

Happy 200th Birthday to Abraham Lincoln



Today is Abraham Lincoln's 200th birthday. Biographers and historians peddling hundreds of books about the log-cabin President have had the benefit of extraordinary timing. Not only is it Lincoln's 200th birthday, but our new leader, President Obama has also explicitly decided to model a large part of his tenure after Lincoln's.

The links could probably fill a book (and most likely will). Obama took his oath on the same Bible that Lincoln used in 1861. Obama and Lincoln were both lawyers from Illinois. Both had to overcome fancy New York opponents to win the primary nomination. Both are master orators, a trait which often compensated for lack of governing experience. And both have assembled a cabinet full of rivals, including nominating their primary opponent as secretary of state.

Still, parallels can only go so far, and so I think it is important on this day to recognize and remember the uniqueness of Lincoln. Part of that uniqueness stems from his remarkable wit and wisdom. When an office in the post office had opened due to a death, an applicant approached Lincoln as he was leaving the White House. "Mr. Lincoln, you know the Chief Postal Inspector just died. Can I take his place?" "Well," replied Lincoln, "it's all right with me if it's all right with the undertaker." Even before he was president Lincoln had a comedic reputation. His only speech as a Congressman was so funny that the House clerks, normally charged with recording speeches, were laughing too hard to write. (Thus, the speech is lost to history.)

Yet Lincoln was much more than good speaker. The words behind the delivery were powerful stuff indeed. Perhaps my favorite Lincoln passage was not even delivered to the public, but instead is a letter written to Mrs. Lydia Bixby:

I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours, to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of Freedom.

We have become too accustomed to having our leaders' words crafted by faceless aides tucked away behind a curtain. But Lincoln invariably wrote his own speeches and letters.

One of his finest hours was the delivering the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln asked his Cabinet to vote on whether he should go through with delivering the Proclamation. The secretary of state stood and said "Nay," then the secretary of interior followed, and then all of the rest. Each had clearly voted against delivering the proclamation. After hearing each of them, Lincoln stood and said, "The Ayes have it."

Lincoln always seemed to be guided by principles far greater than the popular attitudes of the time. He led with the conviction of justice and the wisdom to see right from wrong. Without Lincoln, it is entirely possible that the Union would not have survived. And regardless, there is no question that it would not have survived to be the nation it is today.



By Joshua Claybourn with Joseph Nguyen