

Celebrating the Legacy of Abraham Lincoln

February 15, 2007

Mr. President. Since 1915, an oil portrait of Abraham Lincoln has hung in the chambers of the Nevada Assembly. The painting of our 16th President serves as a reminder of Nevada's entrance to the union during his remarkable administration and of the special place his leadership will always hold in our state's history.

I want to pay tribute today to that man who rose to the highest office in our country at one of the most turbulent times in our history. He is an example to all of a good, decent, honorable man, who contributed more to the freedom we cherish today than we may ever fully understand.

February 12 was the 198th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth in a log cabin in Kentucky. We all learned about "Honest Abe" in grade school and his role in guiding this nation through the Civil War.

But at the very essence of Abraham Lincoln was a man of great conviction who showed incomparable humility, a tested sense of morality, and an ability to rise above personal pettiness. Learning about Abraham Lincoln's life is a humbling lesson in leadership.

He was self-educated and had none of the advantages of a formal education. He taught himself the law and never stopped learning along the way. Whether it was studying history, philosophy, or military strategy, what Lincoln lacked in classroom time, he made up for in focus and determination.

And while moral fiber can be taught, that doesn't mean it will have its desired effect. It is said that trials don't build character, they reveal it. Abraham Lincoln had so many trials. His tremendous character was revealed time and again. The stories are endless, but I want to share a few examples of what a giant of a man President Lincoln really was.

During his days practicing law, Lincoln would often ride the legal circuit, which meant that he traveled with a band of lawyers and judges across Illinois to try cases in every corner of the state. Lincoln was admired and loved by his colleagues for his skill as a lawyer, and his gift for telling stories was legendary. It was during this time that fellow lawyers noted Lincoln's heartfelt conviction that no man was better than he. One lawyer pointed out, "He arrogated to himself no superiority over anyone ..."

This sense of equality would remain consistent throughout Lincoln's life—as a man and a public servant—and would extend to other character strengths he exhibited. Lincoln was humble—to an astonishing degree. In 1855, Lincoln withdrew his name for a seat in the U.S. Senate. Although he had the greater number of votes, it became apparent that, if either he or the other anti-slavery candidate did not succumb, the cause of slavery would be the true victor. Much to the dismay of his loyal supporters, Lincoln advised his floor

manager to drop his name, handing Lyman Trumbull the win. Lincoln showed no hard feelings and shook Trumbull's hand at his victory party.

Six months later, Lincoln suffered another blow to his morale when he believed that he was part of an important patent test case. Unbeknownst to him, he was not part of the case, but he continued to prepare as if he were. When he approached the lawyers involved with the case, one of them, Edwin Stanton, drew the other aside and asked why he had brought the “. . . long armed Ape here . . . he does not know any thing and can do you no good.” Stanton treated Lincoln poorly in the days that followed, but six years later, Lincoln asked Stanton to be his Secretary of War.

Lincoln's ability to put aside such losses—which for most people would be terrible ego blows—was inspiring. Not only did he move forward, but he wasn't blinded by hate or rage and he didn't seek revenge. Instead, he recognized the need to surround himself with the best people who would make the greatest contributions to the mission at hand.

Lincoln's decision on who would join his cabinet was the perfect example of what his assistant, John Nicolay, described as “one of great courage and self-reliance.” Lincoln did not fill these positions with friends and loyal supporters who would agree with him and thought as he did. According to Lincoln, “We needed the strongest men of the party in the Cabinet. We needed to hold our own people together. I had looked the party over and concluded that these were the very strongest men. Then I had no right to deprive the country of their services.”

It took great strength of character to understand that—especially when three of those men were his rivals for the Republican nomination for the presidency. These men: William Seward, Salmon Chase, and Edward Bates, were stunned by their losses to Lincoln in the primary and each maintained that he was the best man for the post well after their losses. When Lincoln embraced them for the cabinet positions, they still looked down on him as the lesser choice for president. However, Lincoln was wonderfully gifted at transforming rivals to admirers.

Seward, who Lincoln named his Secretary of State, slowly came to recognize the President's strong leadership abilities. He called the President's nobility “almost superhuman.” Seward was not alone.

But not everyone grew gradually fond of the President, as many saw his promise and brilliance immediately. Nevada's first senator William Stewart, whose seat I occupy today, described Lincoln's greatness: “President Lincoln was the greatest man this hemisphere has produced. Without schooling he wrote the best English; without education in rhetoric or logic he was the most conclusive reasoner; without the slightest pretension to oratory he was the most persuasive speaker of his time. He was the kindest, most benevolent and humane man of his generation. Whoever may be second as a scholar, as a statesman and as a friend of humanity, Lincoln must be first.”

Lincoln also touched the hearts of the soldiers who served under him. After one of his many visits to the troops on the battlefield, one soldier wrote home that as the President passed them, his smile “was a real reflection of his honest, kindly, heart; but deeper, under the surface of that marked and not all uncomely face, were the unmistakable signs of care and anxiety . . . In fact, his popularity in the army is and has been universal.”

Lincoln’s honest, kindly heart—that the soldier referenced—was also apparent in his loyalty and willingness to take responsibility for his actions. Lincoln would not let a subordinate take the fall for a decision he had made. In 1862, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton was the victim of an especially aggressive, brutal personal attack. He was accused of not providing all the backup troops to counter what turned out to be a battle of great loss to the Union. Lincoln took the unprecedented step of convening a Union meeting with all the government departments. The audience, gathered in front of the Capitol, was comparable in size to that of a crowd at an inauguration. He explained that, “The Secretary of War is not to blame for not giving when he had none to give. I believe he is a brave and able man, and I stand here, as justice requires me to do, to take upon myself what has been charged on the Secretary of War.” What a humbling story. This is what Harry Truman meant when he said, “The buck stops here.”

Equal to his loyalty was Abraham Lincoln’s courage. The Emancipation Proclamation was described by one supporter as “. . . the greatest act of justice, statesmanship, and civilization, of the last four hundred years.” The Executive Order, signed by President Lincoln, declared the freedom of all slaves in those areas of the rebellious Confederacy that had not already returned to Union control. By the summer of 1865, an estimated four million slaves had been freed. Hannah Johnson, the mother of a Northern Black soldier, wrote to President Lincoln about the Emancipation Proclamation, stating, “When you are dead and in Heaven, in a thousand years that action of yours will make the Angels sing your praises.” No doubt there are angels still singing, just 144 years later.

Lincoln never considered himself a champion for the slave. His priority was upholding and defending the Union and the Constitution upon which it stood. However, it was his vision and steady leadership that ultimately brought down slavery in the United States. With this transformation also came the respect and admiration of black abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Douglass has been a frequent critic of the President’s, trashing him publicly many times. However, the two agreed on the need to recruit and build black regiments to fight in the war. It was a controversial move, but Lincoln understood the impact that the soldiers would have on the rebellion. Douglass went to the White House to meet with Lincoln about some of the inequalities among black and white soldiers. Just as he had won over countless rivals in the past, Lincoln’s “humane spirit,” as Douglass called it, won him over as well. The two formed a relationship, and Douglass came to greatly admire Abraham Lincoln.

Mr. President, I wanted to talk about Abraham Lincoln because there is a timeless lesson in his style of leadership and his moral fiber. Today, we face a politically divided government and country. However, the issues are not as dire as the Civil War that took the lives of what today would be five million people. The United States is not on the

brink of extinction. But we have an opportunity to rise above the political games and the pettiness to make progress on some of the major issues facing our nation. We should all strive to show some of the humility, moral conviction, courage, and honesty by which Abraham Lincoln lived his life. This nation paid a grave price in the name of freedom under his watch. Not only did freedom survive but it flourished, and he led us to new and greater heights.

Abraham Lincoln lost his life in the name of that freedom. After being shot in the back of the head, Lincoln struggled for nine hours between life and death. The nation—north and south—mourned for this beloved man, but those most inconsolable were the men who had first been Lincoln’s rivals and who had later become his closest friends and advisors. There is no greater praise than that of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton whose tribute from Lincoln’s deathbed has proven true, “Now he belongs to the ages.”

President Lincoln told an Ohio regiment in 1864, “It is not merely for to-day, but for all time to come that we should perpetuate for our children's children this great and free government, which we have enjoyed all our lives.” I invite my colleagues to join me in honoring the legacy of one of our greatest Presidents by working together and challenging each other to lead as he did.