

Abraham Lincoln

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January 27, 2004

To study Abraham Lincoln is to learn a lost truth about our first Republican president. And it is this... During most of Abraham Lincoln's political career he focused not on anti-slavery but on economic policy. Anti-slavery and economic policy, in his worldview, were tightly linked. As Mr. Lincoln explained, slavery was grounded in coercion. It was, and is, an involuntary economic exchange of labor. In commercial terms, slavery is theft. "The ant, who has toiled and dragged a crumb to his nest, will furiously defend the fruit of his labor, against whatever robber assails him...the most dumb and stupid slave, that ever toiled for a master, does constantly *know* that he is wronged."¹ Slavery differs from free labor as a beast does from a man. Thus, Lincoln assailed slavery not only on moral grounds but also on economic principle. This principle, he asserted, is a truth "made so plain by our good Father in Heaven, that all feel and understand it, even down to brutes and creeping insects."² We must not be misled by Lincoln's simple metaphors; for one of the profound strengths of Lincoln's political philosophy was his self-taught and masterful grasp of economic theory.

Mr. Lincoln's nationalist economics were unmistakably the policies of Alexander Hamilton. But we still hear in his speeches the echoes of Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. On his way to Washington in early 1861, the President declared in Philadelphia, "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiment embodied in the Declaration of Independence."³ "*Most governments* have been based, practically, on the denial of the equal rights of men...*ours* began, by *affirming* those rights."⁴ But only free labor can exercise equal rights. Lincoln's re-affirmation of this equality principle at Gettysburg in 1863 evoked "a new birth of freedom." At Gettysburg he insisted that America — despite the flaw of slavery, accepted in order to establish the Constitution in 1789 — had been "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."⁵ One year later — bringing together the central ideas of the great adversaries of the early republic, Hamilton and Jefferson — President Lincoln explained to Ohio soldiers visiting the White House that the Civil War itself was a struggle to create "an open field and a fair chance for your industry, enterprise, and intelligence; that you may all have equal privileges in the race of life..."⁶ From the war issued the Emancipation Amendments — the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution. This patrimony is the authentic Republican party heritage.

From time immemorial, America has been different from other nations. Bound together neither by race and blood, nor by ancestral territory, Americans inherit but a single legacy — equality under the law and equality of opportunity. That Mr. Lincoln's equality was equality of opportunity cannot be denied. "I think the authors [of the Declaration] intended to include all men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness, in what respects they did consider all men created equal — equal in certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."⁷ This is what the emancipator said; and this is what he meant. "We proposed to give all a chance; and we expected the weak to grow stronger, the ignorant, wiser; and all better, and happier together."⁸ And so, to be stronger and wiser, Americans have ever been ambitious, at home and abroad, for their liberal democracy. Mr. Lincoln was no exception; he, too, was ambitious for American liberal democracy. Indeed, he was history's most ambitious nation builder, presiding as he did over our most profound war and the preservation of the American Union — the future hope of all liberal democracies. In an unforgettable phrase, Lincoln's law partner, William Herndon said

Lincoln's ambition was "a little engine that knew no rest".⁹ So, too, may it be said of America.

Mr. Lincoln was ambitious to use government to good effect. Government, he said, should enable men and women to do the things they cannot do, or do so well, for themselves — in order to develop their freedom, their future, and their country. In his earliest political years, as a state legislator, Lincoln urged that government should be pro-labor and pro-business. During the decades before his Presidency, he advocated government support in creating canals, railroads, banks, turnpikes, a national bank — all needed to integrate a national market — to the end of increasing opportunity, social mobility, and productivity. Like the first Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, and Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky, Lincoln sponsored an "American System." As an economic nationalist, he advocated a modest tariff to give the competitive advantage to American workers, to American firms, and to enhance American independence. The tariff, he believed, would, as a source of federal revenue, make the income tax unnecessary. As a sophisticated student of banking and monetary policy, Mr. Lincoln argued throughout his political career for a sound and uniform national currency.

His economic philosophy rejected the idea of necessary conflict between labor and capital, believing them to be cooperative in nature. Cooperation could, in a society of free labor, lead to economic growth and increasing opportunity for all. In fact, Lincoln argued that capital was, itself, the result of the savings of free labor. Wrought by the mind and muscle of men, the products of labor yield savings which are then deployed as capital. Thus, it follows that people are the most important resource, not wealth. This proposition was so important that President Lincoln argued in his first annual message of 1861 to Congress that "labor is prior to, and independent of capital. Capital is the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed."¹⁰

Nineteenth century echoes of Lincoln's speeches roll down like thunder in the twentieth century voice of Martin Luther King. For it was Mr. Lincoln who defined the essence of the American dream. "There is not, of necessity, [Mr. Lincoln declared], any such thing as the free hired laborer being fixed to that condition for life... The prudent, penniless beginner in the world labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land for himself; then labors on his own account for awhile, and at length hires another new beginner to help him. This is the just, and generous, and prosperous system, which opens the way to all — gives hope to all, and...energy, and progress, and improvement of conditions to all."¹¹ This right to rise is today the hope of a winning Republican majority.

From hard struggle for success, Mr. Lincoln had developed tenacious convictions. Born poor, Mr. Lincoln was probably the greatest of truly self-made men, believing as he said that "work, work, work is the main thing."¹² His economic policy was designed not only "to clear the path for all," but to spell out incentives to encourage entrepreneurs to create new jobs, new products, new wealth. Mr. Lincoln's America was, in principle, a colorblind America. "I want every man to have the chance," Lincoln announced in New Haven in March 1860. "And I believe a black man is entitled to it...when he may look forward and hope to be a hired laborer this year and the next, work for himself afterward, and finally to hire men to work for him! That is the true system."¹³

In Lincoln's American system, government fosters growth. Equal opportunity leads to social mobility. Intelligence and free labor lead to savings and entrepreneurship. Such a colorblind economic system was the counterpart of the Declaration's colorblind equality principle. The great black abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, saw this clearly, pronouncing the fitting tribute when he said of President Lincoln that he was "the first great man that I talked with in the United States freely, who in no single instance reminded me of the difference of color." He attributed Lincoln's attitude to the fact that he and Lincoln were, in Douglass's phrase, self-made men.

President Lincoln's political and wartime legacy has transformed world history. As a last resort, he had accepted war to preserve the Union, and with war, to free the slaves... "It is an issue which can only be tried by war, and decided by victory."¹⁴ Even after four years and 600,000 deaths, his grim determination on victory was, he argued, not imprudent. "The national resources are unexhausted, and, as we believe, inexhaustible."¹⁵ Without the leadership and resolve of our 16th president, separate slave and free states might today compete on the same continent; and the emergence of American liberal democracy, as we know it, would have been stillborn. Thus there would have been no integrated, peerless, American economy based on free labor. But without continental American industrial power — which Lincoln self-consciously advocated — the industrial means would not have been available to contain Imperial Germany as it reached for European hegemony in 1914. Neither would there have been a national power strong enough to destroy its successor, Hitler's Nazi Reich, nor to crush the aggressions of Imperial Japan. And, in the end, there would have been no unified, continental, American power to oppose and overcome the Communist empire of the second half of the twentieth century. Empires based on the invidious distinctions of race and class — the defining characteristics of the malignant world powers of our era — were preempted by the force, leadership, and forward foreign policy of a single world power, the United States of America. "We made the experiment; [Lincoln declared]; and the fruit is before us. Look at it. Think of it. Look at it, in its aggregate grandeur, of extent of country, and numbers of population, of ship, and steamboat, and rail..."¹⁶

Hovering over the whole history of Mr. Lincoln's pilgrimage, from obscurity to worldwide honor, there still lingers the enigma of a very private man — the impenetrable shadow of Mr. Lincoln's profile. We scrutinize his character; but we see him through a glass darkly. So we mine his papers, sap the memoirs left by those who knew him, plumb his personal relationships. But he escapes us. Surely we know about his humble parents, his lack of formal education, his discreet but towering ambition. But we wonder that — unlike the Adamses, the Roosevelts, the Kennedys, the Bushes — no descendants carried on his legacy of national leadership. Like a luminous comet, he had for a twinkling thrust himself before our eyes, the eyes of the world, there to dissolve into the vasty deep whence he came.

FOOTNOTES

Roy P. Basler, Editor, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (CWAL)

1. CWAL, Volume II, p. 222 (Fragment on Slavery, [July 1, 1854?])
2. CWAL, Volume II, p. 222 (Fragment on Slavery, [July 1, 1854?])
3. CWAL, Volume IV, pp. 240-241 (SPEECH IN INDEPENDENCE HALL, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA, February 22, 1861)
4. CWAL, Volume II, p. 222 (ca July 1, 1854).
5. CWAL, Volume VII, p. 22 (Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863)
6. CWAL, Volume VII, p. 506-508 (Speech to One Hundred Sixty-sixth Ohio Regiment, August 22, 1864)
7. CWAL, Volume II, p. 398-410. (Speech at Springfield, Illinois, June 26, 1857)
8. CWAL, Volume II, p. 222 (Fragment on Slavery, [July 1, 1854?])
9. William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon's Life of Lincoln*, p. 304
10. CWAL, Volume V, p. 35-53. (First Annual Message to Congress, December 3, 1861)
11. CWAL, Volume V, p. 35-53. (First Annual Message to Congress, December 3, 1861)
12. CWAL, Volume IV, p. 121 (Letter to John M. Brockman, September 25, 1860)
13. CWAL, Volume IV, p. 13-30 (Speech at New Haven, Connecticut, March 6, 1860)
14. CWAL, Volume VIII, p. 136-153 (Annual Message to Congress, December 6, 1864)
15. CWAL, Volume VIII, p. 136-153 (Annual Message to Congress, December 6, 1864)
16. CWAL, Volume II, p. 222