

Lincoln: Master of Man

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One of the keys to Abraham Lincoln's character was his discipline. In the last two decades of his life, it is difficult to find occasions when Mr. Lincoln did not carefully monitor his public comments or gauge their public impact.

One of those rare occasions may have been the famous "lost speech" which Mr. Lincoln delivered at Bloomington in 1856 when the Illinois Republican party was organized. Interestingly, there is no record of that speech, which Mr. Lincoln delivered extemporaneously after he was called upon to speak by the convention's delegates. It has been speculated that Mr. Lincoln — who sometimes transcribed his own comments after the fact — was just as happy that his actual remarks were not reported.

Mr. Lincoln's notion of discipline stands in stark contrast to many of the other leading figures of his age. Mr. Lincoln as president, for example, systematically refused to give substantive comments which he had not prepared in advance. Indeed, from the time he left a speaking tour of New England in March 1860 until the day he left Springfield for Washington in February 1861, Mr. Lincoln said virtually nothing for public quotation. His remarks on the way to Washington have often been criticized for their deliberate banality.

Washington residents who arrived at the White House for a serenade during his presidency were likely to be disappointed by the president's refusal to say more than a few, innocuous words of greeting. Lesser figures, like the members of Mr. Lincoln's Cabinet, had not such compunctions about addressing such gatherings with ad hoc comments.

Contrast Mr. Lincoln's very limited speeches as president and complete silence as a presidential candidate with the rhetorical behavior of Andrew Johnson, for example. Johnson's famous "Swing around the Circle" in 1866 involved a string of speeches which were increasingly vituperative and ill-tempered. They undermined his presidency and contributed to his impeachment. Johnson's opponents — the Radical Republicans in Congress like Thaddeus Stevens, Benjamin Wade and Charles Sumner — could be equally venomous and offensive.

Civil War journalists like Horace Greeley tended to write first and think later. Even Civil War generals like Benjamin Butler and Daniel Sickles were given rhetorical excess. When such behavior crossed the line to comments contrary to the public interest, Mr. Lincoln's reaction could be swift — as it was in October 1862 when he dismissed Major John J. Key from the army for suggesting in a private conversation that the Confederate Army has not been pursued after the battle of Antietam because slavery needed to be preserved.

But Mr. Lincoln listened to critics. Gen. Carl Schurz once wrote him a harsh letter of criticism, to which the president responded vigorously and summoned Schurz to the White House. Schurz recalled that Mr. Lincoln said: "Well, I know that you are a warm anti-slavery man and a good friend to me. Now let me tell you all about it." Then he unfolded in his peculiar way his view of the then existing state of affairs, his hopes and his apprehensions, his troubles and embarrassments, making quaint remarks about men and things. I regret I cannot remember all. Then he described how the criticisms coming down upon him from all sides chafed him, and how my letter, although containing some points that were well founded and useful, had

touched him as a terse summing up of all the principal criticisms and offered him a good chance at me for a reply. Then, slapping my knee again, he broke out in a loud laugh and exclaimed: "Didn't I give it to you hard in my letter? Didn't I? But it didn't hurt, did it? I did not mean to, and therefore I wanted you to come so quickly." He laughed again and seemed to enjoy the matter heartily. "Well, he added, 'I guess we understand one another now, and it's all right.' When after a conversation of more than an hour I left him, I asked whether he still wished that I should write him. 'Why, certainly,' he answered; 'write me whenever the spirit moves you.' We parted as better friends than ever."

Still, Mr. Lincoln did not tolerate behavior that undermined the war effort. He needed to preserve the Union, and to do that he needed to preserve a political coalition which could sustain his agenda. His techniques for dealing with people were an interesting mix. Mr. Lincoln's tendency to tell stories and recite newspaper satire annoyed many contemporaries — but they denied potential adversaries any policy statements which could be criticized. On

the other hand, his public comments — such as those in his annual messages to Congress — were carefully crafted to say exactly what he wanted them to convey.

Illinois Gov. Richard Yates observed that President Lincoln "was by far, too modest when he said in his letter to (a Kentucky editor) that he 'claimed not to have controlled events.' The truth is, that while he aimed to consult the popular will, because he knew that that will was the power of the government, yet he did much to shape that will and to bring the people to believe in, and to do, what he wanted and intended should be done."

Another Illinois political associate, Ward Hill Lamon, wrote, "The truth is, that Mr. Lincoln was at once the ablest and most adroit politician of modern times. In all

the history of the world I can recall no example of a great leader, having to do with a people in any degree free, who himself shaped and guided events to the same extent, unless it was Julius Caesar. Mr. Lincoln was not the creature of circumstances. He made circumstances to suit the necessities of his own situation. He was less influenced by the inferior minds around him than was Washington, Jefferson or Jackson. His policy was invariably formed by his own judgment, and it seldom took even the slightest color from the opinions of others, however decided."

Mr. Lincoln carefully controlled his public rhetoric — as when he wired his campaign managers at the 1860 Republican National Convention to make no bargains in his name. He was no political neophyte; he must have known what they were up to in the hotel rooms of Chicago. At the same time that he denied he would be bound by any commitments they made, he eventually kept them all.

Leonard Swett was one of those managers and a legal colleague of Mr. Lincoln as well. Swett observed: "As a politician and as president he arrived at all his conclusions from his own reflections, and when his conclusions were once formed he never doubted but what they were right. One great public of his character, as generally received and acquiesced in, is that he is considered by the people of this country as a frank, guileless, and unsophisticated man. There never was a greater mistake. Beneath a smooth surface of candor and apparent declaration of all his thoughts and feelings he exercised the most exalted tact and wisest discrimination. He handled and moved men remotely as we do pieces upon a chess-board."

In dealing with men, Mr. Lincoln was the master.

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