

---

# The President Who Learned: Abraham Lincoln's Six Strengths

Newt Gingrich

---

Congressman Newt Gingrich of Georgia was Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives when he delivered the following at a Claremont Institute symposium on Abraham Lincoln on February 12, 1998.

Today is Abraham Lincoln's birthday. It's good to remember birthdays. One of the mistakes of the past thirty years has been avoiding history and using significant dates to expand weekends. To submerge Lincoln and George Washington into Presidents Day is an insult to our country's history and to leaders who stand at the apexes of that history.

As a history teacher who has several portraits of Washington in his office, I believe that by any reasonable standard, Washington's career taken in toto is clearly the outstanding single achievement in American history. He is literally the father of his country; without his moral leadership we would not have become a country. It is almost impossible to explain his most important characteristics to modern academics and almost impossible for the

modern media to see them.

Washington's greatest strength was his character: he was the rock of personal strength on which a nation was built. That transcended all of the intellectual achievements of Franklin and Jefferson and the others, and all of them knew it. None of them had any doubt who the preeminent leader of their generation was. He applied the force of personal will first to himself and then to create a nation.

You can make an argument that Washington is so extraordinary that he's unreachable, and that that is part of what attracts us to Lincoln.

After many years of studying, I can't imagine Washington. I can envision him. I know he is a fact, but I can't imagine how a person could do what he did. But I can imagine Lincoln: I can feel the humor. I can understand

---

the pain. I can experience the endurance. And so Lincoln is in some ways the greatest of our human presidents, the greatest of those leaders we can identify with as a person. Part of his enduring fascination for us is that through him we experience the anguish of the Civil War, understand the pain of leading free people, and learn some of the difficulties of life.

Lincoln's greatness comes from his subordination to two things: the truth and the American people. He is not great because he stands atop the American nation; he is great because he is willing to let the American nation lead him. His courage is to be found in the Union Army, in the millions of people who believed in freedom, and in the simple endurance of a nation determined to remain united and to be dedicated to freedom.

I know of no speech in which Lincoln is grandiose or self-centered. Quite the opposite: in Lincoln you have the servant as leader in an extraordinarily self-aware way. He galvanized and brought together for the American nation a sense of freedom as the heart of what it meant to be American.

Garry Wills is correct in saying that it is Lincoln who brings the Declaration of Independence back into the American ethos. Lincoln says, at Gettysburg, that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth. That important concept is at the heart of what Lincoln was about.

He was self-consciously poor,

although as a Whig lawyer he became quite wealthy. It was said in Illinois that Stephen Douglas was the best lawyer with a bad case and Lincoln was the best lawyer with a good case. And yet, in spite of his wealth, I think he never forgot the log cabin and reading by the fireplace, never forgot splitting rails, never forgot all the normal, everyday people.

We cannot appreciate that 140 years ago the concept of people mattering, rather than kings or emperors, was, in fact, a radical aberration. Lincoln wasn't simply saying interesting words. Lincoln was describing a time when the French emperor was attempting to impose a French emperor on Mexico, the British queen was looking toward a disunited America, and the Russian czar was a powerful and autocratic force. In that world, the future of freedom for normal, everyday people was truly hanging in the balance.

Lincoln brought to that world six great strengths that we tend to undervalue in the modern era. None of them related to nine-second sound bites, although he was so clever and so smart, I am confident he would have mastered sound bites if he had needed to. None of his strengths related to thirty-second attack commercials, although Lincoln was possibly the best practical politician in Illinois. This was not a meek, romantic idealist. This was a hardened, tough professional politician who had spent his entire career thinking through the process of power in the most practical of ways.

The first of Lincoln's great strengths was this: Lincoln had, I believe, more

---

than any other American president, a sense of intellectual clarity. The debates with Douglas are the right kind of debates—no nonsense about twenty questions and television personalities trying to make themselves look important by playing gotcha, but genuine, hours-long articulation of serious thought by real adults. If you read those debates, you see a man who was probing at the core of the nature of America, the nature of freedom. He brought up questions that some conservatives hide from to this day. When I walked around a magnificent display of photos of the march in Selma, I was reminded of how many conservatives found an excuse for segregation and found a reason not to apply the Constitution to states that were prohibiting people from voting because they were black.

The truth is, Lincoln got it. Read the debate. Look at what he said. His was a great mind. And it wasn't just intellectual clarity about theory. It was intellectual clarity about winning the war. He said at one point, "I hope God is on my side, but I must have Kentucky." And he wasn't jesting: this was a man who believed profoundly in God. But he was making a point. He had figured out intellectually that the pivotal point to the survival of the Union was the state of Kentucky, and for nine months he focused all of his energy on ensuring that Kentucky in the end would remain with the Union. There are few examples of leadership more elegant than Lincoln's first several years as he gradually built the coalition that preserved the Union and sustained freedom.

When he was done thinking—and he was one of the great trial lawyers of American history, a man who had won many cases—there was in Lincoln an astonishing moral purpose. He comes back to it again and again. This was a moral cause, the cause of freedom. This was a moral concern, that the Union must survive so people can be free. If the Union fails, freedom fails, and then all is failed. That's a moral statement—not geopolitical, not egocentric, but moral. You find in Lincoln over and over this capacity to chew his way through a problem until he found with intellectual clarity the moral center of the issue.

Not only did he think clearly, not only was he centered morally, he also had a courageous firmness and persistence that are rivaled only by Washington. No other president is within twenty leagues. Lincoln picked Burnside to command the Army of the Potomac against Burnside's wishes. Burnside had said to him, I can't do this, I'm not smart enough. Burnside led the battle of Fredericksburg and proved that he was right and Lincoln was wrong. Lincoln sat on the porch and for three days watched the wagons roll by with the dead. He didn't blame Burnside, but he didn't quit. He was firm at Antietam, at Bull Run, at Gettysburg, at Vicksburg. He never quit.

As late as August of 1864, there was a serious effort to dump Lincoln from the ticket. He didn't look at polls. He didn't stick his finger in the wind. He didn't worry about advisers who were gutless. He didn't gather a group of timid people around him. He didn't

---

bring his staff in to counsel fears. He did what he thought was historically unavoidable, because he knew that it was better to lose Lincoln than to lose the Union. Very few people are willing to literally obliterate themselves, if that is the price of freedom.

Fourth, with all this greatness, Lincoln may have been the most human of our presidents. Not human in shallow ways, in the ways that we scoff about as though the presidency was a soap opera, but human in the deepest sense: he led people. That's the key difference between a totalitarian state and a truly free society. Totalitarian states have the idea that if they torture you enough you'll become perfect. Truly free societies have a great tragic difficulty: they are made up of people, and people are sinful and weak. On the other hand, people have a romantic capacity to rise above their weakness and sin and at heroic moments do heroic things. Lincoln was able to sustain that balance in a way that no other president has ever done.

Lincoln's treasury secretary was maneuvering to dump him from the ticket so the secretary could become the presidential nominee. So Lincoln cheerfully and cleverly got him maneuvered into being chief justice of the Supreme Court so he couldn't run for president; he couldn't turn down the chief justice position, but that is not what he wanted.

This is a very clever human being, one who has a thorough and deep knowledge, which I suspect he first began to acquire as a young rail splitter hanging around the river. He knew that our country is about people. We're

not about a Cartesian model or straight lines. We are not a totalitarian system that contorts us into deception. We are just a free people, all doing our best. We are a great country filled with good people, and, therefore, we can afford to relax and accept that in the end we will rally and do what's best.

In some ways, Lincoln's most remarkable quality—although other presidents have shared it—is that Lincoln learned. The Lincoln who arrived in Washington in 1861 could not possibly have won the Civil War. He had never studied war. He didn't think much about it. His experience as a volunteer had been markedly limited. An interesting side note: he checked out every book in the Library of Congress on the art of war. He studied war.

He had generals who didn't know what they were doing, and proved it routinely by losing. You can imagine no greater frustration for Lincoln. He created with McClellan the Army of the Potomac, and McClellan did nothing. After Antietam, Lincoln begged him, directed him, ordered him to move, and finally went to visit him. On leaving the camp of this magnificent army, he turned and said to his good friend Congressman Washburn, Do you know what you're looking at? The Army of the Potomac, Washburn said. And Lincoln said, No, you're looking at General McClellan's bodyguard.

In Congress, we have moments when we wish things would happen, and I find on occasion that they don't. When I start to get depressed, I read Lincoln, because he did everything he knew how to do and it didn't work. So

---

he got up the next day and did everything he knew how to do and it didn't work, but every day he learned. Look at the relative difference between Lincoln and Jefferson Davis on the opening day of the war and the relative difference on the last day of the war. It is astonishing: one learned and one didn't, day after day.

Finally, to a degree that I am sure is politically incorrect and taught at virtually no school in America, Lincoln believed in God at a deep intellectual level that is almost unimaginable in the modern world. The second inaugural is so short, so simple, that it is literally engraved on one wall of the Lincoln Memorial. That short address, given in the middle of the Civil War, is about the pain he felt for both sides. I

think it's fair to say that Lincoln felt the death of every Confederate soldier as the death of an American fully as much as he felt the death of every Union soldier. His heart was that big. He did after all argue that it was the Union, and therefore they were all Americans.

In those paragraphs of pain, Lincoln refers to God, or a Supreme Being, fourteen times. Seldom do you see a president who comes back again and again to God. I suspect that Lincoln was driven to God by pain, by the anguish of presiding over a nation tearing itself apart, the anguish of the death of young Americans, the anguish of destruction. I suspect that the clarity I described, the moral purpose, could find no other answer. n

### “With Malice Toward None”: Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865

. . . Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came.

One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union, even by war; while the government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial

enlargement of it. Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been

---

answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses! for it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh!" If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it con-

tinue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether."

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations. n