

Introduction

The Abraham Lincoln most Americans know today is a marble man, a mythic icon enshrined in a magnificent twenty-foot tall statue that looks down on visitors from beneath the dome of his Memorial, a Greek temple modeled after the Temple of Zeus.

One shibboleth of the Lincoln myth is the sentimental notion that he was the idol of the common people during his presidency. Unfortunately, the evidence for Lincoln's popular appeal is missing. Rather, he suffered from an almost unbroken series of failures to win the favor of the press, the public, and the nation's leading men.

The reasons for his unpopularity started with the wretched plight of the presidency itself as he took it up. Lincoln was inaugurated in an era when the presidency was tarnished by the string of poor presidents who preceded him, at a time when all authority was little regarded. The future of democratic government was itself in doubt, even by Americans. The torsions of the slavery debate and attacks by the rabid press routinely destroyed the reputations of public men.

Lincoln appeared on this stormy national scene virtually unknown except as a caricature, the Railsplitter. The people of the South saw the anonymous Illinoisan as a usurper, the illegitimate product of an electoral system that had betrayed the vision of the Founding Fathers. The people of the North feared the political machinery had lifted up a man woefully unequal to the national crisis. From his election by an absurdly low 40% of the electorate—lower than almost every *loser* of a presidential election in every two-party race in American history—his approval dropped to 25% by the time he took office, as state after Southern state showed its rejection of his legitimacy by leaving the Union, and nervous Northerners backed away from his uncompromising opposition to slavery's expansion. When he arrived in Washington in late February of 1861, he did so on a secret night train to avoid assassination; the scathing reaction of the national press to his undignified entrance mark the days before his inaugural as the historic low point of American presidential prestige.

From this poor start, Lincoln sank lower in the eyes of Washington leaders when they beheld at first hand his ungrammatical language, his Western diction,

his uncouth ways, his awkward gait and posture, and his penchant for coarse humor. A certain manner was expected of earnest statesmen, and Lincoln disappointed those expectations completely. It was hard for men of the East to comprehend that such a man, with such vulgar habits, could ever be great.

His first proclamation six weeks after his inauguration, in which he called for 75,000 volunteers to suppress the uprising signaled by the firing on Fort Sumter, precipitated the loss of Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Arkansas, doubling the size and the population of the enemy Confederacy. During the first eighteen months of the Civil War that followed, his hesitant performance seemed to confirm the opinion of the many who saw him as an untutored rustic, hopelessly unequal to his task. As the dead piled up in unimaginable numbers and sorrow was added to sorrow, a nation that had known little of sacrifice blamed Lincoln for a dithering mismanagement of the war effort.

When, in September of 1862, he announced his intention to issue an Emancipation Proclamation one hundred days later, the Northern electorate showed its displeasure by rebuking him in a mid-term election so disastrous that a friend wrote, "I could not conceive it possible for Lincoln to successfully administer the government and prosecute the war with the six most important loyal States declaring against him at the polls."

When the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, resulted in the freedom of not one slave, its lack of efficacy discouraged the abolitionists at the same time its revolutionary spirit threatened to take the intensely Negrophobic states of the Old Northwest out of the Union. The revolt of the North's Lincoln-haters in the wake of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Federal Draft Law in March 1863 had its fiery culmination in the riot in New York City the following July, the largest civil insurrection in American history apart from the Civil War itself.

By 1864, Lincoln was so little regarded that the strongest elements in his own party tried to deny him another term. He engineered his renomination by stacking the Republican convention with appointees, a tactic possible only in the heyday of the Spoils System. As late as two months before the 1864 election, even Republican leaders wrote him off as a beaten man, and took steps to nominate a better candidate. Only by the combination of Democratic bungling and the miracle of last-minute Union victories on the battlefield was Lincoln reelected. As Ohio Republican Lewis D. Campbell observed, "Nothing but the undying attachment of our people to the Union has saved us from terrible disaster. Mr. Lincoln's popularity had nothing to do with it." Anti-Lincoln

feelings hardened in the days after his reelection, as bitter Democrats and vanquished Southerners looked with dread on the prospect of another four years under “the despot Lincoln,” a period that climaxed with Lincoln’s assassination less than a week after the surrender of Lee’s army.

The most sensational aspect of the criticism Lincoln endured was the unsurpassed venom of it. The press was unashamedly partisan, and in a historical era dominated by Democrats, most newspapers were Democratic, duty-bound to wound the Republican leader. There was much to criticize. During the Civil War’s four years of unprecedented danger to the Union, they called Lincoln a “bloody tyrant” and a “dictator” for stretching the rules of the Constitution to allow arbitrary arrests, the suspension of *habeas corpus*, and the suppression of newspapers sympathetic to the Confederacy. Lincoln’s greatest outrage, however, was that he took his place so resolutely at the center of American opinion during the bitterest time in the nation’s history. As a man of caution and moderation, he was blasted from all sides by a Northern people whom the heat of battle had driven to political extremes.

If one considers politics as the art of the possible, Lincoln was the consummate politician. What he accomplished is all the more remarkable considering how limited his possibilities were as a result of his lack of esteem. The depth of Lincoln’s travail is much of what ennobles him. To have a fuller knowledge of the bitterness of the opposition Lincoln faced is, in my view, necessary to a fuller appreciation of this most intriguing of presidents, whose humanity is, if anything, trivialized by being so bronzed over. While researching my book, I have been amazed that the story of Lincoln’s unpopularity has remained so long untold at full length. It is better that it be so told, in order that we may better understand the man.

Larry Tagg
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