. At any rate Lincoln's name is the one most closely associated with that of Washington. A hidden genius is at play here.⁴

Lincoln and Franklin

From other angles than the above, Lincoln's biography resembles much of the personality of Benjamin Franklin. The president held reason and dogma in balance in a way that was parallel to Benjamin Franklin. He saw them as complementary, much as Franklin balanced science and humanism. Both Franklin's and Lincoln's faith were tested in personal ordeals. It was recorded by Mrs. Rankin at whose house in Petersburg Lincoln occasionally stayed. Franklin's inner turmoil, it is worth recalling, was resolved through a spiritual experience, the same in which his friend and benefactor, Thomas Denham, died.

Like Franklin, Lincoln had an uncanny understanding about the effects of alcohol. He believed that drinking muddles the mind, and it was natural for him to abstain. Lincoln felt alcohol made him feel "flabby and undone." He didn't smoke or chew tobacco, either. Yet he did not do so out of any self-

² Susan B. Martinez, *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 83.

³ Susan B. Martinez, *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 83.

⁴ From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Washington's_Birthday: "The day is a state holiday in most states, with official names including Washington's Birthday, Presidents' Day, and Washington's and Lincoln's Birthday."

righteous stance. He loved to tell the story of sharing a trip on the railroad with a friendly gentleman from Kentucky who offered him sequentially a plug of tobacco, a cigar, and a glass of brandy, but couldn't entice Lincoln with any of them. The Kentuckian told him, "See here, my jolly companion, I have gone through the world a great deal and have had much experience with men and women of all classes, and in all climes, and I have noticed one thing." What was it? "Those who have no vices have d—d few virtues." No doubt Franklin could have told a similar story.

Like his predecessor Lincoln could see the issues at stake with the long view. In one of many instances Lincoln stated, "The struggle of today is not altogether for today—it is for a vast future also. With a reliance on Providence, all the more firm and earnest, let us proceed in the great task which events have devolved upon us."⁵ Like Franklin, Lincoln possessed long-term insights that he was willing to test and promote, while patiently waiting for the right time. Ruth Painter Randall, who wrote much about Mary Todd Lincoln, called him "a wizard and prophet. ... he seems to have something of that prescience of the future, with which minds of the highest class are often gifted. ... the prophet waits patiently for the coming events ... and learns to labor and wait." Like Franklin, Lincoln used the weapon of humor to offer little pearls of wisdom and render them accessible educational tools (see box).

Lincoln had understood the role and nature of humor in the American soul. To Noah Brooks he offered, "The grim grotesqueness and extravagance of American humor [are] its most striking characteristics."⁶ And he certainly matched the claims in many of his humorous offerings. Much of Lincoln's lesser-known quips address universal human matters, as had been the case in Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*.

Franklin created the idea of America; he invited his fellow citizens to become something new and daring. Lincoln called America back to its founding impulse, in which lived much of Franklin's wisdom.

⁵ First State of the Union address (1861).

⁶ Paul M. Zall, editor, *Abe Lincoln's Legacy of Laughter: humorous Stories by and About Abraham Lincoln*, 36.

Lincoln's Quotable Wisdom

Just like Benjamin Franklin in his days, Lincoln has left us many quotable juicy bits of wisdom, some of which are familiar, though not necessarily remembered as his. Here are some:

"You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time."

"Leave nothing for tomorrow which can be done today."

"Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt."

"Character is like a tree and reputation like a shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing."

"No man has a good enough memory to be a successful liar."

"He has a right to criticize, who has a heart to help."

"Most folks are about as happy as they make their minds up to be."

"A farce or comedy is best played; a tragedy is best read at home."

"I don't like that man. I must get to know him better."

"We can complain because rose bushes have thorns, or rejoice because thorn bushes have roses."

"My great concern is not whether you have failed, but whether you are content with your failure."

"Elections belong to the people. It's their decision. If they decide to turn their back on the fire and burn their behinds, then they will just have to sit on their blisters."

"In law it is a good policy to never plead what you need not, lest you oblige yourself to prove what you can not."

In summing up, Lincoln had both the overabundance of will forces that we recognized in George Washington, and the lightness, wisdom, and depth of insight that was displayed in his day by Benjamin Franklin. He can be said to have carried their mission further, in rising to the presidency 72 years after Washington.

The similarities between Lincoln and Franklin on one hand, Washington on the other, point to larger common circumstances that can escape a quick survey. Both Revolutionary War and Civil War involved brothers fighting brothers. During the Revolutionary War, especially in the early stages, the population was divided between rebels and loyalists. When fighting broke out, a majority of English and British colonists found themselves fighting their counterparts from across the ocean.

In the times preceding the Revolutionary War, Franklin educated his fellow colonists to see themselves as Americans in a new nation. Washington embodied that ideal. He taught first his army, then the nation, what it meant to subordinate his personal capacities and ambitions to the republican ideal, avoiding the temptations of personal power. His was an education in action. That process of education was continued in the formulation and ratification of the Constitution.

When Lincoln assumed power, an equal temptation lay open to him. He could have usurped powers in order to ensure the preservation of the Union; he could have enlarged the power of the executive at the expense of the legislative and judicial. Instead he maneuvered between each branch of power to negotiate, persuade, and preserve harmony. As we have illustrated, he accomplished a great work of education in preserving the republican ideal and persuading his fellow Americans that all human beings are really created equal.

Lincoln, Initiate of Old?

Lincoln's life was itself an initiation ordeal. He had to overcome humble beginnings, lack of education, the loss of many loved ones, repeated failure, and the nation's trial by fire in order to reawaken the capacities that lay dormant in his soul. What had met him as an initiation in a previous life re-emerged as initiation through life, a trial by fire.

In a talk that he had with Treasury Secretary L. E. Chittenden, which the latter recorded, Lincoln delivers a testimonial of his living link to the spirit:

That the almighty does make use of human agencies, and directly intervenes in human affairs, is one of the plainest statements in the Bible. I have had so many evidences of His direction, so many instances in which I have been controlled by some other power than my own will, that I cannot doubt that this power comes from above. I frequently see my way clear to a decision when I am conscious that I have no sufficient

facts upon which to found it. But I cannot recall one instance in which I have followed my judgment, founded upon such a decision, when the results were unsatisfactory.⁷

This capacity of hearing in an inspired state is what others fathomed through direct observation of the president. An officer hearing the Gettysburg Address noticed that Lincoln, before beginning the address, looked as if his mind had been somewhere else, as if there had been a sort of otherworldliness in his demeanor.⁸ Friends in Illinois had already noticed that Lincoln would seem at times as if in a world of his own, sitting for minutes of complete silence and gazing straight ahead. Other foreign visitors noticed that he could be in states of alternating consciousness, including a French visitor counting up to twenty such changes in an evening.⁹ The painter Carpenter called these "his extraordinary moods of abstraction in which he was blind and deaf to all around him." To those unaware, this could look as if he were dozing off, or distracted.¹⁰

Herndon, who had been closer to Lincoln than many, noticed, "He can sit and think without food or rest longer than any man I ever saw." He also described him as "a peculiar man with a double consciousness, a double life. The two states, never in a normal man, co-exist in equal and vigorous activities though they succeed each other quickly."¹¹ Bad or sad news could trigger the almost disembodied state, even bring him to the place of nearly falling off his feet on few occasions, as upon receiving news of war defeats, like the news of Edward Baker's death at Red Bluff.

⁷ William J Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion*, 156.

⁸ *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, Susan B. Martinez, 191.

⁹ *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, Susan B. Martinez, 191.

¹⁰ *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, Susan B. Martinez, 192.

¹¹ *The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, Susan B. Martinez, 192.