

Lincoln as a Politician

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In 1860 Abraham Lincoln was nominated for the presidency because he was an available candidate, not from any general confidence that he was the best man in the Republican party for the place. He was elected because of the strength of the Republican platform. In 1864, on the contrary, Lincoln was nominated because he had won the confidence of the people so completely that it was believed no candidate would have any chance against him. He was reelected this time because of his personal strength. In four years he had risen from a position of comparative obscurity to be the most generally trusted man in the North. This remarkable growth in public esteem was due almost entirely to Lincoln's skill as a politician- the word politician being used not in the modern sense of a trickster, but in its original sense of a persuader and leader of men in carrying on public affairs.

This work with men began in the ranks of his own most loyal supporters. No class with which he had to deal taxed Lincoln's skill more than those of his own party who, while they were ardent in their support, were seemingly unconscious that anybody was doing anything towards preserving the Union but themselves. They beset the President with their demands and complaints, and, if not heeded raised a commotion which sometimes seriously threatened the success of important matters. Lincoln ^{then} became impatient with these good people. "Tell him when he starts," he wrote of a General from whom he feared annoyance, "to put it through- not to be writing or telegraphing back here, but put it through." But though he might at times become irritable with their fussing he did full justice to their loyalty and good intentions and stood by them. A story is told of one of the war governors who had so worn out the endurance of the War Department by his fretfulness and impatience that his dispatches were referred to the President.

They did not disturb Lincoln in the least. In fact they rather amused him. After reading all the papers, he said in a cheerful and reassuring tone; "Never mind, never mind; those despatches don't mean anything. Just go right ahead. The Governor is like a boy I saw once at the launching of a ship. When everything was ready they picked out a boy and sent him under the ship to knock away the trigger and let her go. At the critical moment everything depended on the boy. He had to do the job well by a direct, vigorous blow, and then lie flat and keep still while the ship slid over him. The boy did everything right but he yelled as he was being murdered from the time he got under the ship's keel until he got out. I thought the hide was all scraped off of his back; but he wasn't hurt at all. The master of the yard told me that this boy was well, that he never had been hurt, but that he always squealed in that way. That's just the way with Governor - Make up your minds that he is not hurt, and that he is doing the work right, and pay no attention to his squealing. He only wants you to understand how hard his task is, and that he is on hand performing it." * Time proved that the President's estimate of the Governor was correct. *

Numbers of people from the beginning to the end of the war, stalwart but narrow Republicans, sought the President with suggestions which seemed to them of vital importance, and to which they thought that he ought to give his per-

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sonal attention. Not the least of Lincoln's political power lay in his ability to listen to these people and to dismiss them with some humorous remark which sent them away good-humored and yet which showed them how unreasonable it was for them to ^{bring them} ~~carry~~ their schemes ~~to the President~~. In 1861 for instance several fires occurred in Washington which, it was suspected, were of Confederate origin. For a time it seemed as if half the fire brigades of the North wanted to come on to protect the Capital and all of these fire companies thought ~~that~~ that the President himself should give attention to their patriotic offer. The morning after one particularly large fire a committee of citizens arrived from Philadelphia to urge ~~him~~ upon ^{him} the President the acceptance of a fully equipped fire brigade. Mr. Lincoln gave them an audience ^{and listened to them}. A long and eloquent address ~~was made to him, to which he listened~~. When it was over, he simply said: "Yes, gentlemen, but it is a mistake to believe that I am at the head of the Fire Department of Washington. I am simply the President of the United States." Of course nothing was to be said after this remark, and the committee withdrew.

His skill with the curious, who felt that because they had voted for him therefore they should know all the secrets of the Government, was great. He had a way of replying to this kind of impertinence which rebuked the offender without actually offending him. His often quoted answer to the persons who waited upon him in - - - - to ask where Burnside's fleet was going, is an excellent example. It was most desirable for the success of this expedition that nobody but the ^{Commander} ~~director~~ know where it was to be sent, yet hundreds of zealous Republicans felt that the President should take them into his confidence and did not hesitate to ask him outright. "Yess, I will tell you," he said to one of these delegations, "It is going to sea." ^A Another similar retort was that to a gentleman who insisted on his telling him how many men the Confederates had in the field.

~~seriously~~ "Twelve hundred thousand," ~~according to the best authorities.~~ The interrogator blanched in the face and ejaculated, "Good heavens!" "Yes, sir, twelve hundred thousand; no doubt of it. You see, all our generals when they get whipped say the enemy outnumbered them from three ~~to five~~ to one and I must believe them. We have 400,000 in the field and three times four makes twelve. Don't you see it?"

Very many of the men and of the committees which came to Mr. Lincoln with suggestions and criticisms he answered with stories. It did not take the people many months to see the practical value of the President's story-telling, although at first it was considered a mere habit and he was caricatured and rebuked as a a buffoon and a trifler. Gradually, however, as these stories found their way into the press and were repeated from mouth to mouth, the discerning began to see that every one of ~~his stories~~ ^{these} settled a question. ~~They saw that, as a rule, there was nothing more to say on the subject after the story, that in fact it was a convincing argument told by the President because it represented clearly his view of the case and by no means simply for the sake of arousing a laugh.~~ For instance, after the surrender of Vicksburg, there was much complaint in the North because Grant had paroled Pemberton's army. The man could not be trusted to keep their parole, it was said. They would immediately get back into the Southern ranks. A committee came to see the President about it. He listened to their arguments and when they were ended he said that the case reminded him of Sykes's dog. There used to be in Illinois, he continued/ a man by the name of Sykes who owned an ill-favored cur to which he was devoted but which because of its ugly looks and its propensity for worrying ~~inoffensive~~ pedestrians was ~~heartily~~ despised by his friends. One day a few desperate individuals induced Sykes's dog to swallow a piece of meat in which a charge of gunpowder with fuse attached was concealed. The meat was no sooner down than the fuse was lighted and the dog was scattered over the road. When Sykes came up and saw the situation he made a feeble effort to collect the pieces, but soon gave it up remarking sorrowfully that he ~~gave~~

guessed that dog's days of usefulness were ^{over} ended. "I guess," said Mr. Lincoln to the committee, "that Pemberton's army is in about the condition of Sykes' dog after the explosion; its days of usefulness are over as an army."

This story of Sykes' dog Lincoln told on other occasions when citizens came to him to criticise the parole of Southern troops. Each time, if we can believe his auditors, the story had a peculiar color; thus, there are several authentic versions of this one story

Lincoln's power with the people was greatly increased as they began to realize that he was a man who did not pretend to agree with everybody who came to him. They learned he might dismiss men good-naturedly but did not yield to them. They saw that he was no suave, non-committal President, who sided with each visitor sufficiently to satisfy and to flatter him, but that he was a man of deep convictions, who had a policy on the great essentials of the war and that no amount of persuasion or of threats could turn him from what he considered essential. Lincoln's sagacity and courage

in following up his own judgment ^{never} illustrated time after time in the Civil War when committees came to him and perhaps never more ~~signally~~ admirably than in his handling of what was known as the "Committee of Seventy.", a delegation from the Radical party in Missouri. From the breaking out of the war ^{affairs} in that State had been particularly tumultuous. The Union Army had at last gotten the uppermost and by the spring of 1863 the fight had become political instead of military. The opponents both claimed to be Union men and both claimed to believe in Emancipation. The Governor of the State, Gamble, was at the head of what was known as the Claybanks, or Conservative party,

while the strong German element, abolitionist in sentiment, active in bringing on the war, firm supporters of Fremont, led the Radicals or Charcoals. ~~There was still a third party, of course, in the State, the Copperheads, who, so far as they aided the two leading parties, were with the Conservatives.~~ The issue between the Claybanks and Charcoals was really the method of emancipation. The one demanded that it should be gradual and compensated, the other that it should be immediate. But so bitter had grown this contest that it was really little more than a partisan, personal struggle. ~~Issues were made over men and non-essential measures.~~ Both parties had done their best to bring Mr. Lincoln into the quarrel but he was determined if possible to have none of it. "It has gone so far," he said, to a delegation in the spring of '63, "that either party would rather see the defeat of their adversary than that of Jefferson Davis. You ought to have your heads knocked together," he ^{said} in his exasperation.

Finally, he determined that he must break up somehow what he called their "pestilent, factional quarrel," and sent a new Military Governor, General J. M. Schofield, to Missouri. The advice he gave him was this:

"Let your military measures be strong enough to repel the invader and keep the peace, and not so strong as to unnecessarily harass and persecute the people. It is a difficult role, and so much greater will be the honor if you perform it well. If both factions, or neither, shall abuse you, you will probably be about right. Beware of being assailed by one and praised by the other."

General Schofield was not able to live up to Lincoln's counsel. He incurred the suspicion and dislike of the Radicals and they determined that he must be removed. In August a great convention was held and a committee of seventy persons appointed to go to Washington and demand from Mr. Lincoln a redress of grievances. The case in Missouri of course had the sympathy of the Radical anti-slavery element of the whole North and when the Committee of Seven started for Washington it received an ovation in almost every State through which it passed. Every mile of its journey seemed to increase its friends. Arrived in Washington it became the centre

Mr. Enos Clark of St. Louis, who was one of the delegates, records the impression ^{the reply} ~~the conference~~ made upon his mind:

"The President listened with patient attention," ^{in the address} says Mr. Clark. "At the conclusion of the reading, Mr. Lincoln replied at length. I shall never forget the intense chagrin and disappointment we all felt at the treatment of the matter in the beginning of his reply. He seemed to belittle and minimize the importance of our grievances, and to give magnitude to artificial and unimportant matters. He gave us the impression of a Western pettifogger before a justice of the peace jury. But as he talked on, and made searching inquiries of members of the delegation, and invited debate, it became manifest that his manner at the beginning was really the foil of a master, to develop the weakness of the presentation. Before the conclusion of the conference he addressed himself to the whole matter in an elevated, dignified, exhaustive and impressive way."

"There was no report made of this conference,* but ~~there are some things I remember~~. I remember that Mr. Lincoln made this statement: 'You gentlemen must bear in mind that in performing the duties of the office I hold, I must represent no one section of the Union, but I must act for all sections of the Union in trying to maintain the supremacy of the government.' And he also said this: 'I desire to so conduct the affairs of this administration that if, at the end, when I come to lay down the reins of ~~government~~ power, I have lost every other supporter and friend, I shall at least have one friend left, and that friend shall be down inside of me.' These were characteristic expressions."

"Toward the conclusion of the conference, and after the whole matter had been exhaustively discussed by the President and the petitioners, Mr. Drake stepped forward and said: 'Mr. President, the time has now come when we can no longer trespass upon your attention, but must take leave of you,' and in those deep, impressive, stentorian tones peculiar to Mr. Drake, he added, 'Many of these men who stand before you today return to inhospitable homes, where rebel sentiments prevail, and many of them, sir, in returning there do so at the risk of their lives; and if any of those lives are lost by virtue of the military administration of that government, let me tell you, sir, that the blood will be upon your garments and not upon ours.'"

"During this impressive address the President stood before the delegation with tears streaming down his cheeks, seeming deeply agitated."

"The members of the delegation were then presented individually to the President and took leave of him. I shall always remember my last sight of Mr. Lincoln as we left the room. Mr. Charles Johnson and myself were walking together, and as we passed out of the room we looked back. Men at one time Mr. Lincoln had met some personal acquaintance with whom he had exchanged pleasantries, and instead of the tears of a few moments before, he was indulging in hearty laughter. This rapid and wonderful transition from one extreme to the other impressed me greatly."*

Ex-Governor Charles P. Johnson of Missouri, another member of the Committee says of ~~the~~ Lincoln's reply to their address:

"The President, in the course of his reply, hesitated a great deal, and was manifestly, as he said, very much troubled over the condition of affairs in Missouri. He said he was sorry that there should be such divisions and dissensions; that they were a source of more anxiety to him than we could imagine. He expressed his appreciation of the zeal of the Radical men, but sometimes thought they did not understand the real situation. He besought us not to get out of humor merely because things were not going as rapidly as we thought they should. The war, he pointed out, affected a

* Mr. John Hay, one of the President's secretaries, was present and made notes of Mr. Lincoln's remarks which are published in part in "Abraham Lincoln, A. History."

* Interview for this Magazine made by J. McCan Davis.

ty in the country which stood for freedom for freedom's sake and though he knew he must hold them in check he did not hesitate in spite of all the annoyance and trouble they gave him to give them their full ^{credit} reward. "I believe after all," Mr. John Hay, his Secretary, heard him say some time after the conference, "that these Missouri Radicals* * * get nearer to me than the other side in thought and sentiment, though bitterly hostile personally. They are the unhandiest fellows in the world to deal with but after all their faces are set Zionward." *

Another source of political power with Mr. Lincoln was that he never hid an issue from the people. He wanted them to understand a question as he understood it. His deliberation in taking important steps, the advisability of which his own judgment was convinced, a deliberation which ^{then} brought bitter criticism upon him from Radicals was due to the fact that he was delaying to act until he felt certain that the people understood what he meant. When forced to follow a course which brought severe criticism it was his habit to explain by a long public letter why he had done the thing in question. These public letters, ~~such as the letter to Greeley quoted in~~ are Lincoln's most remarkable state papers. They are invincible in their logic and incomparable in their simplicity and lucidity of expression. The plain people to whom ^{they} these letters were addressed understood them and fast in their ^{very} line the rigid, mental honesty of the man. ^{They} This convinced the simple, honest masses, whose only desire was to see clearly what was the right and best thing to do. Simply as political manoeuvres these political letters must be counted as Mr. Lincoln's most successful strokes. Take for example the letter on the Val-

A skillful political manouever which President Lincoln practiced more than once was in allowing men to ^{test} ~~adopt~~ personally and ~~politically~~ ^{judicially} a certain course of action which they insisted would end the war, but which he had refused to follow. He tried this manouever once with Horace Greeley with ^{eminent} ~~immense~~ success. ^{Spring 1863} In the spring of 1864 there was in the North a large party crying for peace at any price. They charged the Administration with resisting all efforts at peace. They recalled that after Fredericksburg the French Emperor had offered his services as a mediator and been refused. They blamed Mr. Lincoln for not allowing emissaries to come from the Confederacy and for not availing himself of the many private individuals who believed that they could arrange matters if given authority. Mr. Greeley, in the spring of '64 took no

Skillful at manouevering himself, Lincoln was very quick in anticipating an adversary's manouvers and in preparing a net for him. The care with which he watched for what the opposition might do and made ready for it is illustrated in the following letters. The occasion was an Act of Congress approved on May 3rd, 1863, requiring the Clerk of the House of Representatives to make a roll of the Representatives elected and place thereon the names of such persons only whose credentials showed that they were regularly elected. The President feared lest ^{the Union} ~~new~~ Congressmen might overlook this act and their seats be disputed. To prevent this he wrote himself several confidential letters. Among these was one to Senator Grimes of Iowa. This letter, which has never been published in any biography or collection of Lincoln's letters has recently come into the possession of the historical collection of the Historical Department of Iowa and it is through the courtesy of the Secretary, the Honorable Charles Aldrich, that I am able to publish it here:

Executive Mansion,
Washington, D.C. Oct. 29, 1863.

Hon. HJames W. Grimes,
My dear Sir:

The above act of Congress was passed, as I suppose, for the purpose of shutting out improper applicants for seats in the House of Representatives; and I fear that there is some danger that it will be used to shut out proper ones. Iowa, having an entire Union delegation, will be one of the States the attempt will be made upon, if upon any. The Governor doubtless has made out the certificates, and they are already in the hands of the members. I suggest that they come on with them; but that, for greater caution, you, and perhaps Mr. Harlan with you, consult with the Governor,

* Interview given in audience for this magazine.

and have an additional set made out according to the form on the other half of this sheet; and still another set, if you can, by studying the law, think of a form that in your judgment, promises additional security, and quietly bring the whole on with you, to be used in case of necessity. Let what you do be kept still.

Yours truly,

A. Lincoln."

At the same time he sent in cypher the following telegram to be found in the unpublished collection of the War Department:

Executive Mansion

Washington, D.C., October 30, 1863.

Hon. F. F. Lowe,

San Francisco, Cal.:

Below is an act of Congress, passed last session intended to exclude applicants not entitled to seats, but which there is reason to fear, will be used to exclude some who are entitled. Please get with the Governor and one or two other discrete friends, study the act carefully, and make certificates in two or three forms, according to your best judgment and have them sent to me, so as to multiply the chances of the delegation getting their seats. Let it be done without publicity. Below is a form which may answer for one. If you could procure the same to be done for the Oregon member it might be well.

A. Lincoln."

A similar warning was also given to Vice President Hamlin in regard to Maine.

Much of Lincoln's political power was due to the fact that he took endless pains to find out how men were thinking and feeling on all the great questions of the day. This was his reason for seeing so many men and delegations, for listening so patiently and questioning so carefully. He wanted the fullest information that could be had. Throughout the war whenever he was puzzled by the state of opinion or feeling in a section on a man he sent for somebody whom he could trust to enlighten him. Thus, in 1863 Grant was first talked of as a Presidential candidate. Lincoln, who had never met Grant, became anxious to know what the latter thought. How he found out is told in the following interview with Russell Jones of Chicago:

"In 1863 some of the newspapers, especially the New York 'Herald,' were trying to boom Grant for the Presidency. While General Grant was at Chattanooga, I wrote him, in substance, that I did not wish to meddle with his affairs, but that I could not resist suggesting that he pay no attention to what the newspapers were saying in that connection. He immediately replied, saying that everything of that nature which reached him went into the waste-basket; that he felt he had as big a job on hand as one man need desire; that his only ambition was to suppress the rebellion; and that, even if he had a desire to be President, he could not possibly entertain the thought of becoming a candidate for the office

nor of accepting a nomination were one tendered him, so long as there was a possibility of keeping Mr. Lincoln in the Presidential chair. The whole spirit of his letter was one of the most perfect devotion to Lincoln.

"Before this letter reached me, however, President Lincoln telegraphed me to come to Washington. The telegram gave no hint of the business upon which he wished to see me, and I had no information upon which to found even a suspicion of its nature. On my way to the train I stopped at my office in the postoffice building, and in passing my box in the postoffice I opened it and took out several letters. I put them into my pocket and did not look at them until after I had gotten aboard the train. I then discovered that one of the letters was from General Grant; it was the letter of which I have already spoken. The circumstance has always seemed to me to have been providential.

"Upon my arrival at Washington I sent word to the President that I had arrived and would be glad to call whenever it was most convenient and agreeable for him to receive me. He sent back a request for me to call that evening at 8 o'clock. I went to the White House at that hour.

"When the President had gotten through with the persons with whom he was engaged, I was invited into his room. The President then gave directions to say to all that he was engaged for the evening. Mr. Lincoln opened the conversation by saying that he was anxious to see somebody from the West with whom he could talk upon the general situation, and had therefore sent for me. Mr. Lincoln made no allusion whatever to Grant. I had been there but a few minutes, however, when I fancied he would like to talk about Grant, and I interrupted him by saying:

" 'Mr. President, if you will excuse me for interrupting me, I want to ask you to kindly read a letter that I got from my box as I was on my way to the train'.

"Whereupon I gave him Grant's letter. He read it with evident interest. When he came to the part where Grant said that it would be impossible for him to think of the Presidency as long as there was a possibility of retaining Mr. Lincoln in the office, he read no further, but arose and, approaching me, put his hand on my shoulder and said:

"My son, you will never know how gratifying that is to me. No man knows, when that Presidential grub gets at gnawing at him, just how deep it will get until he has tried it; and I didn't know but what there was one gnawing at Grant.'

"The fact was that this was just what Mr. Lincoln wanted to know. He had said to Congressman Washburne, as I afterwards ascertained:

'About all I know of Grant I have got from you. I have never seen him. Who else besides you knows anything about Grant?

"Washburne replied:

" 'I know very little about him. He is my townsman, but I never saw very much of him. The only man who really knows Grant is Jones. He has summered and wintered with him.' (This was an allusion to the winter I had spent with Grant in Mississippi, at the time Van Dorn got into Holly Springs.

"It was this statement of Washburne's which caused Lincoln to telegraph me to come to Washington."

* Interview with J. McCan Davis with Russell Jones of Chicago.

The agitation in favor of Grant was continued actively for many months after this interview and the next year the President seems to have concluded that he ought to sound Grant again. Colonel John M. Eaton, now General, a friend of Grant, was in Washington and often with Mr. Lincoln considering various problems in connection with the freedmen, a work to which Colonel Eaton was giving his time. One evening the conversation turned on the election. Lincoln declared that if he knew himself, his supreme desire was for the salvation of the Union and that if another man could save the Union better than he, he should be glad to see him elected. He said, however, that he believed that his experience in affairs ought to make him a better guide than a new hand. Referring to the efforts made to nominate ^{Grant} ~~some one else in his place~~ he asked if the Colonel knew what General Grant thought of ^{the} ~~his~~ ~~see~~ ~~and nomination:~~ *the attempt*

No, the Colonel said, he didn't.

"Well, said Mr. Lincoln, "I tell you, before Grant came over here and the Rebel army threatened Washington, we did not sleep nights. If they captured the Capital we did not know what effect it would have upon foreign governments. It might induce them to recognize the Confederacy if the Capital was in Confederate hands; but since Grant came here, if the Rebels threaten the Capital we do sleep nights. We have such confidence in Grant that we believe what can be done he will do and what he don't do we don't believe can be done." "Now, he continued, "if Grant is the great General we think he is, he must have some consciousness of it and know that he cannot be satisfied with himself, ~~and secure~~ the credit due for his great generalship if he does not finish the job," and added, "I don't believe they can get him to run."

The President then asked the Colonel if he could not go to Grant at Richmond and find out from him how he felt. The Colonel ~~replied~~ ^{salon} replied that it would be a delicate task but he would do it, if Mr. Lincoln ordered him. Taking a blank card, Lincoln wrote ~~an~~ ^a ~~order to pass Colonel Eaton to Grant's headquarters and return~~ ^{The}

Colonel started at once on his errand. Reaching headquarters and being received by the General he found ~~much difficulty~~ it difficult to approach his subject, but finally worked his way to it by recounting how he had met parties recently in travelling who had asked him if he thought Grant could be induced to run against Lincoln, not as a partisan but as a citizen's candidate, to save the Union. Grant brought his hand down emphatically on the strap arm of his camp-chair:

"Theyc can't do it! They can't compel me to do it!"

"Have you said this to the President?" asked Colonel Eaton?

"No," said Mr. Grant, "I have not thought it worth while to assure the President of my opinion. I consider it as important for the cause that he should be nominated and elected as that the army should be successful in the fall."

Colonel Eaton returned with this report to the President, who seemed greatly pleased that he had been correct in his estimate of his Lieutenant-General. In relating this anecdote, Colonel Eaton said : "My impression at the time of these two men was that they understood each other instinctively; that they were both men of willing minds and the greatest moral rectitude and they recognized each other as devoted to the salvation of the Union."*

The effect of these political characteristics showed itself ~~when~~ in 1864 when it came to his nomination and re-election. He himself approached the event with a clear and accurate estimate of the situation. He had sounded men so that he knew exactly what each was doing and what his chances were. He had put his own policy so clearly that he knew that honest people could not mistake what he meant. He believed that the people were with him on the fundamental issues of the war and so awaited the result with calmness and confidence.

The effect of his four years work on the people was something extraordinary. ~~In 1861 Lincoln had been nominated because he was an available candidate, not from a general confidence that he was~~

* Interview with Genl John Easton for this magazine.

~~the best man in the Republican party. He had been elected because of the strength of the Republican platform. But in 1864 Lincoln was nominated and elected because he had won the people.~~ For over three years he had been waging unsuccessfully a frightful war. He had many grave mistakes but in spite of this the people believed that he had done the best he could and moreover they understood exactly what he was trying to do. It was ^{then} ~~in 1864~~ that the value of his candid, lucid public letters came out. Lincoln had never hidden anything from the people. He had done his utmost to make them understand his reasons for his policy. He had put into their mouths reasons for his actions. He had given them explanations which to them were demonstrations. They believed in him because he had been frank with them and because he tried to make matters so clear to them- used words they could understand- kept the principle free from all non-essential and partisan considerations. They like his hard sense, his quick wit, his resolute going-ahead and doing the thing he believed to be right. It is doubtful if they considered him a really great man but they knew he was ~~an~~ honest, fearless and level-headed and so concluded, as Lincoln himself said "That it was not best to swap horses while crossing the river and have further concluded that he was not so poor a horse that they might not make a botch of it in trying to swap." It was Lincoln's success as a politician - a handler of men- that won him a second term

Edw M. Tarbell