

LINCOLN, THE POLITICIAN

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Lincoln, the politician by T. Aaron Levy

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PREFACE

LOVE of kind alone transcended Lincoln's political ambition. His career as President, Statesman, Emancipator is a mystery unless his preparation for leadership is demonstrated. He was no product of sudden elevation, no creature of opportunity. No American Statesman was better equipped to meet a national emergency. Lincoln the plain politician, the Illinois legislator, the congressman, and the prairie debater, was a child of the grocery store, of the pioneer gathering, of caucus and convention. It was this political training that determined the mode in which he breathed life into the momentous proclamation of the nineteenth century. The world that admires his charity is in equal need of his policy.

Until the coming of the industrial movement following the Civil War, the Commonwealth commanded the best heart and intelligence of the Republic. Captains of industry had not usurped the places of power. A degraded conception of devotion to the general welfare is in itself a sign of degeneration. A corrupt political system is incompatible with a healthy national existence. When individual aggrandizement is often preferred to the common good, when private institutions frequently allure the genius of a people, it is an inspiration to return to a politician who in simplicity and sincerity believed that civil service and patriotism are better than gold. An abounding demand of the day is a practical political philosophy.

In spite of golden vision, of saintly Grail, civilization still

questions its real progress, and the sphynx of human suffering baffles understanding. Life has ever been a ceaseless compromise between spirit and matter, dream and reality, shadow and substance. In the never ending conflict between the hosts of darkness and of light, of radicalism and of conservatism, the battle often has been won by the use of superior strategy. Wasted energy, a lack of well directed idealism and indifference to the laws of human progress are the main obstacles to human advancement. There is an ever present need of a fine sense of proportion between vision and reality. The reformer needs more method, while the practical representative needs more vision. The solution of vexing governmental problems will be hastened by a clearer and more general comprehension of the gigantic difficulties that stand in the way of the domination of ideas over matter. High political success comes from a profound knowledge of the character of the hostility thwarting human progress. Patience as well as faith must be the guide. Society suffers from misdirected emotion on the one hand and from impervious apathy on the other. Sensational onslaught on evil has been often tested and its futility proved. Likewise the common politician has made many despair of democratic government. Abraham Lincoln represents the sanest example of wise political action, his political life the best platform for eternal warfare on organized evil.

The artist is measured not alone by his sleepless imagination but also by the technic through which his vision assumes external form. Dante skillfully gave voice to "ten silent centuries." Even so the dreams of prophet and humanitarian await the touch of the political artist to find immortality in visible manifestation. Neither a politician without a luminous idea nor a dreamer without political craft ever develops into a statesman. Democracy can solve its destiny

only by an adequate appreciation of the importance of working out its intrinsic mission. The national ideal must become a reality. Dreamer and reformer are needed and likewise the politician, the man of method, the student of matter, the wielder of the tool. A heroic past will not save a nation. "The central idea" of a people cannot be safely relinquished, but must restlessly follow the law of practical evolution in each generation.

Abraham Lincoln was a child of American Democracy. He was trained in the college of republican institutions. The danger to Democracy is the treason of her own children. Lincoln stayed with his teachers—the plain people. He never longed for a place they could not give nor an honor they could not bestow. The aristocracy of externality, of clothes, fashion, wealth, station and descent ever remained shadows to him. He valued them at their real worth, with finer judgment than any man in modern history. The possibility of such a career is in itself a justification of republican government.

He walked the way of the average citizen, labored in the factory of political methods. Living in the common atmosphere, loving the strife of debate, near to the pioneer heart and mind, a student of popularity and party organization, he was from the beginning a champion of the better and broader humanity. He lived his democracy and led his people to a higher realization of the resistless purposes of the republic. Striking the better chords of their being, he led them to make a mere declaration of freedom the possession of a forgotten people. During his political pilgrimage he ever sought to widen in a practical way the Declaration of Independence. Many prate much of Democracy but Lincoln dared to make it the bread of humanity.

Abraham Lincoln used political machinery for the welfare

of the people. He was ambitious and loved success but not for its own sake. Station gave him wider opportunity to practice his philosophy of life, his affection for his fellowmen, and sympathy for the downtrodden. He is a guide to the perplexed, to those who have not bartered their idealism in the stifling fight. His life is richly calculated to deepen faith in the ultimate triumph of righteousness, to lead to the conviction that spirit and method are not sundered of necessity, that the vision is not essentially a stranger to the party worker, that policy and compromise have their place in the domain of progress.

He looms up in American History as a politician who glorified his craft, who kept his hands clean in all of the sordidness of material success. Vicarious government in a republic is ruinous. Lincoln is therefore an inspiration for political consecration and the prophet of permanency. He dedicated his talent to the external manifestations of the destiny of the republic. His common sense, his practical sagacity and knowledge of human nature and of its limitations for progress, his prudent recognition of the labored advance of ethical sentiment and of the solidarity of vested interests, as well as his superb idealism and exalted spirit may well become food and life to those who believe in the better politics. As these become the property and the possession of a broader community the republic will know no fear, dissension will little disturb her serenity and she will be equal to every emergency that may threaten her integrity.

Beginning with the Lincoln-Douglas debates, Abraham Lincoln became and remained a national figure. From that time his life belongs to the history of the United States and has been dwelt upon with ever increasing fullness and eulogy. By contrast his early political life has been almost forgot-

ten. This work covers that neglected period, dealing with Lincoln the politician, showing his development and his training for national leadership. The story is largely told in the words of Lincoln himself, stress being laid on crucial incidents hitherto, in the main, indifferently considered. A unity, dramatic in its simplicity, appears in his recital, giving glimpses of a man who was guided by a supreme political philosophy in seeking to externalize his gospel of the brotherhood of man in statute and decision. Considerable attention is devoted to Lincoln in Indiana and at New Salem, showing the peculiarity of his power, his political popularity, and the rapid maturity of his convictions as to the wisest methods of attacking entrenched evil. An earnest, reverent and impartial study of his political career is an enriching education. There is no need of hiding its humble, rude phases. The more his life is lingered over, the greater the wonder grows at the emerging of Lincoln from the humility and the poverty of his environment with a "message of range and sweep," to the sons of men the world over.