

Franklin and Lincoln: True leaders for change

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They were born 103 years apart. Abraham Lincoln was born in rural Kentucky in 1809. Benjamin Franklin was born in relatively cosmopolitan Boston on Jan. 17, 1706 -- 304 years ago, today.

The balding and overweight Benjamin Franklin appears to have little in common with lanky, bearded Abraham Lincoln, but they shared an avid curiosity about the way the world worked and should work. Freed in middle age from the necessity to earn a daily living, Franklin's mind took a more scientific bent. At middle age, confronted by slavery expansion and then secession, Lincoln became a moral philosopher.

Both had little formal schooling but became accomplished writers, thinkers and inventors. Both were styled as frontiersmen. Lincoln the Railsplitter came by that distinction more authentically than did Franklin the printer's apprentice. Both gained an extraordinary international renown. Franklin was a font of inventions -- a musical instrument and bifocals were among his creations. Lincoln was the only president to file a patent on his own behalf. A middle-aged Benjamin Franklin, who coined the term "electrician," invented the lightning rod -- creating intense discussion on the theological implications of his invention.

Both men were founts of homespun wisdom. Franklin wholesaled his through "Poor Richard's Almanac." Lincoln retailed his through stories told to friends. Young Franklin wrote for his brother's newspaper under the pen name "Silence Dogood." Lincoln employed a variety of pseudonyms when writing for his local Springfield newspaper.

Among the pen names used by Benjamin Franklin was "Father Abraham." In one letter from "Father Abraham" to his son "Isaac," Franklin wrote: "Whether you chuse to act in a public or a private Station, if you would maintain the personal Character of a Man of Sincerity, Integrity and Virtue, there is a Necessity of becoming really good, if you would do good: For the thin Disguises of pretended private Virtue and Public Spirit, are easily seen through; the Hypocrite detected and exposed. For this Reason then, My dear ISAAC, as well as for many others, be sincere, candid, honest, well-meaning, and upright, in all you do and say; be really good, if you would appear, so."

Abraham Lincoln became a real-life "Father Abraham" to thousands of Union Soldiers during the Civil War. One of the conflict's more popular songs was, "We are coming, father Abr'am, six hundred thousand more, From Mississippi's winding stream and from New England's shore." Both were modest but ambitious men who shaped their own public image.

Benjamin Franklin has inspired many critics who have not liked his writing, his attention to commerce, his penchant for self-promotion. His life and writings have been prone to caricature. If young George Washington was forever characterized for chopping down a cherry tree, Franklin was immortalized for flying a kite in a thunderstorm to prove lightning was electricity.

Franklin served on the five-man committee that in June 1776 drafted the Declaration of Independence that Lincoln revered. Lincoln called the founding document an "immortal emblem of Humanity" and contended that it laid the foundation for the abolition of slavery.

In the final years of his life, Franklin, a one-time slave owner, became a leader in Pennsylvania's anti-slavery movement -- asking that Congress "devise means for removing this Inconsistency from the Character of the American People." When Franklin died in 1790, he had stipulated that the bulk of his legacy go to his daughter and her husband, Richard Bache, provided that his son-in-law "set free his Negro man Bob." Lincoln's own antislavery legacy was deep and unique by the time he died in 1865. The Thirteenth Amendment he helped push through Congress liberated all Americans from servitude. It was, he said, a "king's cure" for slavery.

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