

Lincoln: The Self-Made Man

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Pity poor Abraham Lincoln. Behind the legend, there was certainly much to lament.

Lincoln's grandfather had been killed by Indians while tilling his field; his father had nearly been kidnapped in the same attack. Lincoln himself was born 186 years ago this month in a rustic Kentucky log cabin — surely substandard housing by anyone's definition.

Lincoln's family moved a lot — migration just before winter to a three-sided lean-to in Indiana when he was seven. Two years later, his mother died of the "milk sickness."

Lincoln's educational background was similarly deficient, lacking as he did tenured teachers, contemporary classrooms, and trendy textbooks. As a child, Lincoln attended school intermittently, surely qualifying him as underprivileged and neglected.

There was no compensatory education and no tuition assistance to provide entry into a publicly-funded university. His education came from the university of literature — reading the Bible as a youth, legal scholars as a young man, and Shakespeare's plays on his nocturnal visits to the War Department as president.

Though he had a kindly and sensitive stepmother, his relations with his own illiterate father were problematic. The two remained distant all of the elder Lincoln's life.

Indeed, young Lincoln worked as a virtual indentured servant, hired out by his father to work on neighbors' farms. When he did get out from under his father's custody, he hired himself out as a rail splitter. Eventually, he became a store clerk and then a co-owner of the store — his partner running up liabilities so large before he died that Lincoln referred to them as the "national debt." But for poor Mr. Lincoln, there was no government bailout — just a long, slow process of paying off his financial obligations.

Lincoln was so poor that when he was elected to the Illinois Legislature, he had to ask his friend Coleman Smoot for a \$60 loan. "Smoot," asked Lincoln, "did you vote for me?" Admitted Smoot, "I did that very thing."

"Well," replied Lincoln, that makes you responsible. You must lend me the money to buy suitable clothing, for I want to make a decent appearance in the Legislature."

Generally, Lincoln was more careful about ethical appearances than physical ones. After Lincoln had served his first term, he was given a \$200 campaign fund for his second race, of which he returned \$199.25, writing "my only outlay was 75 cents for a barrel of cider with which to treat some farm laborers."

Had all of Lincoln's writing and comments become public, the media would have had a field day during his presidency. Fortunately for Lincoln, many of them did not — sometimes, because he had the good sense simply to write letters but never send them. Lincoln knew better than to play the victim; it was a self-indulgence that neither the presidency nor the Republic could afford.

As president, he advised Secretary of War Edward Stanton to write a harsh reply to an impertinent gener-

al. Then, once Stanton wrote the letter, Lincoln told him: "Put it in the stove. That's what I do when I have written a letter while I am angry. It's a good letter, and you've had a good time writing it and feel better."

Lincoln had perhaps learned a lesson — that getting ahead doesn't require getting even — from his early political career when he anonymously signed and published a satirical attack on a Democratic official's fraud. His pseudonym of "Sampson's Ghost" was unmasked and very nearly landed Lincoln in a duel with the offended official.

Not that the press treated him gently as president. Words like baboon, tyrant, buffoon, lunatic, and charlatan were among the common synonyms used by newspapers for the nation's president. Whether he made jokes or made appointments, his every move was criticized. Even his choice in Shakespeare came in for censure and ridicule from the New York Herald.

Lincoln told one reporter that the "New York newspapers" reminded him of the story of the Kansas farmer lost at night and caught in a thunderstorm: "The terrified farmer finally got off his horse and began to lead it along as best he could by the flickering lightning flashes. All of a sudden, a tremendous crash of thunder brought the man to his knees in terror and he cried out: 'Oh Lord! If it's all the same to you, give us a little more light and a little less noise!'"

But as much as such criticism must have wounded him and would have led a lesser man to self-pity, Lincoln never let it poison his spirit. He tolerated abuse from his own nominal assistants like Gen. George McClellan and Secretary of War Stanton as well as his nettlesome antagonists inside and outside his party. Rather than alienating his enemies, he tended to embrace them — turning Republican adversaries like Stanton and Secretary of State William H. Seward into staunch admirers.

Lincoln rose above adversity. He himself said: "I want it said of me by those who know me best that I have always plucked a thistle and planted a flower when I thought a flower would grow." Whatever happened in his personal life, at the polls or on the battlefields, Lincoln knew the U.S. Constitution must be preserved.

In Lincoln's prophetic speech before the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois on Jan. 27, 1838, he said:

"As the patriots of '76 did to the support of the Declaration of Independence, so to the support of the Constitution and laws, let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor."

Lincoln, of course, had his own contract with America. It was called the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, which Lincoln called "the only safeguard of our liberties." In his first inaugural address, President Lincoln vowed to preserve the Union, saying the "the Constitution itself expressly enjoins upon me, that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the States."

Lincoln's Constitution was about equal opportunity, self-reliance, and responsibility — his and ours.

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