

Introduction

My Lincoln Lessons

In his speeches, President Lincoln frequently placed the United States in a global context. Readers often take these mentions as rhetorical flourishes that he used to surround his words with an aura of consequence. Consider his speech at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on November 19, 1863. Standing on a platform beside the new national cemetery, the president orated phrases that continue to resonate and define the basis of republicanism in the United States: “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Before the platform on that sunny day, 15,000 people stood near and among the newly shoveled graves of Union soldiers. Collected from the battlefield by gravediggers, many of whom were free African Americans, the soldiers’ remains now rested in burial plots forming concentric semicircles. At the focal point, a monument with the statue “Genius of Liberty” on a towering pedestal would be placed in 1869. The orderliness of cemetery design had replaced the chaos and carnage of war. Mortally wounded during the great battle of the previous July, the soldiers had fallen in gruesome postures that defaced the town – its streets, house yards, and farm fields. To dedicate the cemetery, President Lincoln’s address now transformed the corpses interred in their symmetrically arranged mounds into the “honored dead” whose sacrifice called for increased devotion to a great cause.

In his salient concluding sentence, the president explained that cause. The loss of each of the approximately 3,200 Union soldiers had mattered to the United States and to the world. They “had died that that nation might live.”

In the present day, readers of Lincoln's well-known speech tend to emphasize his three prepositional phrases that sum up the central propositions of republican government: that governments depend on the consent of the governed and that they exist to serve those whom they govern. Readers then move quickly to the end of the sentence while overlooking why the president said that republican government, and in particular the republican government of the United States, possessed global importance. U.S. soldiers had died so that their national government should not perish, and even more, so that republican government should "not perish from the earth." For Abraham Lincoln, the outcome of the Civil War would determine the fate of republicanism both nationally and globally, in 1865 and for all time. If the Union prevailed, the United States would survive and the world would retain a model of republican government that other countries could emulate. As he had written to both houses of Congress in his annual message almost a year previously, the United States, the Union, was "the last best, hope of earth."

This book demonstrates that Lincoln meant what he said. It reveals the lessons of his early life and presidency that he drew from the Atlantic world. They taught him to think and to act globally as a politician and then as president.

This book had its beginning when my father gave me his father's volumes of Roy P. Basler's *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. After spending a summer reading every volume and being suitably impressed with Lincoln's powers of analysis, I began offering students at Franklin & Marshall College a seminar on the president. While teaching that class a few years ago, attendance at a lecture about the French revolutions of the 1830s and 1848 moved me into a new and lightly charted area. During the discussion of European revolutions, my mind drifted from France to the United States of the 1830s and 1840s. The college semester was beginning, and the students in the current "Lincoln" seminar were considering the president's early life and how it had shaped his political career.

As the young Lincoln began to appear in a transatlantic context, questions naturally arose. To what extent had he resembled so many young Americans of those years; how had European revolutionaries inspired him with their vision of their countries' futures? After all, from Lincoln's teen years and through his early years in the politics of Illinois, he matured in an Atlantic world of democratic revolution.

Lincoln had grown up imagining his country as a member of the world community of nations. In 1823, President James Monroe issued

the proclamation now known as the Monroe Doctrine to counter, at least in diplomatic prose, European threats to overturn the revolutions of Latin America. A few years previously, the Greeks' decade-long uprising against the Ottoman Empire had aroused great sympathy in the United States. In Congress, Henry Clay, then a representative from Kentucky, spoke in favor of a resolution, which went down to defeat, that would have sent an official emissary to Greece to observe their uprising. In his speech, Clay offered "good wishes" for Greek independence from his country – "almost the sole, the last, the greatest depository of human hope and human freedom."¹

Given the momentous international events of Abraham Lincoln's teens and twenties, little wonder exists that he should have appreciated his country's membership in a global community. Even though the Lincoln family lived in rural Indiana, its curious and intellectually gifted son had borrowed books and newspapers from William Wood, a neighbor. The reading material brought international events to the attention of the young reader and pushed him to imagine his country's place in world history. The newspaper owner later reported that in 1829 he had read an essay by his neighbor. It claimed that the United States government was "the best form of Government in the world" and "ought to be Kept sound & preserved forever."²

More than revolutions in Greece and Latin America inspired Lincoln as he grew from a gawky teenager to adulthood. Before the 1850s, monarchies and social systems based on unfree labor had dominated the countries of the Atlantic world. In the recent past, the rise of reformers across western Europe and the political turmoil of the late 1840s had promised that the days of unlimited monarchy would end. Then, the forces of political reaction had taken over. The intervention of the Russian army into Hungary had quashed the chance for its independence. Soon, the victory of monarchical forces also had ended hopes for a unification of the Italian states and the German states. In France, Louis-Bonaparte Napoleon, President of the Second Republic, overthrew it in 1851, established the Second Empire, and proclaimed himself its emperor, Napoleon III.

In England, reformers had fared better. In 1832, the British Parliament extended representation in the national legislature to the country's burgeoning industrial cities and expanded the right to vote to an increased number of landholders and renters, thus enlarging the electorate by about 60 percent to include about 20 percent of adult males. Later in the same year, similar reforms were enacted in Scotland and Ireland. In the next decade, Parliament repealed the Corn Laws, which

had benefited landowners while raising the cost of food. Agitation for public education promised that England soon might have an educated electorate.

Additionally, Parliament's end of slavery in almost all lands of the British Empire in 1834 and Alexander II's ending of serfdom of Russia in 1861 seemed to predict that all forms of unfree labor would end. Working people and reformers throughout Europe and former colonies in South America saw history ordaining that slavery, serfdom, and autocratic monarchies would disappear. The ideal government would be known as republican, and it would rest on the consent of the governed with free labor as the foundation of its economy. Ideally, citizens would be equal before the law, and the rule of law would prevail. Holding these ideals made one a republican no matter where one lived, although implementation of them differed in European and American countries.

Lincoln learned of these republican hopes through newspaper reading, conversation, and his everyday experiences. They confirmed that his country belonged to the Atlantic world both economically and politically. When nineteen years old, in 1828, he traveled some 750 miles to New Orleans. Transporting cargo to Louisiana on a flatboat, he learned of the commercial route that ran from the Midwest via the Mississippi River and its tributaries.

The trip taught him more than geography. As Lincoln and his rafting partner exchanged their goods at stops along the river, they learned how engaging in consecutive transactions offered the possibility of increasing the value of the merchandise that they were transporting. At the route's end, in New Orleans, they witnessed numerous commodities being transferred from riverboats and rafts to oceangoing ships. These vessels sailed to ports in the Caribbean Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and islands off the African coast, eventually returning to the United States with manufactured items, minerals scarce in the Americas, or agricultural products.

Having made two trips to New Orleans by 1831, he probably had a good look at the polyglot people of the Atlantic world's economy. To a young man from the Midwest, the French- and Spanish-inspired architecture of New Orleans as well as the appearance and languages of the city's residents must have appeared exotic. Whereas the population of Illinois and Indiana in 1830 included less than 1 percent of free or enslaved African Americans, that of Louisiana had more than 58 percent. As a former possession of Spain and then of France, New Orleans was home to many Americans with ancestors from those countries. As an

international port, the city inevitably brought Lincoln into contact with non-English-speaking sailors.

After the Lincoln family moved to Illinois in 1830, he, along with many Midwesterners, had the opportunity to learn about political ideas then percolating, especially those in Europe. Into their cultural and political baggage, immigrants, especially those from the German states, had packed a commitment to republicanism. Further, many had voted with their feet for a republican political system when they embarked from their homelands for the United States.

Starting in the 1830s and gaining momentum through the 1840s and 1850s, German immigration to Illinois increased significantly, until German Americans became the most numerous group of non-native-born residents of the state, amounting to about 9 percent of its foreign-born population, and 4.5 percent of its total population. The presence of these émigrés and their dedication to the European revolutions of the late 1840s eventually encouraged the politically active Lincoln to participate in community meetings in Springfield. There, he composed resolutions proclaiming sympathy with the Hungarian, Irish, French, and German people in their efforts “to establish free governments, based upon the principles of true religious and civil liberty.”³

My reading Basler’s collection combined with this thinking to create a novel understanding of Lincoln. It built on my previous research and publications, which had dealt with European influences on American culture from 1830 to 1880, whether in higher education or Victorian domestic life. Encouragement for this sort of analysis also arrived from myriads of recent books. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, history writers began to see the United States situated within a world community, or as Thomas Bender succinctly said, *A Nation among Nations*.⁴

Clearly, discovery of how the international events of the prewar decades intersected with the life of the young Lincoln would offer a new and fuller perspective. Subtracting world events from reconstruction of Lincoln’s mental world leaves our understanding of him, both his thought and actions, incomplete and diminished. If global events help reveal in full resolution presidents of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the same should be true of earlier presidents, especially one who stands among the greatest of them all.

In 2007, Michael Oren’s *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Mideast, 1776 to the Present*, a Christmas gift from my daughter, provided further encouragement for investigation of Lincoln’s interactions with the world. On its title page, its author had written “to a fellow lover

of Civil War history.” Not until Oren’s chapter 8 did I grasp why a domestic conflict in the United States would compel the attention of a historian of the Middle East.

Oren relates how a confrontation in Tangier, Morocco, had incited an international incident with France during the second year of the Lincoln presidency. The overly ambitious U.S. consul had encouraged local authorities in Tangier to apprehend two Confederates – a naval officer and a diplomat – whom the Navy then transported to Boston, Massachusetts, for imprisonment. Because France was a neutral power in the American war, its diplomats protested. Since the Confederates had journeyed to the African port on a vessel bearing the French flag, its diplomats argued that the United States had violated international law, according to which a ship carried the status of its home country, in this case neutral status. The Lincoln administration soon defused the crisis by releasing the Confederates. Additionally, Oren claimed that the young Lincoln’s reading about African pirates in *Sufferings in Africa*, a well-known steady seller of the prewar years, a book mentioned prominently in the Republican candidate’s 1860 campaign biography, and the subject of chapter 2, had played a major role in shaping the future president’s attitude toward human slavery.⁵

To discover more about the lessons that Lincoln learned from around the globe, I began to reread the works by notable Lincoln biographers, who had taught me so much about his early life and domestic political accomplishments. They touch briefly on the revolts and revolutions that had roiled the Atlantic world during the 1820s through the 1840s. For example, David Donald’s *Lincoln* summarizes the young Lincoln’s sympathies “for liberal movements abroad” in several lines.⁶

When moving forward from Lincoln’s Illinois days to his presidential years, most biographers focus on domestic events and justify their decision by relying on comments from the president’s first months in office. For instance, in the spring of 1861, he expressed his misgivings about Queen Victoria’s declaration that her country would recognize a state of belligerency between the United States and the seceded states. At that time, the president confided to his friend and political adviser Carl Schurz, an émigré from Prussia whom he later appointed as minister to Spain, that he deplored having to rely on others for foreign affairs and intended “to study up” on the topic. Donald set the pattern for his successors by pronouncing that the president possessed “no knowledge of diplomacy and no personal acquaintances or correspondents from abroad”; thus “he willingly entrusted foreign policy to his Secretary of State.”⁷

Alternately, scholars turn for evidence of Lincoln's noninvolvement in foreign affairs to Secretary of State William Seward, who recalled that the recently inaugurated president confided that Seward would have to manage the international policies of the country "of which I know so little, and with which I reckon you are familiar."⁸

Richard Carwardine and Doris Kearns Goodwin both depart from the established narrative about Lincoln's foreign policy expertise. Accounting for Lincoln's habitual self-deprecation and his secretary of state's braggadocio, they note the ability that he displayed during the foreign relations crises with Great Britain during the last two months of 1861. Goodwin says that Lincoln deserves much credit for the "sophisticated prowess" with which he responded to that country's diplomatic protest.⁹ Still, their reconsideration does not extend beyond the diplomatic crisis of late 1861 with Great Britain.

Historians of U.S. foreign policy and international relations place the president in a broader perspective. The path of Oren's research for American involvement in northern Africa during the Civil War guided me to his chief authority, Jay Monaghan's *Diplomat in Carpet Slippers: Abraham Lincoln Deals with Foreign Affairs*, first published in 1945. As a narrative of the Lincoln administration's foreign efforts, the book dealt more with events and less with their relationship to Lincoln's life and domestic affairs.

Howard Jones and Kevin Peraino both update and add scholarly depth to Monaghan's survey. Jones, who has written extensively about the Civil War and Lincoln, notes, "Lincoln realized early in his presidency that the slavery issue proved that domestic and foreign affairs were inseparable." Recently, Peraino analyzes more extensively the president's vital role in foreign affairs by unraveling his complex relationship with his secretary of state and showing the president's crucial role in the 1861 diplomatic crisis with Great Britain and the conflict with France during Napoleon III's 1862 Mexican incursion.¹⁰

This book revises Lincoln biographies and studies of his presidency. It demonstrates that a Lincoln portrait within a national frame eliminates from view crucial components of his thinking. When Lincoln became president, although he may have possessed slight knowledge of the formal conduct of foreign affairs, as he freely admitted, he had great experience thinking about the worldwide progress of republicanism. In his political career, he intended to perpetuate the republic of the United States and make it "more perfect" by ending the institution of human slavery within its boundaries.

After the bombardment of Fort Sumter in April 1861, it was predictable that, given the European and hemispheric events of his youth, he should insist on the global significance of the need to preserve the republic of the United States when, on July 4, he addressed the Congress, whose members had assembled for a special session. He wanted the voters in the United States to see the conflict between the states as he did – from a republican and global perspective:

It presents to the whole family of man, the question, whether a constitutional republic, or a democracy – a government of the people, by the same people – can, or cannot, maintain its territorial integrity, against its own domestic foes. It presents the question, whether discontented individuals . . . can . . . break up their Government, and thus practically put an end to free government upon the earth. It forces us to ask: “Is there, in all republics, this inherent, and fatal weakness?”¹¹

The president’s reference to the whole family of man and his interpretation of the Fort Sumter bombardment raised the question central to the existence of republics since Roman days. Was their demise foreordained? Moreover, in this quotation Lincoln reveals the core of his global view. Thinking globally in his terms meant understanding that political history since the Enlightenment had possessed one main theme, namely the rise of republican thought and government in the Americas and Europe. Concomitantly, republican government implied a government resting on the consent of free men, as the Declaration of Independence had said. Lincoln thought the United States in the 1850s and 1860s occupied an exceptional place in the history and, he assumed, the progress of republicanism.¹²

Republicans worldwide knew that they had lost the foremost champion of their causes when John Wilkes Booth, the famous actor turned infamous assassin, fired his fatal shot in April 1865. Accordingly, this book begins with the worldwide reaction to the death of President Abraham Lincoln. This global response inspires awe by running far beyond the sympathy letters from kings, queens, prime ministers, and presidents, who, with notable exceptions, followed established etiquette and diplomatic protocol. Everyday people around the globe poured out their sorrow and their high estimation for the U.S. president with telling words and material tributes.

The remaining chapters tell how Lincoln won that worldwide esteem. Chapters 2 through 4 explain how his global thinking developed during his pre-presidential years with specific reference to the issue of slavery, the Hungarian revolution, and political turmoil in the German states. Whereas as a young man he had taught himself the skills of speech,

writing, and logic that gained him entry into the literate, genteel society of Victorian America, in the late 1840s, following his term in Congress and the visits of German and Hungarian patriots to the United States, his ambition developed to include an international dimension. He began to see that praise of U.S. history and political system had contemporary relevance. Political reformers in the German states, France, and Great Britain shared his republican political ideals. Absorbing their lessons, Lincoln began to shape his appearance and his message. He wanted to become an opponent of autocracy as was Lajos Kossuth in Hungary, and a champion of republicanism and free labor as was John Bright in England and the self-exiled Comte de Gasparin for France.¹³

The next three chapters trace how his thinking matured and received implementation with encouragement from sea captain and author James Riley and Member of Parliament John Bright, as well as German émigrés Francis Lieber, a political scientist, and John George Nicolay, his personal secretary.

A concluding chapter elevates *Our American Cousin*, some say the most popular comedy of the nineteenth-century stage, from its current status as a frivolous British comedy. (See Figure I.1.) More than laughs, the comedy presented serious political and cultural commentary by upholding the ideals of free men, free labor, and free land. When Booth, Confederate partisan and pro-slavery advocate, shot Abraham Lincoln, he disrupted a theatrical presentation situated in the midst of the nineteenth-century culture war between government by the people and government by inherited right. As Lincoln chuckled at the play, he received his last global lesson. By implication, the play affirmed the rightness of the Union victory and the preservation of the republic of the United States. Directly, it affirmed the conviction of liberals around the globe that ascendance of republican governments everywhere, especially in the Atlantic world, was inevitable.

For now, one example will illustrate the global context in which Lincoln lived. A second example will demonstrate how his global thinking affected his thinking by exposing the global dimension of the phrase in the Gettysburg Address: “all men are created equal.”

Consider the nickname, “the Tycoon,” by which Nicolay and John Hay, his private secretaries, affectionately referred to their boss, the president. Unraveling how the term came to be applied to Lincoln shows that politically active and informed people of the 1850s and 1860s were acutely aware of the U.S. commercial and diplomatic engagement with the world. Today, we call men such as Andrew Carnegie or J. Pierpont Morgan tycoons to evoke the great wealth and power that they often

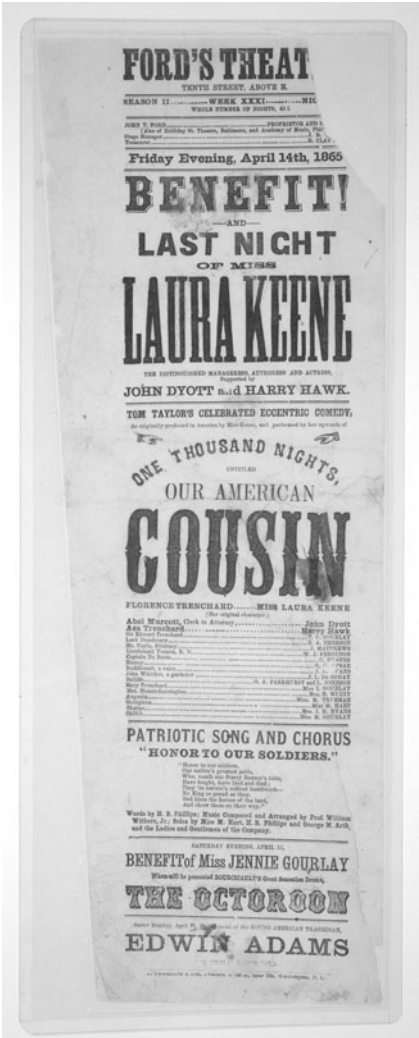


FIGURE 1.1. Playbill for Ford’s Theatre, Friday evening, April 14, 1865. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division.

deployed for suspect ends. Abraham Lincoln does not seem to qualify for that usually pejorative term. In 1858, “tycoon” possessed an entirely opposite meaning. Internet-powered research through U.S. newspaper databases of the 1850s and 1860s revealed that the term surfaced in diplomatic correspondence and on the printed page in late 1858. In that year, Townsend Harris, whom President Franklin Pierce had appointed as the first consul general to Japan two years previously, negotiated with