

Lincoln's Memo to Obama

A distinguished Lincoln biographer imagines what advice the 16th president would offer the 44th as he takes office.

BY RONALD C. WHITE JR.

ILLINOIS SENATOR EVERETT DIRKSEN OBSERVED 50 years ago, "The first task of every politician is to get right with Lincoln." As the inauguration of President Barack Obama converges with the beginning of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial, it is intriguing to think about what Lincoln might say across the years to the new president. In recent election campaigns many politicians, both Republicans and Democrats, have tried to associate themselves with Lincoln. President Obama has moved far beyond the invocation of Lincoln's words to patterning his political spirit after his 19th-century model. Again and again Obama has buttressed his vision for America by beginning, "As Lincoln said. . . ."

Nearly 150 years after his assassination Lincoln con-

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Abraham Lincoln, 1863

tinues to captivate us because he eludes our simple definitions and final judgments. Lincoln endured critics who libeled him as “the Black Republican,” “the original gorilla,” and “the dictator.” Obama is rapidly picking up his own libels—Rush Limbaugh has called him “The Messiah” and *National Review* labeled him “Our Memoirist in Chief.” Pundits always want to apply the conservative/liberal grid to politicians, but these political labels could not define Lincoln, nor can they confine Obama.

I believe Lincoln would begin by offering his own “Yes we can” to the election of America’s first African-American president. Lincoln, the homely westerner with less than one year of formal education, was surprised by his nomination and election as president in 1860. Four years later, when he had become convinced he could not be reelected, he told the men of the 168th Ohio Regiment, “I happen temporarily to occupy this big White House.” He said to the soldiers, “I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father’s child has.” How like Lincoln to speak of himself as “my father’s child.” How like Obama to say on the eve of his victory, “If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible . . . tonight is your answer.” In a world of “I,” both leaders pointed beyond themselves to the larger truth of the American “we.”

Lincoln would especially encourage Obama to use his public speeches as a key to his political leadership as president. Our most eloquent president would be distressed to hear the modern shibboleth, “It’s only words.” Lincoln, thinking of the role his speeches and public letters played in the Civil War, would counter that words are actions. He might advise Obama to nourish this gift by taking time for contemplation, not knowing how difficult space and time for thinking and reflection have become for modern presidents. In Springfield, Illinois, Lincoln escaped from the torrent of visitors to write the initial drafts of his inaugural address at an old merchant’s desk on the third floor of his brother-in-law’s office building. In the White House, quite accessible to visitors, he often found time to write very early in the morning in his office (what is now the Lincoln Bedroom). He would write either at the large walnut table

in the middle of the room where he convened cabinet meetings, or at an old mahogany writing desk with pigeonholes. Sometimes he would rise and ponder what to write as he gazed out the window at the unfinished Washington Monument.

The private Lincoln might offer some advice to the private Obama. Lincoln generated a running intellectual conversation with himself by developing the habit of writing down his ideas on little slips of paper or on the backs of envelopes. He stored these notes either in his tall silk hat or in the bottom drawer of his desk, ready to be retrieved to serve as the foundations of his finest speeches. Perhaps Obama already does something similar with his ever present Blackberry, and if, as reports suggest, he will have to give up this 21st-century technology in the White House, he could do worse than take up Lincoln’s old-fashioned pen and paper.

And what about speechwriters? Lincoln would not understand this modern phenomenon that probably began with FDR but has now become a full-time occupation, with a phalanx of writers backed up by even more researchers. Lincoln would advise Obama to write his own speeches, or at least the major ones.

Lincoln’s renown for compelling oratory has obscured the story of how much of his eloquence was the product of hard editing and rewriting. He might tell Obama the surprising story of his own first inaugural. As he worked on the speech, he showed it to a few Illinois friends who made but one significant suggestion. Arriving in Washington, he decided to give a copy to a new colleague who was not yet a friend: William Seward, the New York senator who had been his chief rival for the Republican nomination and would now be his secretary of state. Lincoln was surely surprised when Seward responded with six pages of suggestions. Seward, who fancied himself a great speaker, told Lincoln to throw out his last paragraph. He offered the president-elect two possible replacements. Lincoln demonstrated his brilliance by editing Seward’s words to make them his own. We know this memorable para-

graph by the words Lincoln revised to make it read like poetry:

Seward

I close.

We are not, we must not be,
aliens or enemies, but fellow-
countrymen and brethren.

Although passion has strained
our bonds of affection too
hardly, they must not, I am
sure they will not, be broken.
The mystic chords which,
proceeding from so many
battlefields and so many patriot
graves, pass through all the hearts
and all the hearths in this broad
continent of ours, will yet again
harmonize in their ancient music
when breathed upon by the
guardian angel of the nation.

Lincoln

I am loath to close.

We are not enemies, but friends.
We must not be enemies.

Though passion may have strained,
it must not break our bonds of
affection.

The mystic chords of memory,
stretching from every battlefield
and patriot grave, to every living
heart and hearth-stone, all over this
broad land, will yet swell the chorus
of the Union, when again touched,
as surely they will be, by the better
angels of our nature.

Lincoln might also offer his counsel to President Obama on integrity and ambition.

Lincoln's moral integrity was the strong trunk from which all the branches of his life grew. His integrity had many roots, including his intimate knowledge of the Bible, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution. He may not have read Aristotle's *Treatise on Rhetoric*, but he embodied the ancient Greek philosopher's conviction that persuasive speech is rooted in ethos, or integrity. Lincoln would advise contemporary politicians that the American public knows when they are acting out a political role and when they are speaking with integrity, or what people now call authenticity.

Lincoln wrote candidly of his "peculiar ambition" in his first announcement for public office, in 1832. Barely 23, he offered a definition of ambition worth passing on: "that of being truly esteemed by my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem." Over the years, Lincoln learned to prune the strong branch of personal ambition so that it did not grow out of proportion to his service to others. The biting satire the young Lincoln occasionally dispensed gave way over time to the magnanimity he expressed in the closing benediction of his second inaugural

address: "With malice toward none, with charity for all."

The 16th president would counsel Obama to resist the growing demands to act quickly in response to the admittedly dire crises facing the nation in 2009. During the long interregnum between his election and his inauguration on March 4, 1861, Lincoln found himself under tremendous pressure to declare his policies on the growing Southern secession movement. The pressure only increased when he embarked on a 12-day train trip from Springfield to Washington in February 1861, which allowed him to speak to far more Americans than any previous president. And they expected to hear answers from him.

Lincoln would probably tell Obama that he too had been accused of being distant in the face of pressing political problems. As president, Lincoln emerged as a leader who kept his own counsel. Members of his own party accused him of neither convening nor consulting his cabinet enough.

I think Lincoln might offer a word of caution as President Obama puts in place several layers of economic and national security advisers in today's admittedly more complex administrative structure. On the one hand, Lincoln would applaud Obama for emulating what he did—

surround himself with strong leaders who would provide differing points of view. On the other hand, Lincoln might offer a gentle warning that Obama has appointed far more cooks than he did in the White House kitchen, which could end up spoiling his recipes for change.

With historical imagination, I can envision Lincoln putting his arm around Obama when offering this advice: Be comfortable with ambiguity. On a blue state/red state map, too often the question becomes, Are you for it or against it—gun control, abortion, immigration reform?

Ambiguity is too often seen as a weakness, an inability to decide. Not so for Lincoln. Ambiguity became for him the capacity to look at all sides of a problem. Ideologues are the persons who lack the capacity to see complexity in difficult issues.

Lincoln voiced this ambiguity in a private memo to himself that was found only after his death. As he pondered the meaning and action of God in the Civil War, he wrote, "I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet." At the very moment that Lincoln, in private, offered the affirmation that God willed this ongoing war, he did so by admitting the partiality of his vision—"almost" and "probably." Ambiguity is the mark of humility, not weakness. The question for the next four or eight years will be whether the American public can appreciate a president whose political autobiography, *The Audacity of Hope*, is filled with self-deprecating stories of his partial vision and even conflicting viewpoints.

Finally, Lincoln might have a heart-to-heart talk with Obama about the role of faith in politics.

Lincoln, who never wore his faith on his sleeve, who did not formally join a church, has left us in his second inaugural address the most profound speech combining politics and religion ever delivered to the American public. In only 701 words, the second shortest inaugural address (George Washington delivered a second inaugural of only 134 words), Lincoln mentions God 14 times, quotes the Bible four times, and invokes prayer three times. Today, what the public may remember most about

candidate Obama's religion is his painful distancing of himself from his former pastor and congregation during the 2008 campaign. What the American public needs to know is in his thoughtful discussion of faith in *The Audacity of Hope*. If the Bill of Rights codifies the separation of church and state, Obama affirms that Americans, "as a religious people," have never divided politics and religion. He couples the story of his own journey from skepticism to "embrace the Christian faith" with his admonition "to acknowledge the power of faith in the lives of the Ameri-

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can people." Obama says that part of the magnetism of the Christian faith that attracted him was the power of the African-American religious tradition to minister to the whole person and be an advocate for social justice.

Lincoln, in his second inaugural address, used inclusive language—"Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God"—to appeal to his entire audience, North and South. He would commend Obama's intention, in our increasingly multicultural and multireligious nation, to make his case for the religious and moral values that are the historical foundation of our society in order "to engage all persons of faith in the larger project of American renewal."

At the end of a compelling discussion of the Constitution in *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama exclaims, "I am left then with Lincoln." The remarkable tether between Lincoln and Obama, suddenly in such plain view in recent months, is not an end but a beginning. For many Americans, Lincoln, however appreciated before, has at the outset of a new presidency moved from there and then to here and now. He has become strangely contemporary. Obama, at the beginning of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial, reminds us that whenever contemporary Americans try to trace an idea or truth about our national identity, we will find Lincoln's initials—AL—carved on some tree, for he was there before us. ■