

## A Penny for Your Thoughts

Michael C. Scanlon KitKat Club October 17, 2006

"Remembrance for a great man is this. The newsies are pitching pennies. And on the copper disc is the man's tose.":

Abraham Lincoln was an American original. His place in history is secure. And so is his place in our affections. There was something lofty, something different, something special about him. He emanated a kind of parochial grandeur. He had many contradictions-but they served him well. He was a politician in the noblest sense of the word. A man of moral structure, he had a strong intellect plus an uncommon street sense. He was a figure who would give heroic life to what the Union was and what it might become.

The tragic order of Lincoln's life might have been the product of a playwright's imagination. His humble beginnings; basically self-taught; early failures; then a meteoric rise in politics; his presidency coinciding with a war; the climatic freeing of the slaves; and his assassination as the war ends. His destiny was obliged to follow a most unusual script.

No historical figure has had more written about him in the English language with the exceptions of Jesus Christ and William Shakespeare. With so many books on Lincoln and more coming each year, it is necessary for me to limit the time in his life I will focus on tonight. If I did not do this, you would "little note nor long remember what I said here".<sup>2</sup>

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The last one year, four months, and four weeks of his life comprise very little time. It began at the dedication of a military cemetery at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863. Asked to say a few appropriate remarks, Lincoln delivered what would become the most famous speech in American history.

"The enduring fame of the Gettysburg Address derives from several qualities: its musical cadence reminiscent of the Bible Lincoln knew so well; its simple language; its use of repetition; its succinct expression of overarching

ideas; and its generous spirit and soaring vision."3 The structure allowed Lincoln to link the country's past, present, and future in one sustained, abstract view.

The problem facing Lincoln at Gettysburg was to accomplish two things: to commemorate the past and to prophesy the future. He took the theme dearest to his audience, to honor the heroic dead, and combined it with the theme nearest to his own heart, the preservation of democracy. "Out of this double theme grew his poetic metaphor of birth, death, and spiritual rebirth of the life of man and the life of the nation."5

Democracy, as an active, living thing, meant to Lincoln the verification or the proving of the proposition to which its very existence was in the beginning dedicated. "Lincoln placed promise of equality at the heart of the American

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experience and, anticipating the end of slavery in the republic, called for a new birth of freedom in the country to redeem the war's terrible cost."6

By dating the nation's birth back to 1776, with the Declaration of Independence, he meant to justify the transformation of the Union war aims during the short period remaining to include not just preservation of the Union, but the destruction of slavery, in order to fulfill the ideals of the American Revolution.?

Lincoln well understood the power of rhetoric to delineate the aims of politics and war. Against those who wanted to return to the Union as it was and end the carnage, Lincoln argued forcefully why the war, with all of its revulsions, must be continued to a just and peaceful conclusion.s

He made use of down-to-earth words derived from Old English as opposed to elevated words derived from Latin and Greek. Most striking is how "the sublime appears in the simplest dress." Lincoln achieved his eloquence by a remarkable blending of the humble and the lofty. Poet James Russell Lowell, in early 1864, praised Lincoln's style as "familiar dignity."

The voice we hear in the Gettysburg Address is not an individual voice.

The address is full of first-person references, but everyone is plural. Ten times

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Lincoln uses the plural we and three times us. At Gettysburg, Lincoln says nothing of himself.!» "His very reticence to speak about himself is what makes his voice by the end of the address so decisive."11

Through the process of lonely meditation during his rough and humble life, Lincoln had been particularly impressed by two different sources he read and re-read, the Bible and the plays of William Shakespeare. From the Bible he absorbed the religious color in which he clothed his thoughts. The King James Bible was called the Saxon Bible in Lincoln's time. Saxon words are briefer. They bring more clout. "It might be that the highest potential for Saxon eloquence can be found in someone not educated to be a gentleman, someone with deep roots in rustic life. Some of the greatest romantic eloquence ever produced comes from one such person. It is in the Civil War oratory of Abraham Lincoln that Saxon eloquence displayed all its possibilities."12

From Shakespeare, he learned to study the passions of humanity. Some of the plays focused on power and politics, issues central to his own life. He enjoyed the range of Shakespeare's characters from the sublime to the ridiculous and from profound pessimism to infinite hope. The quality that set both the writer and the reader apart from others, was their degree of comprehension of humanity, and the scope of their relationship to their

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tellurians.» It seems appropriate that Lincoln favored the tragedies of Shakespeare and that Macbeth was his favorite.

Emancipation was a dangerous subject for a politician to face. Lincoln understood that the Republican Party was not a unified, coherent organization but a collection of rival interest groups.<sup>16</sup> Lincoln retained a firm understanding. As Lincoln returned from Gettysburg, the reality of the moment was that the war was progressing at a slow pace and losses on both sides were horrific.

At the end of the conflict the final figures would reveal that 623,000 men died in the Civil War. With a population of 31 million, it would be the bloodiest war in our country's history.

Lincoln had moved earlier in 1863 to end slavery in a restricted way with his Emancipation Proclamation. He presented it as an exercise of his war powers as commander in chief to weaken the South and to provide manpower for the North. He had used legal language that one historian said had "the moral grandeur of a bill of lading."<sup>14</sup> Whatever its legal limitations, the Emancipation Proclamation had immense symbolic significance, a point the black abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, emphasized when he declared that its spirit had "a life and power beyond its letter."<sup>15</sup> It left Lincoln to free all of the slaves with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment at a later time.

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of the line separating party loyalty and patriotism. He sought partisan advantage without mercy when he could but Lincoln understood the opposition to him was not necessarily unpatriotic. He had been trying to balance different factions in his party since he arrived in Washington. The slave holding border-states of Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky and Missouri had to be handled with care as he dealt with the problem of slavery. The more radical Republicans had been attacking him for moving too slowly toward emancipation.

It was a challenge for Lincoln to identify the moment when the country would accept an advance to new ground. "Not pushing mainstream sentiment toward emancipation faster than it wanted to go, meant turning a deaf ear to the appeals of antislavery radicals, while simultaneously nudging border-state conservatives toward greater realism."<sup>18</sup> By making freedom of the slaves another goal of the war, the President risked losing the political coalition which had supported him in the fight to preserve the Union. Any suggestion of a moral crusade or of equal rights would have inflamed the conservative elements in the army and at home.

Lincoln learned when to seize the initiative and when to let public opinion ripen. His law background helped him to perfect this attribute." He was able to analyze complex situations and to seek the least provocative way to neutralize the opposition while making his position crystal clear.» But it was his patience

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and his timing that provided the presidential leadership that the nation needed at this time.

As he wrestled with problems presented by his political party, he had to deal with similar factions within his own cabinet. Lincoln had appointed his Republican rivals, Seward, Chase, and Bates, as well as members of other parties to his cabinet. He needed administrative talent and the best man available for each post. By including these men in his cabinet, Lincoln reflected great self-confidence and the fact that he intended to be the leader of his administration. It was a lesson several cabinet members would absorb only with difficulty.<sup>21</sup> Lincoln was able to impress on this politically divergent cabinet his own purpose, perception and resolution at virtually every juncture.<sup>22</sup>

As 1863 drew to a close, Lincoln emerged as a stronger and more sure leader. Fumbling and uncertain at the beginning of his term and plagued by problems of deficient military leadership, he grew in mind and character. He had an enormous capacity for personal growth. This enabled a man with very little formal education, no administrative experience, and poor preparation to eventually succeed in high office. "Lincoln instinctively understood the moral burdens he had to shoulder; he appreciated the high seriousness of the crisis; he grasped its tragic proportions while never losing sight of the good that could somehow be made out of this awful conflict." <sup>23</sup>

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The year of 1864 was entered into with doubt of being reelected or even being renominated by his party. Lincoln was being stridently criticized from all sides. One group that Lincoln could take comfort in was the Union army, which

was not only a staunchly loyal political force but one which would play its part in energizing and mobilizing wider public support.

In March, 1864, Lincoln appointed Ulysses S. Grant to take command of the Union army. Lincoln had gone through a list of generals—McClellan, Rosecrans, Burnside, Hooker and Meade. He did not simply need Grant to succeed; he needed to show the American people that a strategy of total war could defeat the South. Grant would utilize the vastly superior manpower and attack on all fronts.

Grant advanced against Lee in May and inched forward in Virginia with staggering losses. From all corners of the Union waves of indignation were directed at Lincoln. He was held responsible for the large numbers of dead and wounded under Grant's command.

The war and the loss of life increased the desire for peace on any terms.

By late June, an anti-Lincoln riptide was beginning to rise as a result of the war news. Yet Lincoln had enough control over his party organization to win a

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unanimous endorsement for a second term. He insisted that the party platform call for a constitutional amendment to bring about full emancipation for all slaves.

Regarding a negotiated peace settlement, Lincoln correctly understood that Jefferson Davis would never agree to a restoration of the Union. Having come this far on emancipation he did not use it as a bargaining chip for peace on Southern terms. Lincoln would not give up on the nearly 200,000 black men who would eventually serve in the Union ranks. He was a model for presidential leadership in crisis. Moral vision and willingness to act set him apart.

"Men friendly to the Union cause remembered July and August of 1864 as the darkest days of the war. Earlier setbacks had tried the nation's faith, but the reverses of this hot, dry summer fell with greater oppressiveness because high hopes had been dashed. No joyful tidings came from the army now. Confusion

reigned in politics. Peace appeared to be a distant dream."<sup>25</sup>

To add to the negative atmosphere, Lincoln was visited by members of Congress who opposed him. In August, Senator Benjamin Wade told him, "You are the father of every military blunder that has been made during the war. The government is on the road to Hell, and you are not a mile from there this

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minute." Lincoln responded, "Yes....that is just about the distance from here to the Capitol."<sup>26</sup>

Even Lincoln's most devoted supporters despaired of his reelection.

Nicolay, his secretary, wrote, "Everything is darkness and doubt and discouragement."<sup>27</sup> Lincoln reconciled himself to losing the election and prepared to cooperate with his successor.

Then the situation changed. In September, Sherman took Atlanta.

Sheridan smashed Jubal Early in the Shenandoah Valley. Even the pressure of Grant on Lee took on a more positive look. The favorable turn of military events caused many to board the Lincoln bandwagon. The momentum had turned in favor of the North.

Crucial to the election outcome would be the vote of the Union soldiers.

Most of them voted in the field but Sherman granted furloughs to 29 Indiana regiments to vote at home. Lincoln won 78% of the vote of the troops and won a decisive victory over his Democratic opponent. He had met the test of being able to rally popular support in the middle of a devastating war.

Lincoln had been the imponderable factor that frustrated the South.

Their troops had fought with courage under the inspired leadership of Robert E. Lee. Their people had shown heroic fortitude. With a less determined leader in the White House, they might have achieved their goal. But Lincoln, with his

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unwavering faith in the nation's destiny, had infused his own unconquerable spirit into the people of the North.<sup>28</sup> The trust and confidence of the people in

their President continued to grow stronger.

When Congress assembled in early December, in a lame duck session, Lincoln reminded the House that the Senate had already approved the Thirteenth Amendment, and he enjoined them to do so as well. He had travelled far on the road to emancipation from the loud silences in his First Inaugural to actively seeking freedom for the slaves. He set about using his powers of persuasion and patronage to get the amendment approved. Slowly, several votes changed sides. The vote came on January 31, 1865, and the amendment passed with just three votes more than the two-thirds majority needed. It was sent on for ratification by the states.

One of Lincoln's most polished and sophisticated speeches was delivered March 4, 1865. It was his Second Inaugural Address. Lincoln knew the audience would have cheered him if he chose to demonize the South. But he chose a different path. He was to portray a path that North and South could now travel together.<sup>29</sup>

He noted that one eighth of the whole population were slaves, not distributed over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of the Nation.

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Lincoln intended to situate slavery as an inclusive problem that was the responsibility of the whole nation. He pointed out the irony that both sides failed to understand adequately both the cause and the result of the civil strife.<sup>30</sup> Many in the audience expected Lincoln to offer assurances that God was on the side of the North. He did not. What we hear is not the legal Lincoln but the theological Lincoln and his meaning is buttressed by quotations from the bible. "More than any of his other speeches, the Second Inaugural fused spiritual faith with politics."<sup>31</sup>

This speech was remarkable for its compassion, its humility, and its profound comprehension of the tragedy the nation had suffered. Lincoln disassociated himself from the moral arrogance which military victory spawns.



He closed with an eloquent plea for a just peace and a better future. "With malice toward none; with charity for all."<sup>33</sup>

Barely a month after Lincoln's second inauguration, on April 9, 1865, Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Court House, in Virginia. Six days later Lincoln died on April 15, 1865.

His voice was stilled forever but not his words. "If today's politicians are glued to their teleprompters because their speeches are written by others and

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meant to be read, Lincoln was attentive to the actual audience crowded before him as he delivered speeches written by himself that were meant to be heard."<sup>34</sup> Lincoln wrote for the ear. He often spoke or whispered out loud before putting pen to paper. He was fascinated by the sound of words. Not being a good extemporaneous speaker, he preferred to prepare well and choose his words carefully. The Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural remain as living proof of this.

One year, four months and four weeks is a thin slice of time. Yet, this is what Lincoln had prepared for his whole life, and in this brief period his accomplishments secured his place in history.

Lincoln struggled every day in the White House with turmoil, both inner and outer. He was not a saint. Do not mistake him for a saint. He was a good man in a bad time. A man of belief, he believed in the goodness of the American people. He embraced the thought of continued national life for the country he loved. At Gettysburg Lincoln said, "That this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."<sup>35</sup>

Footnotes

1. Carl Sandburg, "In A Back Alley" 2. Abraham Lincoln 3. William E. Gienapp, 149 4. Roy P. Basler, 94 5. Ibid 6. Gienapp, 149 7. Ibid 8. Ronald C. White, Jr., The Eloquent President, 254 9. Kenneth Cmiel, 95 10. Ibid, 116 11. White, 256 12. Ibid, 254 13. Basler, 206 14. Frank J. Williams, 47 15. Gienapp, 125 16. Donald Herbert Donald, 262 17. Mark E. Neely, Jr., 154 18. Richard J. Carwardine, 193 19. Frank J.

Williams,47 20. DorisKearnsGoodwin, 364 21. Gienapp,76 22. Goodwin, 701 23. Jay Winik,251 24. Carwardine, 280 25. Benjamin P.Thomas, 440 26. Williams, 113 27. Thomas, 443 28. Ibid,495 29. White, 287 30. Ibid,259-260 31. Goodwin, 699 32. Gienapp, 188 33. Abraham Lincoln 34. White, Pg.XX 35. Abraham Lincoln

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