

Lincoln: Man of Honor

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February 15, 1999

He was called "Honest Abe" for a reason, but he detested the nickname. None of his friends called him that to his face. But in a profession full of dissimulation, he came by the title honorably. It fit. As his wife once wrote, "Poor Mr. L. is almost a monomaniac on the subject of honesty."

According to his neighbors, his was a reputation he earned early — as a store clerk, a postmaster and a surveyor. His change to customers was as accurate as his books at the post office; people sought his surveying talents because they knew his lines would be as true as his word. When his youthful ventures in shopkeeping in New Salem, Ill., went bankrupt, Lincoln never evaded his obligations even though it took more than a decade to pay them off. When his horse and surveying equipment were seized for auction, friends bought them back for him.

Honesty was not the sort of thing he boasted about. But truth was at the center of his vocation — the law. When law partner William Herndon filed a motion that contradicted the facts, Lincoln told him: "Hadn't we better withdraw that plea? You know it's a sham, and a sham is very often but another name for a lie. Don't let it go on record."

In notes for a law lecture, Lincoln wrote in July 1850: "Resolve to be honest at all events, and if in your own judgment you cannot be an honest lawyer, resolve to be honest without being a lawyer. Choose some other occupation rather than one in the choosing of which you do, in advance, consent to be a knave."

In politics, Mr. Lincoln applied the same principles to himself. In the 1858 Senate campaign in Illinois, Mr. Lincoln told a crowd, "I only ask my friends and all who are eager for the truth, that when they hear me represented as saying or meaning anything strange, they will turn to my own words and examine for themselves."

A decade earlier, Herndon questioned Congressman Lincoln for his vote against the Mexican American War. For Lincoln, it was a simple question of honesty. He wrote Herndon, "That vote affirms that the war was unnecessarily and unconstitutionally commenced by the president. ... Would you have voted what you felt you knew to be a lie? I know you would not. ... [The] resolutions ... make the direct question of the justice of the war; so that no man can be silent if he would. You are compelled to speak; and your only alternative is tell the truth or tell a lie. I can not doubt which you would do."

His concept of honor in the law applied also to fees, which he scrupulously divided with his partner, telling Herndon that he immediately labeled Herndon's half because "unless I did as I do, I might forget that I collected money or had money belonging to you; second, I explain to you how and from whom I got it so that you have not to dun the men who paid; third, if I were to die, you would have no evidence, that I had your money, and you could not prove that I had it. By marking the money, it becomes yours, and I have not in law

or morality a right to use it. I make it a practice never to use any man's money without his consent, first obtained."

But he also insisted upon honor in the billing of clients. When his associate lawyers on a case objected to his return of a legal fee, he brushed them aside, saying, "That money comes out of the pocket of a poor, demented girl, and I would rather starve than swindle her in this manner."

Indeed, Mr. Lincoln found in honesty and trust the path to personal advancement. In his first annual report to Congress in December 1861, he wrote: "This [system of free, hired labor] is the just, and generous, and prosperous system, which opens the way to all — gives hope to all, and consequent energy, and progress, and improvement of condition to all. No men living are more worthy to be trusted than those who toil up from poverty — none less inclined to take, or touch, aught which they have not honestly earned."

When he was president, even Mr. Lincoln's harshest critics conceded that he was "honest and means well," which is what Gen. George B. McClellan wrote in November 1861 to his wife in a letter in which also he called the president a "gorilla." On the other side of the political spectrum, Massachusetts Sen. Charles Sumner wrote an English political leader that the president was "honest but inexperienced." Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase confided to his diary that an army general evaluated the president as "irresolute but of honest intentions."

Secretary Chase learned that the president could be ingenious in exposing duplicity. When senators inspired by Chase confronted Lincoln in December 1862 with demands that he fire Secretary of State Seward, he managed to turn the tables on them by subtly maneuvering Chase publicly to reverse criticisms he had been making privately to the senators. Chase's credibility with them never fully recovered.

Diplomats were frequently dismissive of the president, but in a dispatch to his government, an Austrian vice consul compared Lincoln favorably to Secretary of State Seward: "As he is more honest, so he is more logical than the secretary of state; as he is more original, so are his turns more unexpected; he is very shrewd and pointed in his observations and acts. I should regard him as a more formidable antagonist in any encounter than the secretary, whose specious plausibilities are not always discreet."

Indeed, it was the honesty, honor, and courageous tenacity of President Lincoln that were at the core of his presidency and the core of his character. He could deal with those whose standards fell short of his own — as Seward's sometimes did — but he preferred generals Ulysses Grant and William T. Sherman whose more straightforward conduct was in line with his own.

A little more than 157 years ago, Mr. Lincoln wrote an eulogy in which he said of the subject: "In very truth he was, the noblest work of God — an honest man ..."

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