

# Abraham Lincoln: An American for All Time

Lewis E. Lehrman  
Co-Chairman,  
Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History  
February 10, 1995

Abraham Lincoln, whose birthday we celebrate on Sunday, is generally remembered for winning the Civil War and freeing the slaves. He should be. But the great lost truth about our 16th president is that during most of his political career he focused, not on slavery, but on a policy for economic growth and equal opportunity for the new nation. As Lincoln explained over and over, slavery was an involuntary economic exchange of labor, based on coercion; and, therefore, it was theft. Slavery, in short, was the antithesis of free labor, and thus Lincoln opposed it on moral and economic principle.

One of the hidden strengths of Lincoln's political philosophy was its grounding in a thorough grasp of economic theory and policy. That Mr. Lincoln had a coherent economic philosophy is one of the most obvious facts that emerges from Roy Basler's definitive 11-volume edition of the 16th president's original writings, speeches and state papers. Anyone who doubts this should read Gabor Boritt's pathbreaking book on "Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream."

Though Jeffersonian populist in sentiment, Mr. Lincoln's economics were, paradoxically, Hamiltonian in policy. We can see this when, on his way to Washington in early 1861, he declared in Philadelphia, "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiment embodied in the Declaration of Independence." This idea he later vindicated at Gettysburg in 1863 by upholding "a new birth of freedom" in an America "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." One year later he 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. . . ."

## Equality of Opportunity

Lincoln's equality was equality of opportunity. He denied explicitly that American equality was equality of result. In 1857 at Springfield, he said: "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."

He also opposed direct federal taxation, except by necessity of war, because, as he said, "the land must be literally covered with assessors and collectors, going forth like swarms of locusts, devouring every blade of grass. . . ." Like Alexander Hamilton, he preferred a tariff because, Lincoln suggested, customs collectors on the coast would do less harm to the people than tax collectors roaming their neighborhoods.

He believed that government should be pro-labor by being pro-business; thus for 20 years, he advocated government help in creating canals, railroads, banks, turnpikes and other public institutions needed to integrate a free national market, to increase opportunity and social mobility, and to make the American economy more

productive. As the economic historian Bray Hammond has noted, Lincoln was also a sophisticated student of banking and monetary policy, arguing throughout his political career that "no duty is more imperative on government, than the duty it owes the people of furnishing them a sound and uniform currency."

His economic philosophy, above all, was based upon "his patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people." He was an authentic populist. But he saw no necessary conflict between labor and capital, believing them to be cooperative in nature. Only cooperation could, in a society of free labor, produce economic growth and increasing opportunity for all. Lincoln argued that capital was, itself, the result of the free labor of mind and muscle. People were the most important resource, not

*Lincoln was an authentic populist. But he saw no necessary conflict between labor and capital, believing them to be cooperative in nature.*

wealth. In fact this idea was so important that President Lincoln argued in his first annual message of 1861 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. Capital has its rights, which are as worthy of protection as any other rights."

He went even further and, once and for all, defined the essence of the American dream: "There is not, of necessity, 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."

Born poor, Mr. Lincoln was probably the greatest of truly self-made men, believing that "work, work, work is the main thing." His economic policy was designed not only "to clear the path for all," but to spell out incentives to encourage entrepreneurs to create new products, new wealth, and new jobs. He himself had applied for and obtained a patent, declaring in 1859 the patent and copyright protection of intellectual property to be one of the greatest incentives to innovation of Western civilization.

While today many Americans would dispute some of Mr. Lincoln's economic policies, it is manifestly true that his proposition—based on the right of every American to rise on his or her merits—defined the colorblind American dream of Martin Luther King. "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."

This was Lincoln's American system, where government fosters growth, where equal opportunity leads to social mobility, where intelligence and labor lead to savings and entrepreneurship. The black abolitionist Frederick Douglass pronounced a 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 open attitude to the fact that he and Lincoln were both, in Douglass's phrase, "self-made men."

Lincoln's economic legacy has had a powerful effect on world history. Without our 16th president there would have been separate slave states and free states; and thus no integrated North American economy in which emerged the most powerful free-market, commercial civilization the world has ever known. Without pre-eminent American industrial power—which Lincoln self-consciously advocated—the means would not have been available to contain Imperial Germany in 1917 as it reached for European hegemony. Neither would there have been a national power strong enough to destroy its global successor, Hitler's Nazi Reich in 1945, nor to crush the aggressions of Imperial Japan. And, in the end, there would have been no world power to oppose and overcome the Soviet Communist empire during the second half of our century. World conquest based on the invidious distinctions of race and class, the goal of the malignant world powers of our era—was prevented by the force and leadership of a single country, the perpetual union of the American states.

## The Enigma

Hovering over the whole of this history, there lingers still the enigma of the private man and the shadow of his personality. We scrutinize Lincoln; but we see him through a glass darkly. We mine his papers, savor 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 Adamases, the Roosevelts, the Kennedys, he left no descendants to carry on his legacy of great deeds. It is as if, like a luminous comet, he thrust himself in front of our eyes, the eyes of the world—for a brief moment—then to dissolve into the vasty deep of the cosmos from which he came.

This archetypal American, born poor of the South in Kentucky, elected of the North from Illinois—his professional achievement the very epitome of the American dream—this man Lincoln is the elusive inspiration we should be looking for as we commemorate his birth, 186 years ago, on Feb. 12, 1809.

Mr. Lehrman is chairman of Lehrman Bell Mueller Cannon.



Abraham Lincoln