The Man Who Has Stood the Test of Time

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

by Ida Tarbell

No man in American history is wearing better than Abraham Lincoln. The man has stood the test.

Lincoln comes out of each examination and re-examination sound, wise, honest, humorous, merciful. The more we know of him the less desire we have to treat him as a heroic figure—he is too strong and good a human being to be obscured by idealism. We want him as he was, one of our kind.

It is good to see what a man can make of heart and brain if he will set himself for life to the task—what can be done in spite of multiplied handicaps. This man is worth studying if only to understand his definite idea of what a citizen in a democracy should be—that being the job of each of us now. It is significant that throughout his life he regarded knowing, not guessing, a matter of primary individual responsibility in public affairs.

The duty to labor in order to know held a high place in his creed. He was willing to work to get facts; willing to take time to digest them. His mastery of the question of slavery came from years of studying and pondering. He went to the sources of information for his knowledge, never evaded a new fact or argument of an opponent, was never satisfied that he knew all. Confronted early in the Civil War with the necessity of making decisions in military matters, he found time in the frightful pressure of affairs to read numbers of works on military science. Nothing which would help him better to discharge his duties was neglected, whatever the labor. "This man was all right for labor", said Ralph Waldo Emerson of Lincoln, "and liked nothing so well" and added, "A good worker is so rare."

He did not see the possibility of self-government without charac-
ter meant to him truthfulness, frankness, willingness to give up personal ambition if by so doing he could make the truth of the thing he was working for more clear, and charity for all men—charity for them in their *m* views, their *m*ities, even their *m*es.

He understood men and could work with them. He never held himself aloof from anyone, high or low. If you want to have a government in which all take part you must work with all. He made his way around or through the superciliousness, the *m*ance, the intrigue, the meaness of men, and found that in them which was sound, appealed to that, used that. It made him a past master in handling men.

His confidence in the right thinking of the mass never was shaken, it was that to which he steadily appealed through defeat after defeat. "He never appeals to any vulgar sentiment," James Russell Lowell said of him, "he never alludes to the humbleness of his origin; it probably never occurred to him, indeed, that there was anything higher to start from than manhood; and he put himself on a level with those he addressed, not by going down to them, but only by taking it for granted that they had brains and would come up to a common ground of reason."

No career in our history so justifies the democratic *m* theory that men can be depended upon to do the righteous thing if leaders have the patience and the intelligence to demonstrate what is righteous.

No man's leadership has furnished stronger argument for the value of *m*fulness in public life. By nature he was kindly—liked people—dreaded to hurt them. His hard fought battles with men—constant through the last ten years of his life are free from malice. When he told the North that the war should be wound up "with malice toward none, with charity for all," he was but expressing the deepest thing in him— the greatest thing he had learned in his years of struggle.

The hold Lincoln has on the world is as strong an argument as we have for believing that his faith in men's ability to govern themselves
was not misplaced. So long as men honor, study and hold up Abraham Lincoln as a model, so long we may be sure they understand the quality of manhood which is essential to self-government.
No man in American history is wearing better than Abraham Lincoln. This is true in spite of the fact that no man's life has undergone so close a scrutiny. His tragic death in 1865 set his contemporaries telling what they knew and thought of him. The more they told the more men demanded to know. As time went on he who knew Lincoln in a community became a special and revered figure. He was pressed to tell and retell his recollections. These recollections finding their way into print brought out other recollections - an unbroken stream even today. Nothing genuine has ever been too slight to find its way into Lincoln literature.

His letters and speeches were gathered into volumes years ago and they have been added to from time to time so that it has come to be that we have, probably not all, but practically all that he ever set down on paper. No one was ever so bared by his associates. No one's words were ever so spread before the world. And never has a man's life in so short a period become so many times written and re-written, unless possibly it is that of Napoleon Bonaparte.

The man has stood the test. He comes out of each examination and re-examination still sound, wise, honest, humorous, merciful. The more we know of him the less desire we have to treat him as a heroic figure - he is too strong and good a human being to be obscured by idealism. We want him as he was, one of our kind. It is good to see what a man can make of heart and brain if he will set himself for life to the task - what can be done is spite of multiplied handicaps.
He found the essentials for both citizenship and leadership in a democracy. Born close to the time of the making of the Republic he shared the faith of the Fathers in the soundness of the undertaking. He saw it as an experiment, something for which men must work if its promises were to be redeemed. He asked chiefly of the new government that it give him the opportunity to work for its realization.

The closer one studies his life the clearer it becomes that he had a definite idea of what a man in a democracy should be. He should have knowledge of the things that he proposed to work for.

It is significant that throughout his life he regarded knowing, not guessing, a matter of primary individual responsibility in public affairs. Follow his life from start to finish and you find him faithful to this conviction that a man's opinion must be built on what he has been able to learn, and if he learns that which changes the case then he must change his view. "I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views," he told Horace Greeley in 1862. This was only another way of saying what he had said thirty years before, in his first public address, "So soon as I discover my opinions to be erroneous, I shall be ready to renounce them."

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ness to give up personal ambition if by so doing he could make the
truth of the thing he was working for more clear, and charity for
all men - charity for them in their views, their stupidities, even
their crimes.

His fidelity to this code was natural. He could do no
other way. It led him again and again to sacrifice his hopes - put
him out of politics in 1849 - defeated him for senatorship in 1858 -
imperilled his re-election in 1864. But personal victory was never
his first aim - his first aim was making clear what he believed -
what he would do if given power.

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around or through the superciliousness, the ignorance, the intrigue, the meanness of men, and found that in them which was sound, appealed to that, used that. It made him a past master in handling men.

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No career in our history so justifies the democratic theory that men can be depended upon to do the righteous thing if leaders have the patience and the intelligence to demonstrate what is righteous. No man's leadership has furnished stronger argument for the value of mercifulness in public life. By nature he was kindly - liked men - dreaded to hurt them. His hard fought battles with men - constant through the last ten years of his life are free from malice. "What I deal with is too vast for malicious dealings," he said once when Horace Greeley was badgering him. Victory brought him no exultation over his enemies. He never got satisfaction, he said, from knowing that somebody had been disappointed or pained by his success. When he told the North that the war should be wound up "with malice toward none, with charity for all," he was but expressing the deepest thing in him - the greatest
thing he had learned in his years of struggle.

There is no life in our history better fitted than Abraham Lincoln's to show men and women what they should be if they are to help this country work out the aims of democracy; and there is none that shows better the courage, the labor, the sacrifice, the human sympathy it requires to be the kind of man he was.

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