

SOME LESSONS THAT ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S LIFE
HOLDS FOR THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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I am deeply honored to be invited to serve as the David Dougherty Senior Teaching Fellow of American History and wish to express my heartfelt thanks to Headmaster Dougherty and the other members of the selection board for choosing me and to Lewis E. Lehrman for establishing the Fellowship.

I am especially glad to be among you and to be reminded of my own days as a student at another elite boarding school, Andover, from which I graduated in the late Pleistocene. I hope you students enjoy your time here as much as I did my four years at Phillips Academy.

In 1953, Benjamin P. Thomas, author of what remains to this day the best single-volume biography of Abraham Lincoln, explained what he had hoped to accomplish in his remarkable book: "I tried . . . to relate Lincoln to his own and to our own times, and there is a close relationship between the two, because democracy was under challenge in Lincoln's day, just as it is in ours. And since he probably understood the true meaning of democracy better than any of our other leaders, his life holds great significance for us and the world today. In fact, his vision was so far reaching that I sometimes think we are just now catching up with him, just now beginning to appreciate the lessons his life holds for us."¹

Though written more than five decades ago in the aftermath of the victory over Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan and while the Cold War against Communist

totalitarianism was well underway (most notably in Korea), Thomas's words resonate strongly at a time when radical Islamic jihadists have declared war on the United States in particular and democracy in general.

Throughout the American Civil War, Lincoln insisted that the conflict was not simply about preserving the Union, though that was obviously an important goal. Nor was it simply about ending slavery, though that too became an important war aim with the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation a year and a half after hostilities had begun and over two years before they would end. Less than a month after the bombardment of Fort Sumter initiated the conflict, one of Lincoln's two private secretaries told the president that many of his correspondents wished him to abolish slavery. Lincoln replied: "For my own part, I consider the central idea pervading this struggle is the necessity that is upon us, of proving that popular government is not an absurdity. We must settle this question now, whether in a free government the minority have the right to break up the government whenever they choose. If we fail it will go far to prove the incapability of the people to govern themselves."²

That same day, Lincoln addressed a letter to the Regent Captains of the tiny principality of San Marino, Italy, in which he said that the war "involves the question whether a Representative republic, extended and aggrandized so much as to be safe against foreign enemies can save itself from the dangers of domestic faction."³

Two months later, Lincoln elaborated on this theme in a special message to Congress, one of his most eloquent state papers. "Our popular government," he wrote, "has often been called an experiment. Two points in it our people have already settled –

the successful establishing and the successful administering of it. One still remains – it's successful maintenance against a formidable attempt to overthrow it. It is now for them to demonstrate to the world, that those who can fairly carry an election, can also suppress a rebellion; that ballots are the rightful, and peaceful, successors of bullets; and that when ballots have fairly, and constitutionally decided, there can be no successful appeal back to bullets; that there can be no successful appeal, except to ballots themselves, at succeeding elections. Such will be a great lesson of peace; teaching men that what they cannot take by an election, neither can they take it by a war; teaching all, the folly of being the beginners of a war.”

Later in the message he foreshadowed the celebrated speech he would give at Gettysburg: “And this issue embraces more than the fate of these United States. It presents to the whole family of man the question, whether a Constitutional republic, or a democracy – a government of the people, by the same people – can, or cannot, maintain its territorial integrity against its own domestic foes. It presents the question, whether discontented individuals, too few in numbers to control administration, according to organic law, in any case, can always, upon the pretences made in this case, or on any other pretences, or arbitrarily, without any pretence, break up their government, and thus practically put an end to free government upon the earth. It forces us to ask: ‘Is there, in all republics, this inherent and fatal weakness?’ ‘Must a government, of necessity, be too strong for the liberties of its own people, or too weak to maintain its own existence?’”

In this message to Congress, Lincoln called the war “essentially a People's contest.” For Unionists, “it is a struggle for maintaining in the world, that form and

substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men – to lift artificial weights from all shoulders; to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all; to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life. Yielding to partial and temporary departures, from necessity, this is the leading object of the government for whose existence we contend.” These words had a special meaning for a man who had made his way up from frontier poverty and ignorance.⁴

Lincoln felt it necessary to keep reminding his constituents that the war involved the fate of democracy. In the Gettysburg Address, delivered more than two years after that message to Congress, Lincoln put the case more succinctly: the war was fought so “that Government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”⁵ This was no exaggeration: at that time the United States was by far the most democratic of all nations, allowing its citizens a much greater voice in their governance than England, France, or any other country. Opponents of democracy hoped that the Confederacy would triumph so that they could plausibly argue that allowing common people a say in their government might sound like a good idea on paper, but it could not work in practice. The breakup of the United States would prove that point.

In our time it is also necessary to remember that we are locked in a war with an enemy whose goal is to eliminate democracy. Radical jihadists hate the United States not merely because our country is powerful, or because it is wealthy, or because its culture is in their eyes decadent. They also hate it because it is a liberal democracy. As a recent scholar of jihadist thought explained, the “entire concept of democracy comes in for special condemnation by jihadists” who today “have made a critique of democracy the

centerpiece of their ideology.” More than just majority rule, they reject virtually all aspects of Western liberalism, including personal freedom, religious freedom, separation of church and state, international law and organizations like the UN, and modern economies with financial markets, banks, and stock markets.⁶

In waging a war to vindicate democracy, Lincoln demonstrated iron resolve which he managed to infuse it into the Northern public. If he had not been so determined, and if he had been unable to inspire the North with that determination, his presidency would have been ineffectual, the South would have prevailed, and the history of the U. S. and the world would have been vastly different. While Lincoln’s mercy and compassion are justly celebrated, it is often forgotten that he was tough-minded, determined, and relentless in pursuit of victory. Nothing better captures that aspect of Lincoln’s leadership than his instructions to Ulysses S. Grant in the summer of 1864. As the Union army moved on Richmond, that general had urged that none of his troops be withdrawn to deal with potential anti-draft riots like the one that had occurred in New York the previous year. Lincoln replied with a steely telegram: “I have seen your despatch expressing your unwillingness to break your hold where you are. Neither am I willing. Hold on with a bull-dog gripe, and chew & choke, as much as possible.”⁷ A few months later, Lincoln penned a similar message to the general: “Gen. Sheridan says ‘If the thing is pressed I think that Lee will surrender.’ Let the thing be pressed.”⁸

Earlier in the war, Lincoln had similarly expressed his iron resolve. In the wake of General George B. McClellan’s failure to take Richmond in 1862, Lincoln wrote a letter to Northern governors urging them to recruit 300,000 more troops. In it he stated bluntly:

“I expect to maintain this contest until successful, or till I die, or am conquered, or my term expires, or Congress or the country forsakes me.”⁹ He told friends: “I have got done throwing grass.” From now on, he “proposed trying stones.”¹⁰ Solicitude for the rights of slaveholders and other Confederate non-combatants as well as for civil liberties in the North had to be modified. In carrying out this new strategy, Lincoln emancipated slaves, suspended the writ of habeas corpus, drafted men into the army, confiscated Confederate civilian property, promoted the adoption of ever-more lethal weapons, and appointed what he hoped were aggressive, capable generals.

Opposition to Lincoln’s stern measures was led by so-called Peace Democrats (also known as Copperheads) who insisted that the president had become a tyrant, trampling underfoot the Constitution and rescinding the Bill of Rights. To those charges, Lincoln in 1862 replied gently but firmly: “What would you do in my position? Would you drop the war where it is? Or, would you prosecute it in future, with elder-stalk squirts, charged with rose water? Would you deal lighter blows rather than heavier ones? Would you give up the contest, leaving any available means unapplied? I am in no boastful mood. I shall not do more than I can, and I shall do all I can to save the government, which is my sworn duty as well as my personal inclination. I shall do nothing in malice. What I deal with is too vast for malicious dealing.”¹¹

Defending the suspension of habeas corpus, Lincoln pointed out that the Constitution authorized such drastic action. “The whole of the laws which I was sworn to take care that they be faithfully executed,” he wrote early in the war, “were being resisted, and failing to be executed, in nearly one third of the states. Must I have allowed

them to finally fail of execution, even had it been perfectly clear that by the use of the means necessary to their execution, some single law, made in such extreme tenderness of the citizens liberty, that practically, it relieves more of the guilty, than the innocent, should, to a very limited extent, be violated? To state the question more directly, are all the laws, but one, to go unexecuted, and the government itself go to pieces, lest that one be violated? Even in such a case I should consider my official oath broken if I should allow the government to be overthrown, when I might think that disregarding the single law would tend to preserve it— But, in this case I was not, in my own judgment, driven to this ground— In my opinion I violated no law— The provision of the Constitution that ‘The privilege of the writ of habeas corpus, shall not be suspended unless when, in cases of rebellion or invasion, the public safety may require it’ is equivalent to a provision – is a provision – that such privilege may be suspended when, in cases of rebellion, or invasion, the public safety does require it. I decided that we have a case of rebellion, and that the public safety does require the qualified suspension of the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus, which I authorized to be made. Now it is insisted that Congress, and not the executive, is vested with this power— But the Constitution itself, is silent as to which, or who, is to exercise the power; and as the provision plainly was made for a dangerous emergency, I can not bring myself to believe that the framers of that instrument intended that in every case the danger should run it's course until Congress could be called together, the very assembling of which might be prevented, as was intended in this case, by the rebellion.”¹²

Lincoln had a good argument, for Congress in that era was often out of session, and an invasion or rebellion might well take place during one of its long recesses, just as

had occurred in April 1861. Critics maintained that since the provision regarding habeas corpus appears in the Constitution's first article, which deals with the powers of Congress, the legislative branch, not the executive, had the power to suspend the writ. But they failed to note that the original draft of that article stated that the "privileges and benefit of the Writ of Habeas Corpus shall be enjoyed in this Government in the most expeditious and ample manner; and shall not be suspended by the Legislature except upon the most urgent and pressing occasions, and for a limited time not exceeding _____ months." Later it was revised by Gouverneur Morris to read as it did in the ratified version of the Constitution. By replacing the original language with Morris's substitute, the framers implicitly rejected the notion that Congress alone was empowered to suspend the privilege.¹³

In justifying the emancipation of slaves, Lincoln was unable to cite a specific provision of the Constitution like the one authorizing the suspension of habeas corpus. Instead he explained that implicit in the founding document were presidential war powers that authorized him to take unusual steps necessary to prosecute a war, steps that would not be legal in peacetime. "I am naturally anti-slavery," he told a Kentucky delegation in 1864. "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I can not remember when I did not so think, and feel. And yet I have never understood that the Presidency conferred upon me an unrestricted right to act officially upon this judgment and feeling. It was in the oath I took that I would, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. I could not take the office without taking the oath. Nor was it my view that I might take an oath to get power, and break the oath in using the power. I understood, too, that in ordinary civil administration this oath even forbade me to

practically indulge my primary abstract judgment on the moral question of slavery. I had publicly declared this many times, and in many ways. And I aver that, to this day, I have done no official act in mere deference to my abstract judgment and feeling on slavery. I did understand however, that my oath to preserve the constitution to the best of my ability, imposed upon me the duty of preserving, by every indispensable means, that government---that nation---of which that constitution was the organic law. Was it possible to lose the nation, and yet preserve the constitution? By general law life and limb must be protected; yet often a limb must be amputated to save a life; but a life is never wisely given to save a limb. I felt that measures, otherwise unconstitutional, might become lawful, by becoming indispensable to the preservation of the constitution, through the preservation of the nation. Right or wrong, I assumed this ground, and now avow it. I could not feel that, to the best of my ability, I had even tried to preserve the constitution, if, to save slavery, or any minor matter, I should permit the wreck of government, country, and Constitution all together.”¹⁴

A year earlier, he told a group of Peace Democrats who had protested against the military arrest of one of their most inflammatory leaders: “I can no more be persuaded that the government can constitutionally take no strong measure in time of rebellion, because it can be shown that the same could not be lawfully taken in time of peace, than I can be persuaded that a particular drug is not good medicine for a sick man, because it can be shown to not be good food for a well one. Nor am I able to appreciate the danger . . . that the American people will, by means of military arrests during the rebellion, lose the right of public discussion, the liberty of speech and the press, the law of evidence, trial by jury, and Habeas corpus, throughout the indefinite peaceful future which I trust

lies before them, any more than I am able to believe that a man could contract so strong an appetite for emetics during temporary illness, as to persist in feeding upon them through the remainder of his healthful life.”

As a nation, we face a challenge from jihadists like the one Lincoln’s generation faced in the 1860s. The fate of democracy depended on Northern victory in the Civil War and today it depends on victory over the forces of radical jihad. Lincoln’s example should inspire us to meet that challenge resolutely and realistically, never forgetting that the stakes involved in the struggle are high indeed and that the means to wage that’s struggle are not necessarily the same that would be appropriate for times of peace.

Lincoln’s example should also inspire us not only as we contemplate how to respond to the forces of jihadism but also how to conduct our personal lives. He offered wise advice that might profitably be followed by us all. My own favorite Lincoln quote is from the counsel he gave in 1863 to a young Union captain who was squabbling with his superior officers. He began by citing a passage from Hamlet, Polonius’s speech to his adolescent son who was about to leave for college. (Shakespeare was one of Lincoln’s favorite authors.) “The advice of a father to his son ‘Beware of entrance to a quarrel, but being in, bear it that the opposed may beware of thee,’ is good, and yet not the best.” Lincoln proposed a wise revision of Polonius’s advice: “Quarrel not at all. No man resolved to make the most of himself, can spare time for personal contention. Still less can he afford to take all the consequences, including the vitiating of his temper, and the loss of self-control. Yield larger things to which you can show no more than equal right;

and yield lesser ones, though clearly your own. Better give your path to a dog, than be bitten by him in contesting for the right. Even killing the dog would not cure the bite.”

Another piece of paternal advice that I especially admire is contained in a letter that Lincoln wrote to his young law partner several years before the Civil War. The partner had complained that older members of the Whig party (which Lincoln belonged to) were discriminating against the younger members. In reply, Lincoln said: “The way for a young man to rise, is to improve himself every way he can, never suspecting that any body wishes to hinder him. Allow me to assure you, that suspicion and jealousy never did help any man in any situation. There may sometimes be ungenerous attempts to keep a young man down; and they will succeed too, if he allows his mind to be diverted from its true channel to brood over the attempted injury. Cast about, and see if this feeling has not injured every person you have ever known to fall into it.” This is an especially timely message, for in recent times people have been encouraged to wallow in a sense of victimhood. Beware of such thinking, Lincoln warned. It injures all who fall into it.

As a lawyer, Lincoln was occasionally asked by young men if they could have an apprenticeship under his tutelage. He obliged some applicants and offered good advice to others whom he could not accommodate. To one he wrote: "If you are resolutely determined to make a lawyer of yourself, the thing is more than half done already. It is but a small matter whether you read with any body or not. I did not read with any one. Get the books, and read and study them till you understand them in their principal features; and that is the main thing. It is of no consequence to be in a large town while

you are reading. I read at New Salem, which never had three hundred people living in it. The books, and your capacity for understanding them, are just the same in all places. . . . Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed, is more important than any other one thing."¹⁵ When a would-be attorney asked Lincoln how to gain "a thorough knowledge of the law." he replied: "The mode is very simple, though laborious, and tedious. It is only to get the books, and read, and study them carefully. . . . Work, work, work, is the main thing."¹⁶

I would like to close with an 1860 quote from Lincoln that may be especially relevant to the seniors in the audience. (By seniors, I do not refer to codgers like myself but students in their final year.) He had recently learned from his son Robert that a young friend has received a rejection letter from the college he wanted to attend: "I have scarcely felt greater pain in my life than on learning yesterday from Bob's letter, that you had failed to enter Harvard University. And yet there is very little in it, if you will allow no feeling of discouragement to seize, and prey upon you. It is a certain truth, that you can enter, and graduate in, Harvard University; and having made the attempt, you must succeed in it. 'Must' is the word. I know not how to aid you, save in the assurance of one of mature age, and much severe experience, that you can not fail, if you resolutely determine, that you will not. The President of the institution, can scarcely be other than a kind man; and doubtless he would grant you an interview, and point out the readiest way to remove, or overcome, the obstacles which have thwarted you. In your temporary failure there is no evidence that you may not yet be a better scholar, and a more successful man in the great struggle of life, than many others, who have entered college

more easily. Again I say let no feeling of discouragement prey upon you, and in the end you are sure to succeed.”¹⁷

If we follow Lincoln’s example and take his advice, both personal and political, we too are sure to succeed.

A young pianist recently remarked that he felt it an honor and a responsibility to play Beethoven’s music. Doing so compelled him, he said, to be a better musician and a better human being. I feel the same way about Lincoln. I have spent the last two decades studying and writing about him; it has been a challenge and a pleasure. I have tried to be a better historian and a better person as a result. I will keep on trying.

¹ Thomas, autobiographical sketch [1953], unpublished typescript, Benjamin P. Thomas Papers. Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

² Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettlinger, eds., Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 19-20 (entry for 7 May 1861).

³ Roy P. Basler et al., eds., Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln (8 vols. plus index; New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953-55), 4:360.

⁴ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 4:439.

⁵ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:19.

⁶ Mary Habeck, Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 72-73.

⁷ Lincoln to Grant, Washington, 17 August 1864. Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:499.

⁸ Lincoln to Grant, Washington, 7 April 1865, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 8:392.

⁹ Lincoln to Seward, Washington, 28 June 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:292.

¹⁰ Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 22 July, Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 24 July 1862; Washington correspondence, 21 July, Cincinnati Gazette, 22 July 1862; Washington correspondence, 22 July, New York Evening Post, 23 July 1862.

¹¹ Lincoln to Cuthbert Bullitt, Washington, 28 July 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:344-46.

¹² Draft of special message to Congress, 4 July 1861, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹³ Wilbourn E. Benton, ed., 1787: Drafting the U.S. Constitution (2 vols.; College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1986), 1:976, 991.

¹⁴ Lincoln to Albert Hodges, Washington, 4 April 1864, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:281-82.

¹⁵ Lincoln to Isham Reavis, Springfield, 5 November 1855, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 2:327.

¹⁶ Lincoln to John M. Brockman, Springfield, 25 September 1860, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 4:121.

¹⁷ Lincoln to George C. Latham, Springfield, 22 July 1860, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 4:87.