

Lincoln's Patience and Ambition

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By Lewis E. Lehrman

When 23-year-old Abraham Lincoln won election as his militia company captain in the Black Hawk War, the new officer told a friend: "I'll be damned, Bill, but I've beat him!" Preparing to run for president in 1860, Lincoln wrote that he had "not since had any success in life which gave him so much satisfaction" as his election as militia captain. A child of the hardscrabble frontier, Lincoln was ambitious but he managed to keep his expectations of preferment in check. "I have been too familiar with disappointments to be much chagrined," he wrote in announcing his candidacy for the Illinois State Legislature the spring of 1832.

Service in the 1832 war kept Lincoln from campaigning so he lost that political contest. Two years later and better known, Lincoln won easily and launched himself on the path to political prominence in Illinois. His skills as a political speaker grew steadily.

In 1838, Lincoln gave a speech in which one theme was the danger of political ambition. "Towering genius disdains a beaten path," he argued. "It seeks regions hitherto unexplored." Lincoln had early recognized both his own intelligence and ambition. The circumstances of his life taught him the necessary patience whereby he could regulate that ambition.

As a teenager, Lincoln worked hard on the farm, but he did not particularly like it. Nor did he like the restrictions of life governed by his less ambitious father. At 22, Lincoln, legally emancipated, shed the family farm for independent living in New Salem, Illinois. A few years later, as an aspiring lawyer he shed that village for nearby, more cosmopolitan Springfield. Lincoln did not look back. Ambition moved him forward.

As a lawyer, Lincoln learned that you could grow by staying in one place and there building relationships. He did not develop the wanderlust of many fellow politicians of the time who moved further west in search of better political opportunities. Several of Lincoln's friends from central Illinois migrated to California or Oregon. James Shields, a political opponent with whom Lincoln nearly dueled, managed to be elected U.S. Senator in three different states. Lincoln instead traveled around the vast Eighth Judicial Circuit of Illinois each spring and fall -- and occasionally to Chicago for federal cases.

Though born in Kentucky, raised in Indiana, Lincoln assiduously cultivated his Illinois political base where he planted deep roots for nearly three decades. Though he served just one term in Congress, he was well-known as the skilled strategist of the Whig Party and as a feared litigator in the appellate courts.

President Lincoln -- guided by patience -- did not rush into situations and crises with an exaggerated sense of self-importance. He understood the limits of his own power -- and the

necessity to cede power to others in order to increase the effectiveness of his decisions. As a military leader, he exercised direct power reluctantly -- doing so when he saw that military commanders were not acting with sufficient dispatch.

Lincoln valued the entrepreneurial spirit -- the ability to take advantage of situations. Generally he calculated the likely results of possible actions before he took them. In the Fort Sumter crisis in April 1861, it was Lincoln's patience which created the preconditions for a successful outcome and for northern unity and thus the opportunity to restore the Union.

As President, Lincoln respected those who set achievable goals and pursued them -- *unlike* the dilatory General George B. McClellan at the beginning of the war but *like* the quiet but aggressive General Ulysses S. Grant at the conflict's conclusion. Lincoln had no patience for those who could not set reasonable and obvious military goals. After the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863, Lincoln grew increasingly frustrated with General George Meade who refused to pursue the Confederates aggressively as they retreated across the Potomac River, thus missing the chance to destroy Lee's army and the Confederacy.

Lincoln understood the value of planning. When necessary and if generals failed to lead, he, the constitutional Commander-in-Chief, took command. But Lincoln was never driven by sheer power or glory; his goal was victory and reunion, and an end to slavery. He was not fooled by false goals. He knew that the capture of the Confederate capital was a false goal. Simply driving Confederates from Pennsylvania was a necessary but insufficient goal. The destruction of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia was the only true goal which would bring the Civil War to a just and honorable end.

Lincoln's critics frequently mistook his patience for passivity. "Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition," Lincoln had declared in his first 1832 campaign announcement in the Springfield newspaper before he left for military service in the Black Hawk War. "Whether it be true or not, I can say for one that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem."

"How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition, is yet to be developed," he continued. "I am young and unknown to many of you. I was born and have ever remained in the most humble walks of life. I have no wealthy or popular relations to recommend me. My case is thrown exclusively upon the independent voters of this county, and if elected they will have conferred a favor upon me, for which I shall be unremitting in my labors to compensate."

In 1860, and again in 1864, Lincoln's case was ultimately in the hands of the nation's voters. He indeed proved worthy of their esteem.

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