

What Abraham Lincoln Means to Us Today

By Leandra Wolf, March 2008

Curled up in a corner of the couch, I sigh deeply as I delve into *A Picture of Freedom*, my latest story of a slave girl. From Harriet Tubman to the characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, such beloved books make my active imagination gasp and thrill at the fantastic horrors of slavery. Along with my factual and fictional heroes I feel the grueling oppression of slavery, and the glorious—though at times bewildering—effects of newfound freedom. With my heroes, I too come to recognize Abraham Lincoln as the man who granted me unheard-of liberties, the *Emancipation Proclamation* as the document that changed my life forever, and Washington, D.C., as the scene of these mysterious, life-altering politics.

A few years have passed, and I am at an adult get-together, witnessing the political discussions that inevitably ensue. My adolescent ears are only half-heartedly tuning in to the conversation, when, suddenly, something reaches out of this mysterious, adult world of politics and grabs my attention. “Abraham Lincoln...destroying states' rights...” someone is grumbling. What is this? I can hardly believe my ears! The question assaults me: Isn't Abraham Lincoln always the hero?

Call it the dawning of reality, the same experience that can irrevocably destroy childhood idylls. When, several years ago, I thus witnessed an Oregonian speak of Lincoln in such negative context, I was stunned. Like most schoolchildren, I had an unspoken conviction that Abraham Lincoln was one of those men definitively placed in column “Good”. But suddenly, the world of politics was ushered in: a drizzly world of gray, so rarely marked by black and white.

In the following years, I learned of the thorny sparring between states' rights and those of a unified, central government, as well as the contentious debates over the justice of slavery. In addition, I grew to comprehend the extreme repercussions of the Civil War in the South: the economic collapse, the injustices of the Reconstruction and the 'carpet-baggers'. Lincoln's choices took on a new, bloody meaning when I realized that he personally authorized General Grant to target Southern civilians and infrastructure to effectively cripple the Confederacy.

Abraham Lincoln's fame as president also acquired a new dimension when I discovered that many of his achievements were due to an unprecedented appropriation of powers. The *Emancipation Proclamation* was not the only time Lincoln relied on his status of 'Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy': he also proclaimed a blockade¹, surreptitiously suppressed the Maryland legislature², suspended the writ of habeas corpus³, imprisoned thousands of Confederate sympathizers without trial⁴, and spent money without the authorization of Congress⁵. At one point, in fact, Congress was provoked to rule against Lincoln's attempts to convict civilians before military tribunals, while the civil courts were still fully functional⁶.

The greatest surprise came to me when I unearthed the circumstances around the *Emancipation Proclamation*. Although every civil rights leader idolizes Abraham Lincoln for his work in ending slavery, he himself clarified that that was not the ultimate aim of the War. "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union," he wrote in a letter to Horace Greeley, in August 1862. "And is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that." In fact, much earlier, during the 1858 senatorial race, Lincoln had stated that he was "not in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races."

Furthermore, even when the *Emancipation Proclamation* was announced a month later, and finalized in January 1863, it only pertained to those states "rebellious" against the Union. Lincoln's exception of other states, such as Maryland and Delaware, was a now-often-overlooked compromise. And even after Lincoln's death, 'Jim Crow' laws throughout both North and South continued to undermine blacks' liberty and make the *Proclamation* worth little more than the paper on which it was written.

If so many of Lincoln's transactions were dubious, if not discreditable, what is it that places him so high in America's admiration? My seven-year-old sister unabashedly calls Abraham Lincoln her "hero"; because in her own words, "he was one of the first Presidents I learned the name of." Surely there is a reason for this fame that runs much deeper than Lincoln's romantic boyhood and inspiring oratory, his homely appearance and down-to-earth

nicknames.

I think Abraham Lincoln's significance today traces back not just to his civil rights efforts, but especially to the conviction he displayed in pursuing them. Even though they were often a means, rather than a political end, Lincoln's achievements in this field were definitive and unapologetic. His level of dedication to this cause can be tangibly measured; it was his speech advocating the black vote, in fact, that directly instigated his own assassination.

Furthermore, every democratic American has reason to admire Lincoln's devotion to upholding the *Declaration of Independence*. Abraham Lincoln constantly placed the *Declaration* before any other document in importance, with the *Constitution* a close second. It was these two writings that served as Lincoln's guiding lights: from his decisions for war, to his opposition to further expansion of slave territory, to his emphasis for universal liberty.

Looking back, I can tell that it was these two traits that so early on defined Lincoln to me, in that blissful period of childhood when I read all the Civil War stories I could get my hands on. It was these two qualities that both cost him his life, and made him a living hero, an inspiration to civil rights workers of every age. And it is these same two characteristics that, in the perennial mind of the nation, compensate far beyond any of Lincoln's shortcomings.

So it is that now, in this election year of 2008, we all nourish a relentless hope for the perfect mayor, senator, or president. We dare to dream for a leader who could be today's Abraham Lincoln. A leader who will smoothly solve all the difficulties surrounding our own Iraqi War, our own concerns about the rights of immigrants, and the rights to health care, to only name a few.

But in this world of compromised visions and stark reality, perhaps we would do best to accept, too, the less idealistic sides of Lincoln. For truly, his legacy is not that of an untarnished hero, but that of a man who made political and jurisdictional mistakes, and overcame them; who determinedly waged war, in search of peace; who established the rights of a nation, at the expense of that nation; and who trespassed traditional boundaries in favor of unorthodox freedoms. For, whether or not we appreciate all of Lincoln's decisions, we respect that he, even despite half a nation's opposition, stood firm and tall for his beliefs about justice. Is it not this that makes Abraham Lincoln mean so much to us today?

1. "Abraham Lincoln". Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia.

Accessed online, March 2008, at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Lincoln

2. Dilorenzo, Thomas. "Let's Put Myths to Rest". Internet, www.lewrockwell.com/dilorenzo/dilorenzo44.html

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3. See note 1

4. Ibid

5. Ibid

6. Ibid