Lincoln’s Legacy of Justice and Equality of Opportunity: Our Challenge a Century and a Half Later

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One hundred fifty years ago, as the nation struggled to come to terms with a tragic loss, Abraham Lincoln’s funeral train lumbered with somber deliberateness toward its final destination. The journey had been long and circuitous, essentially retracing the route that four years earlier had taken the president-elect from Springfield to Washington. Along the way, mourners and the just plain curious crowded alongside the tracks or filed silently behind the coffin as the body was borne from the train depot to the place where it would briefly lie in state until it was time to move on to the next stop. This shared experience—at least for northerners—momentarily created a bond that transcended gender, age, political affiliation, and race. Within this context the iconic Lincoln began to emerge—the enduring symbol of America’s sacrifice for union and liberty.

A few weeks earlier, General Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to General Ulysses S. Grant, virtually ending the Civil War and bringing needed relief to an exhausted president. By all accounts, the days following Appomattox were the happiest Lincoln had enjoyed since the war began. A carriage ride with the First Lady on Good Friday provided the opportunity to imagine a life beyond the presidency—perhaps travel to the West Coast or even abroad, where the burdens so dramatically etched in his face would eventually become a distant memory.

The northern mood had been buoyant as well. Union victory confirmed America’s professed beliefs and vindicated the North’s position on disunion. The price of war had been dear—the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives on the battlefield and in the disease-riddled camps, and the irreparable divisions within families as brothers chose opposing sides. Union supporters celebrated the hard-won victory until
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John Wilkes Booth’s act suddenly and violently ended their jubilation. Emotions fluctuated from shock to sorrow to anger as people tried to comprehend the senseless tragedy. Grown men cried openly, and anyone imprudent enough to speak ill of the martyred president or to revel in his assassination paid for their indiscretion with arrests, beatings, and even death.1

As the nation mourned the loss of a president, it also bemoaned the potential that he carried with him to the grave. Aversions to counterfactualism notwithstanding, we cannot resist speculating about what a full second term in office would have brought. Perhaps the process of reconstruction would have been smoother, less fraught with acrimony or the pressing of political agendas. Certainly, his second inaugural address suggests as much. Even southerners believed they had a better chance with Lincoln at the helm than his successor, Andrew Johnson, who hated the southern plantocracy.2 Perhaps the freedpeople would have been spared the abuses and the suffering inflicted on them by former Confederates committed to restoring their peculiar institution in a more subtle form and by northern capitalists eager to exploit anyone for economic gain. Lincoln’s annual message to Congress in December 1863 hinted that he was willing to intervene to protect the freedmen, if it came to that.3 And, of course, the freedmen and women were confident that he would. They were nearly inconsolable over Lincoln’s assassination, believing that the only man who could protect their freedom had been struck down. Perhaps the accomplishments of Reconstruction would have been longer lasting, would have prevented, or at the very least minimized, the economic disadvantages and the political and civil hindrances that continue to mark the African American experience today.

We will never know what the death of Lincoln denied us in practical terms, what could have been but never was. Yet his influence endures as his thoughts and actions continue to shape our national discourse. We commemorate President Lincoln’s death and celebrate his life, not simply because he was the first slain American chief executive, or even

1. For a discussion of the reaction to President Lincoln’s assassination, see Martha Hodes, Mourning Lincoln (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).
2. Hodes, Mourning Lincoln, 75.
because he helped to preserve our national union by ending slavery. He is honored because of his commitment to justice, to equality of opportunity, and to human dignity—ideals that still resonate with many Americans a century and a half later. The ineffaceable imprint he has left on the nation we are today is a reminder of what still must be done if we are ever to become the nation that he imagined we could be.

Although Lincoln’s vision for America remains a hallmark of our society, it has not gone unchallenged. Sadly, there have been those who would invoke his memory but who find it difficult to embrace the lessons he taught. They see no contradiction in revering him as a “Great Emancipator” while denying to the emancipated the rights and dignity he sought to secure for them. The America they embrace tends to be less compassionate, more self-interested than altruistic, and more inclined to see compromise as a weakness rather than a strength. Of course, it is an America that would have been familiar to Lincoln; it is one that he spent his entire life attempting to remake.

The America of Lincoln’s day was a place characterized by unapologetic hypocrisy—where men and women professed their belief in the fundamental principle of the Declaration of Independence but contradicted it in their actions. Lincoln believed in the Declaration. For him, its words were a near sacred promise intended to endure for all time. He was disturbed by the tendency of many of his fellow Americans to disregard those words at their convenience. “On the question of liberty, as a principle,” he wrote in 1855,

we are not what we have been. When we were the political slaves of King George, and wanted to be free, we called the maxim that “all men are created equal” a self-evident truth, but now when we have grown fat, and have lost all dread of being slaves ourselves, we have become so greedy to be masters that we call the same maxim “a self-evident lie” The fourth of July has not quite dwindled away; it is still a great day—for burning fire-crackers!!!

In Lincoln’s view, the assertion that all men were created equal was the “electric cord” in the Declaration that linked diverse groups of Americans in a common purpose. While the core population consisted of the descendants of the English men and women who were among the founding generations, he celebrated the fact that men who came from Europe—the German, Irish, French, and Scandinavian—were

4. Lincoln to George Robertson, August 15, 1855, Basler, Collected Works, 2:318.
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absorbed into the American family as equals. Although not united by blood with these earlier Americans and their descendants, they claimed and received a right to all that America had to offer.5

Of course, it is debatable whether this assessment of immigrant acceptance in the nineteenth century was accurate. In fact, Lincoln was well aware of the nativist sentiment of his day. The anti-immigrant American, or Know-Nothing, Party had formed out of a longstanding (and unwarranted) fear of papal influence and more immediately out of concern over an influx of Irish and German arrivals at midcentury. In a letter to long-time friend Joshua Speed, Lincoln outlined why he objected to the politics of the party. “I am not a Know-Nothing,” he wrote. “How could I be? How can any one who abhors the oppression of negroes, be in favor of degrading classes of white people?” The Know-Nothings represented regression, he asserted:

Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that “all men are created equal.” We now practically read it “all men are created equal, except negroes.” When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read “all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and catholics.”

An America so thoroughly influenced by the Know-Nothings was nearly inconceivable to him. “When it comes to this,” he wrote, “I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretence of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.”6

Lincoln hoped the nation would restore that promise of the Declaration of Independence by challenging the expansion of slavery. His objections to the institution, formed at an early age, were both moral and practical. He declared it a “monstrous injustice” that deprived enslaved men and women of their liberty and their right to the bread they had earned. It robbed the nation of its “just influence in the world” and convinced the supporters of freedom to doubt the nation’s sincerity.7 While he did not champion the notion of absolute equality—like most nineteenth-century white men and women, he accepted the idea of white social and intellectual superiority—he did believe in equality of opportunity, the right of every American to pursue his fortunes to the extent that his talents, abilities, and conscientiousness would take him. Slavery prevented the advancement of roughly

one-eighth of the American population. The founding fathers understood this; hence they were hostile to the principle of slavery and tolerated it only out of necessity. And in the early years of the nation’s growth, the country’s leaders tried to hem it in. Lincoln’s executive actions during the national crisis over disunion hastened slavery’s demise. The Emancipation Proclamation, even with its limited scope, opened the door to universal abolition, and his championing of the Thirteenth Amendment in its second journey through the House of Representatives, in the latter part of 1864, facilitated the outlawing of slavery throughout America.

Although he hated human bondage, Lincoln did not demonize the southern people for its presence in American society or for their decision to retain it when the North cast it aside. Nor did he blame the South solely for the war. It was, instead, divine retribution imposed on the entire nation for the offense of slavery. With Union victory, there would be no recriminations or punishment; “with malice toward none; with charity for all,” would be his mantra as the war ended. When Union major general Godfrey Weitzel asked for guidance on how to treat the vanquished in Richmond, the president purportedly declined to give him orders but suggested, “If I were in your place I’d let ‘em up easy—let ‘em up easy.” That magnanimity supposedly was repeated a few days later when General Grant offered General Lee generous terms of surrender. Essentially, military hardware would be turned over, officers could keep their side arms and private horses, soldiers and officers would be required to swear not to take up arms against the federal government, and all would be allowed to return home without fear of arrest. These lenient terms of surrender reveal an empathetic president who could and would fight with every weapon in his arsenal to preserve his vision for America but who was quick to recognize the common humanity of his adversary and to be able to place himself in that man’s position. It was a pattern of behavior that had defined Lincoln throughout the war years. Whether it was the inability of a young soldier to keep up with the demands of guard

8. Ibid., 2:274–75.
duty or searing criticisms from both political friends and opponents, he offered a measured response and a sense of fairness.

In the years that followed his assassination, Lincoln became an iconic figure worldwide and America, in turn, came to symbolize a place of infinite possibilities for those hungry for freedom and opportunity. Emma Lazarus’s famous words, mounted on a plaque on the inner wall of the pedestal on which the Statue of Liberty rests—“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”—suggested a willingness on the part of Americans to embrace the less fortunate, the dispossessed, the “wretched refuse” of other countries. But there were already those who objected to this open-door policy. Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s poem “The Unguarded Gates” captured their uncensored sentiment. Aldrich began by extolling the virtues of America—its “enchanted” cities and forests, “fields of living gold, vast prairies . . . majestic rivers,” and snow-covered mountains. Because the poem was written in 1895, he was able to talk about a free America, where “but if a slave’s foot press it sets him free” and where the “humblest man stands level with the highest in the law.” But Aldrich feared that America was being overrun with undesirables. “Wide open and unguarded stand our gates,” he wrote, “and through them presses a wild motley throng . . . Flying the Old World’s poverty and scorn.” He found their strange customs and language unsettling, and a menace to American society. “O Liberty, white Goddess! is it well / To leave the gates unguarded?” he asked. Aldrich advised his fellow Americans to assist the disadvantaged, but “with hand of steel / Stay those who to thy sacred portals come / To waste the gifts of freedom.” America responded with passage of anti-immigration legislation that sought to limit the entry of Asians, southern Europeans, and others deemed less desirable than the founding generations.

The acceptance of America’s own “huddled masses” proved to be an even more challenging feat. The former slaves and generations of their descendants struggled to realize the opportunities Lincoln had envisioned for all Americans. The accomplishments of the Reconstruction era—citizenship, due process, voting rights, education—were quickly eroded as the governments of the states of the former Confederacy were returned to those who had the most to gain by the suppression of black rights. Hate groups formed to keep African

American aspirations in check, landowners and businessmen colluded to deny men and women access to sustainable employment and economic independence, and new state constitutions began the process of slowly reversing the progress made during Reconstruction. Lynching—the cruel circumvention of the judicial process—and the denial of social justice created what historian Rayford Logan termed a nadir for African Americans late in the nineteenth century. Discrimination and intimidation continued into the twentieth century, often sanctioned directly or tacitly by all three branches of our national government.

Through the spontaneous efforts of individuals and the organized activities of protest groups, injustices were challenged. On the centennial of Lincoln’s birth, concerned citizens proposed a Lincoln Emancipation Conference that would address the disabilities suffered by African Americans and that would press for solutions to them. When it met on May 31, 1909, in New York, it had been renamed the National Negro Conference, but its purpose remained intact. Out of this effort sprang the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, an interracial organization that sought to give true meaning to the Declaration’s pronouncement of equality for all.

Still, the effort to bifurcate America persisted and even gained momentum during the economic crisis of the 1930s. The Great Depression tested the will of Americans to share in what bounty remained. Equality of opportunity fell victim to self-interest, justice—already illusive—found few proponents, and lofty sentiments became little more than hollow words. Yet champions of equality refused to concede the struggle. Highly placed supporters of progress, such as Eleanor Roosevelt, took both personal and public action to counter the negative racial fallout from the national economic crisis. Her support of the NAACP and her general concern for the welfare of the disadvantaged kept the issue of inclusion and opportunity in public view. And when the Second World War commenced, all of America’s citizens, including its most underprivileged, raised their voices and shouldered arms in defense of democracy and freedom abroad, even as they were denied it at home.

By midcentury, however, the demand for equality of opportunity and social justice had reached levels that could not be ignored. I need not review the Civil Rights Movement here; it is a recent occurrence that remains seared in our collective memory. Many of us lived through it, some of us sacrificed for it, and perhaps endured the censure of friends, family, and coworkers. We need to be reminded simply that change came only when men and women, black and white, expressed their objections loudly and persistently. It was a second civil war; not
with guns and cannon but with strength and determination to create a better, more inclusive America.

While Lincoln may not have been able to fully anticipate today’s challenges, he certainly understood the complexities in American society that would lead to conflict. In his message to a delegation composed of black men who visited the White House in August 1862, he urged support of colonization. “Even when you cease to be slaves,” he had told them, they would still face discrimination and prejudice.14 We can debate forever whether he truly intended to encourage widespread colonization or if his words were simply meant to convince white Americans to support the proclamation he had already written but not issued. At the very least, Lincoln understood his countrymen and accurately assessed the struggle African Americans would face in their effort to secure the benefits shared by other Americans. The suggestion in his last public speech that certain groups of black men should be given the ballot can and has been interpreted as a strategy to create a postwar political constituency in the South that would remain loyal to the Republican Party. Perhaps it was nothing more than that. But Lincoln also knew that securing the elective franchise for black men would give them a fighting chance at success and would help to safeguard their rights.

A reasonable person would be hard-pressed to deny the progress we have enjoyed in the century and a half since Lincoln’s death. Certainly, individuals have benefited, especially in the last half-century, from access to better educational facilities and from government intervention in the form of laws designed to stem the more egregious examples of inequality. But not all segments of the African American community have shared in that progress. Economic opportunity remains out of reach for many; the result of poorly run and overcrowded schools, outsourcing abroad of what were once sustainable sources of employment, and a general continuing disregard for the plight of the poor. Huge wealth disparities have always characterized economic comparisons between the races. Since the Great Recession, the gap has widened even more. According to a Pew Research Center study, median wealth for white households in 2013 was nearly thirteen times higher than that for black households.15 The massive unemployment and

underemployment, blighted communities, and hopelessness attending these disparities have produced generations disconnected from the institutions that other Americans hold dear. Those who believe they have no opportunity to better themselves—who no longer believe in the national promise of advancement for all—will be bound by no rules that the society seeks to impose on them.

These economic issues combine with inequity in the judicial system to confirm startling national divisions along racial lines. The belief among many African Americans that Lady Justice sometimes peeps from under her blindfold before she renders a legal decision is strengthened by the disproportionate incarceration of people of color. Lack of equal access to competent legal service for the poor and a disregard for the lives of the most disadvantaged among us have characterized a house divided no longer over slavery but by discrimination and prejudice that are fueled by preconceived notions, animosities of long standing, and a lack of empathy that hinders the ability to see beyond one’s own perspective.

So how do we as a nation return to the path that Lincoln had envisioned? Perhaps the answer lies in his brief remarks to residents of Indianapolis as he traveled to Washington in February 1861. In response to the enthusiastic reception he received from the citizens of the city, he reminded them that the preservation of the Union and the liberties they enjoyed rested in their hands: “It is your business to rise up and preserve the Union and liberty, for yourselves, and not for me. . . . Not with politicians, not with Presidents, not with office-seekers, but with you, is the question, ‘Shall the Union and shall the liberties of this country be preserved to the latest generations?’”

In his message to Congress a few months later, after eleven southern states had left the Union, Lincoln characterized his actions against the secessionists as defense of a government “whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial weights from all shoulders—to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all—to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life.” He eventually came to realize that such a government could not be preserved without the society being remade. Essentially, its reality would have to match its ideals. There could be no American exceptionalism—no example for the rest of the world—until those ideals enjoyed practical application.

However, Lincoln was a pragmatist and a careful observer of human nature. He understood that men (and women) had limitations—their very humanness prevented them from reaching an ideal state. But given the proper motivation, they could overcome the more negative elements of their natural inclinations. “I say in relation to the principle that all men are created equal, let it be as nearly reached as we can,” he counseled, for he knew the perpetuation of democratic institutions depended on it.\textsuperscript{18}

In a time of great national crisis, a president took the bold step of declaring freedom for more than three million people held in servitude. It was not a popular decision among many of his countrymen and women; even his friends criticized his actions as imprudent. But his gamble saved the Union and facilitated the destruction of the institution that had threatened to undo the nation since its founding. In challenging the notion that it is acceptable to withhold freedom from some for the benefit of others, Lincoln reaffirmed the “truths” espoused in the Declaration of Independence and recommitted the nation to fulfilling that promise of justice and equality of opportunity for all. Our challenge in the twenty-first century is to honor that legacy by living up to its promise.