
From the Instructor

Zachary Kraehling wrote “Lionized Lincoln” for his third and final essay for the WR 100 seminar “Lincoln and His Legacy.” In this course, students study Abraham Lincoln both before and during his presidency; then the final unit of the course examines Lincoln’s legacy from the time of his death until today. Zak’s extraordinary final paper synthesizes readings of Lincoln’s words and actions both in the presidential and pre-presidential eras in order to develop an assessment of the legacy that this leader has for us, today.

Zak’s essay makes a provocative claim: that Lincoln’s beloved reputation is built not only on what most people know about him (his humble origins, his rise to political prominence, and his moral leadership during the Civil War), but also on his dictatorial actions and grand ambition. This last charge demonstrates Zak’s willingness to confront the facts on the ground, so to speak. In a style distinctive for its voice, Zak’s writing effectively “plants nay-sayers” (as Graff and Birkenstein put it in *They Say/I Say*) throughout the essay in order to acknowledge and respond to counterclaims. In making his case, Zak also incorporates a diverse range of sources (historians, a legal scholar, an activist, and a politician), but he does not lean on these for their authority; instead, his command of the material enables him to treat his sources respectfully, but not deferentially. Zak’s essay offers the kind of intellectual criticism that we are most in need of: he admires the subject of his essay, but he is unwilling to ignore the flaws that he observes. Ultimately, his work suggests that we—as critical readers, listeners, viewers, and consumers of culture—can be active participants in discovering and creating the icons we admire.

— David Shawn

WR 100: Lincoln and His Legacy

LIONIZED LINCOLN

Among the giants lionized in American culture, none stands as tall as Abraham Lincoln. Often viewed as the crusading, moral savior of the Republic, Lincoln is known as the archetypal American leader and the ideal President. It is this sense of perfection that undergirds the collective romanticized depiction of Abraham Lincoln. In my examination, however, I aim to look past this political correctness and offer a portrait of Lincoln derived from empirical evidence, primary sources, and expert opinion. In doing so, I endeavor to ascertain if Lincoln is overly romanticized or if his life and actions warrant his glorification. In gaining such an understanding, I will answer the weighty question: why is Abraham Lincoln so beloved a man in American history? Lincoln's legacy endures because of the unprecedented dictatorial power he wielded as president, his command of the country through its greatest moral struggle, and his embodiment of progress and democracy.

Lincoln's legacy endures because he is the closest thing America has had to a dictator. Regardless of whether a given dictator is just or unjust, good or bad, enlightened or despotic, the fact is axiomatic: great dictators are remembered. In America's system of checks and balances, however, it is hard for any one individual, even one possessed of great political tact, to influence the country's political course. As a result, it is difficult to say of any one president that he realized political change by himself. However, while Lincoln had, as President, neither the totalitarianism of Hitler nor the military genius of Caesar, his immense powers as commander-in-chief, his unilateralism, and his indomitable will win him perhaps the only American place in the realm of dictators. In his speech to the Young Men's

Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois in 1838, Lincoln expounds:

Think you [a Presidential chair or seat in Congress] would satisfy an Alexander, a Caesar, or a Napoleon? Never! Towering genius disdains a beaten path. It seeks regions hitherto unexplored. It sees *no distinction* in adding story to story, upon the monuments of fame, erected to the memory of others. It *denies* that it is glory enough to serve under any chief. It *scorns* to tread in the footsteps of *any* predecessor, however illustrious. It thirsts and burns for distinction; and, if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves or enslaving freemen. (19)

While one may tenably argue Lincoln was not speaking of himself in this passage, his talk of emancipating slaves, his manifest passion, and the distinctiveness of this section of his oration suggest Lincoln's ambitions were here exposed. Rising from the depths of obscurity to the highest office in the land through self-education, Lincoln's ascent to greatness exemplifies the scorn expressed here for the well-worn paths to immortality. Moreover, Lincoln's proclamation at the Gettysburg Address that the Civil War would give rise to "a new birth of freedom" is congruent with his sentiment that the momentous leaders of history see "*no distinction* in adding story to story" (405; 19). In keeping with this perspective, David Donald of Harvard University advances that Lincoln was focusing on the long-term consequences of the war in his Gettysburg Address, that Lincoln "was deliberately moving away from the particular occasion to make a general argument" (461). Rather than a mere chapter in American history, perhaps as Lincoln suggests in the Gettysburg Address, the epoch America would enter after the Civil War would be "regions hitherto unexplored" (19). Lincoln created an image of himself as a trailblazer, which the test of time would not erode. In being a maverick, a visionary Chief of the country, and in emancipating slaves, Lincoln's own life and actions are thus in accord with his own definition of "an Alexander, a Caesar . . . a Napoleon" whom history will not soon forget (19).

The profundity of Lincoln's unprecedented expansion of Presidential power makes him a leader of a dictatorial yet romantic nature. Dennis Hutchinson in the *South Dakota Law Review* notes of Lincoln:

he suspended habeas corpus and jailed opponents, flouted a court order by the Chief Justice of the United States, ordered troops raised and material purchased, blockaded Southern ports, emancipated slaves after denying the right to do so—all without prior congressional authorization. (284)

While the justice of these actions remains a point of contention, that Lincoln expanded his Presidential powers to beyond its legal limits in the name of the Union has unequivocally ingrained in the American psyche a profound distinction for President Lincoln. Whereas some might argue Lincoln's expansion of Presidential power was pursuant to his constitutional powers as Commander-in-Chief, I rejoin that even if this were the case, the argument that he was the closest the United States has had to a dictator still stands to reason. Furthermore, it is not solely for his bold actions that Lincoln is remembered and romanticized; had the North lost the war, Lincoln's daring actions would surely have been condemned or forgotten. As weapons instrumental to the success of the North, however, it is natural that his dictatorial measures be portrayed typically in positive, apologetic light by posterity. While the dictatorial transgressions cited by Hutchinson are undeniably inimical to the American tradition, they stand as concrete examples of his obstinacy in the face of Southern treason. The effect of these unbridled efforts to save the country is plainly seen in our contemporary sanctification of him. The best example of this phenomenon is the fact that the Emancipation Proclamation is championed as an enlightened example of freedom despite the fact it is a dictatorial decree, and that the 13th Amendment was more legitimate and fruitful in freeing the slaves. Is it not likely that had Lincoln sacrificed his daring, extraordinary measures of saving the Union in favor of agreeable, ordinary means he would not be so romanticized? It is, indeed, his creative, dictatorial, audacious methods of rescuing the country from the horrors of dissolution, the unprecedented lengths he went to in order to succeed, that have won him so august a place in the annals of history.

Although other Presidents led the country in times of world conflict, social strife, and racial tensions, Lincoln is singular in his leadership of a homeland engulfed in war and riven by the question of slavery. In his speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, Lincoln avers slavery is a "monstrous injustice" and proceeds, "I object to it because it assumes

there can be moral right in the enslaving of one man by another” (94; 96). In playing a large role in ending this evil institution in America, Lincoln is exalted as a uniquely moral leader. What other President can boast he freed the slaves? Lincoln goes so far as to say “[slavery] is hidden away, in the [C]onstitution, just as an afflicted man hides away a wen or a cancer, which he dares not cut out at once, lest he bleed to death; with the promise, nevertheless, that the cutting may begin at the end of a given time” (97). While Lincoln claims to have issued the Emancipation Proclamation out of necessity, it nonetheless inseparably linked him with the idea of equality, racial justice, and morality. Perhaps Lincoln’s name is so consonant with morality and justice because his Emancipation can be credited to himself only rather than to a whole legislative body. Through emancipation, Lincoln offered, in Martin Luther King Jr.’s words “a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice,” a promise to cut out the immoral cancer from the body of the country that would be completed with the 13th Amendment. Expanding on the degradation slavery brought America, Lincoln notes, “Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it” (98). In engineering the manumission of the slaves, Lincoln effectively re-purified the sacred robe, and in doing so realized the moral ideal set forth by the founders that all men are created equal. No other President can boast of an accomplishment of such moral grandeur. What is more, Lincoln realizes the gravity of the moral issues at stake in the war beyond slavery; the future of democracy and the United States itself rested upon the result of the war. In his Gettysburg Address Lincoln propounds, “now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether [this] nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure” (405). A “test” of the nation’s principles, the war was the trial by which the moral, enlightened, sacred ideals of the country would either die or succeed (Lincoln 405). By leading the “work” of saving “that government of the people, by the people, for the people,” Lincoln assumed a role of unparalleled importance in the crucible that was the Civil War, and in the moral history of our nation (405).

Even before accomplishing this great work in his presidency, Lincoln’s life story embodied the American ideal of progress. Perhaps more than that of any previous President, Lincoln’s life personified the senti-

ment that where one begins does not determine where one ends. Indeed, he climbed to the heights of the Presidency by virtue of his own initiative, consonant with the American ideals of individualism, democracy, and capitalism. Of his life in Indiana, he relates simply “there was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education” (Lincoln 238). Donald notes of Lincoln “in fact he was, in grammar as in other subjects, essentially self-taught” (48). Having grown up in the most uninspiring of circumstances, it can be reasonably assumed his only impetuses for education were his vision for self-betterment and his burning for distinction (Lincoln 19). Taking the onus of socio-economic progress on himself, Lincoln thus fully adopted the American entrepreneurial spirit so cherished in our culture. This ability to dream outside the confines of present circumstance characterizes both American idealism and Abraham Lincoln’s life, making him a man every American can identify with. Lincoln’s self-motivated evolution from humble farmer to Chief Executive defines his enduring populist appeal; that he inherited nothing and accomplished so much captures the essence of the American dream and makes him a man worth remembering.

Various representations of Lincoln’s progress inform how he is depicted as the embodiment of democracy. President Woodrow Wilson stated at the donation of the Lincoln homestead to the United States government that “this is the sacred mystery of democracy, that its richest fruits spring up out of soils which no man has prepared and in circumstances amid which they are least expected” (3). In advancing from the lowly occupation of farmer to Chief Executive, Lincoln not only demonstrates the potency of the idea of American progress but also captures “the sacred mystery of democracy” (Wilson 3). By Wilson’s estimation, then, in Lincoln can be found an example of democracy more compelling and inspiring than perhaps any other American figure. The founding fathers promised that the pursuit of happiness would be an opportunity afforded to all in the United States. In proving the veracity of this proposition, Lincoln gives life to the words of the founders, and force to the ideal of democracy so treasured by Americans. Of course, how democratic is a nation that confines its geniuses and leaders to the upper classes? Further underscoring Lincoln’s populism is his admission, “my parents were both born in Virginia, of undistinguished families—second families perhaps I should say” (238). Innumerable Presidents both before and after Lincoln

were seemingly destined for power, having been birthed into aristocratic, wealthy, educated circles. Whereas many other Presidents might rightfully be viewed as the products of generations of self-interested elitism, Lincoln is unique in his proximity to the common man. This would go far in explaining the deference with which the American populace accepted Lincoln's clearly undemocratic wartime policies. Ascending to powerful leadership from the very ranks of the people he led, Lincoln became a paradigm to which Americans adhere to this day. A close analysis of my propositions begs the question: how can Lincoln both embody democracy and be dictatorial? In response, I offer that it is most commonly the men who capture the general will of their nation, the men who embody the principles of their people, who win positions of immense dictatorial power.

Lincoln's death secured his appeal as a uniquely democratic leader. President Woodrow Wilson further relates at the Lincoln homestead, "we are not worthy to stand here unless we ourselves are in deed and in truth real democrats . . . ready to give our lives for the freedom and justice and spiritual exaltation of the great nation which shelters and nurtures us" (5). Some might contend Wilson said this with the foresight that America would soon enter the Great War in Europe, and that he was rousing patriotic fervor for this purpose rather than to commemorate Lincoln. While this argument might hold some truth, it does not detract from the power of self-sacrifice in America's democratic tradition exemplified in President Wilson's words. The death toll of the Civil War would be incomplete without Commander-in-Chief Abraham Lincoln; by becoming what Lincoln scholar Harold Holzer calls "a martyred President," Lincoln indeed assumed his place among the people he led into war (53). The fact Holzer uses the term "martyr" is of particular importance; Lincoln's death was not meaningless, but rather had profound value for the cause he valiantly led (53). Harvard President and Lincoln historian Drew Faust goes so far as to say of Lincoln's death that "religion and patriotism united in the ritual observance of the passing of one who embodied popular hopes and sacrifices" (56). In posterity's collective memory, Lincoln's death thus evidences his devotion to his mission in a way not unlike Christ's sacrificial death. Besides making Lincoln a martyr for the cause of liberty, his death further cemented the perception of him as a democrat by making his association with the founding fathers even closer. Like the founders, whose

“*all*,” according to Lincoln, “was staked upon [the success of the American experiment and whose] destiny was inseparably linked with it,” Lincoln gave his very life for the causes of Union and liberty (19). In forever enjoining his name with the founding fathers and the scores of men who died for the Union, Lincoln stands as a monument to the American ideal of democracy.

Lincoln’s legacy is as enigmatic as his life. To accredit his enduring popularity to a single trait of his life would be to grossly oversimplify a man who represents so many things to so many Americans. To the general public, he is an example of what can be accomplished with education, vision, and persistent effort. In this sense he is proof of the legitimacy of the American dream. For this reason he is glorified as a distinctively democratic President and a populist savior. His death only further solidifies this association. Conversely, the unprecedented dictatorial influence he wielded as Commander-in-Chief makes his name synonymous with the numerous national accomplishments borne of the Civil War. In formulating an illustration of Lincoln’s appeal, it is both his own actions and the idealism of posterity that have created the Lincoln depicted in popular culture. Indeed, irrespective of the fame he garnered during his lifetime, his actions have perhaps more force in the collective American memory today than when he was alive. In understanding why Lincoln is so romanticized in the American tradition, one gains a deeper knowledge of the man who so profoundly impacted the course of history. Furthermore, grasping the reasons for his glorification aids us in identifying those in contemporary society and in our midst who possess the same potential for leadership and veneration.

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