

The Party of Lincoln

The legacy of the first Republican president.

BY LEWIS E. LEHRMAN

TO REASSESS ABRAHAM LINCOLN on his 195th birthday is to learn a lost truth: During much of his political career, Lincoln focused not on the moral issue of slavery but on economic policy. Yet slavery and economic policy were tightly linked in his worldview.

As Lincoln explained, slavery is grounded in coercion. In commercial terms, involuntary labor is theft. "The ant," he wrote, "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." Slavery differs from free labor as a beast does from a man. Thus, Lincoln assailed slavery on both moral grounds and 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."

Lincoln's nationalist economics coincided with the policies of Alexander Hamilton. But we also hear in his speeches echoes of Thomas Jefferson. On his way to Washington, D.C., in early 1861, the president-elect declared in Philadelphia, "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiment embodied in the Declaration of Independence." Seven years before, he had asserted, "*Most governments* have been based, practically, on the denial of the equal rights of men. . . . *Ours* began, by *affirming* those rights."

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But only free labor can exercise equal rights. In 1864—bringing together the central ideas of 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." From the war issued the Emancipation Amendments—the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution. This patrimony is the authentic heritage of the Republican party.

From the beginning, 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. Lincoln's equality was equality of opportunity. "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," he said in 1857. "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."

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." And so, to be stronger and wiser, Americans have ever been ambitious, at home and

abroad, for their liberal democracy. Lincoln, 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. Lincoln's law partner, William Herndon, said Lincoln's ambition was "a little engine that knew no rest." So, too, may it be said of America.

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 for the creation of 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 Hamilton, the first secretary of the Treasury, and Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky, Lincoln championed an "American system." As an economic nationalist, he advocated a modest tariff to give the competitive advantage to American workers and American firms and to enhance the nation's independence. As a student of banking and monetary policy, Lincoln argued throughout his political career for a sound and uniform national currency.

His economic philosophy rejected the idea of necessary conflict between free labor and capital. Cooperation, he believed, could lead to economic growth and increasing opportunity for all. In fact, Lincoln argued that capital was itself the product of free labor, wrought by the mind and muscle of men. Thus, it followed that people were the most important resource. President Lincoln underlined this proposition in his first annual message to Congress in 1861, noting 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."

Thus Lincoln defined the essence of the American dream. "There is not, of necessity," he 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." This right to rise is today the hope of a winning, and governing, Republican majority.

From his own hard struggle for success, Lincoln had developed tenacious convictions. Born poor, he was probably the greatest of truly self-made men, believing as he said 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 jobs, new products, new wealth. 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."

In Lincoln's American system, government fosters growth. Equal opportunity leads to social mobility. Intelligence and free labor lead to savings and entrepreneurship. This economic system was the counterpart of the Declaration's equality of inalienable rights, and both, properly understood, were colorblind. The great black abolitionist Frederick Douglass saw this clearly, pronouncing a fitting tribute when he said President Lincoln was

"the first great man that I talked with in the United States freely, who in no single instance reminded me of the difference between himself and myself, of the difference of color between us." 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 extends far beyond our shores. As a last resort, he accepted war to preserve the Union, and with the war, he initiated freedom for the slaves. Without the leadership and resolve of our 16th president—through four years and 600,000 deaths—separate slave and free states might today compete on the same continent, and American liberal democracy would have been stillborn.

Thus there would have been no single, integrated American economy based on free labor. Without the continental industrial power that Lincoln advocated, the means would not have been available to contain Imperial Germany as it reached for European hegemony in 1914. Neither would there have been a nation strong enough to destroy Hitler's Nazi Reich, or to counter the aggression of Imperial Japan, or, in the second half of the twentieth century, to oppose the Soviet Union. Empires antithetical to freedom, based on invidious distinctions of race and class—a defining characteristic of the malignant world powers of our era—were overcome by the force, leadership, and forward foreign policy of the United States.

This forward foreign policy of American liberal democracy—designed to vindicate our constitutional union, and to uphold the implicit hope of the Declaration of Independence that in time all people might be free—originated not with President Woodrow Wilson, but in the wartime statecraft of Abraham Lincoln. A private man, self-taught, who rose from obscurity and left no dynasty, he was an enigmatic character. Yet he remains singularly luminous in his grasp of our economic and political essence as a nation, as well as of our contribution to the world. ♦