

Man of Springfield Found Inspiration From Monticello

LEWIS E. LEHRMAN TIMES-DISPATCH COLUMNIST

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Barack Obama will not be the first American president to find his political model in a predecessor from a different political party.

Even after he became a Republican in 1856, Abraham Lincoln described himself as an "old line Whig." But the Whig Party had elected only two presidents, both of whom soon died in office. Lincoln's own "beau ideal of a statesman" -- Kentucky's Henry Clay -- had often run for the presidency and repeatedly lost either the Whig nomination or the general election.

So in the 1850s when Lincoln was attempting to define a political philosophy in opposition to that of Southern slaveholders and their Northern sympathizers, he turned to two former Democratic presidents, Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson.

As a boy, Lincoln had grown up in Indiana as a Jackson supporter, but when he moved to Illinois as a young man, he switched his allegiance to the economic policies of the National Republicans, who became the Whigs. Rather than criticize Jackson, however, young Lincoln became a strong critic of the policies of Jackson's successor, Martin Van Buren. For two decades, Lincoln spoke out in favor of the Henry Clay's "American System" of internal improvements -- tariffs to promote domestic manufacturing, a national banking system to facilitate commerce, and limitation on the spread of slavery.

But in 1854, Lincoln turned to the memory of Thomas Jefferson after Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This legislation abolished the prohibition on slavery in the northern part of the Louisiana purchase that had been established by the Missouri Compromise of 1820. As Lincoln developed arguments against the extension of slavery, he turned to the example of the Founders, especially Jefferson. Lincoln made Jefferson's Declaration of Independence -- and the proposition that "all men are created equal" -- the foundation of his political philosophy. In his speeches that fall, Lincoln singled out Jefferson's Declaration, and the Jefferson-inspired slavery restriction of the Northwest Ordinance, to support his arguments.

Lincoln described Jefferson as "a chief actor in the revolution; then a delegate in Congress; afterwards twice President; who was, is, and perhaps will continue to be, the most distinguished politician of our history; a Virginian by birth and continued residence, and withal, a slave-holder; [Jefferson] conceived the idea of taking that occasion, to prevent slavery ever going into the north-western territory." Lincoln concluded: "Thus, with the author of the Declaration of Independence, the policy of prohibiting slavery in new territory originated." Thus, Lincoln shrewdly enlisted Jefferson -- a slave owner and a Southerner -- to oppose the extension of slavery.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act had been designed by Democratic Party leaders, who had dominated national politics during the entire first half of the 19th century. To hijack Jefferson from the Democrats was a sincere but shrewd maneuver to reawaken national reverence for the Declaration of Independence and the antislavery sentiments Jefferson had expressed.

In 1859 Lincoln wrote in a letter to Bostonians: "All honor to Jefferson -- to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that today, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression."

At Peoria, Ill., on Oct. 16, 1854, private citizen Lincoln vindicated Jefferson's Declaration: "What I do say is, that no man is good enough to govern another man, without that other's consent. I say this is the leading principle -- the sheet anchor of American republicanism." He then went on to quote the Declaration: "We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

Eleven years later, in 1865, President Lincoln presided over congressional passage of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, which abolished slavery in the United States of America.

Lewis E. Lehrman is the author of "Lincoln at Peoria."