

Abraham Lincoln and Our “Unfinished Work”

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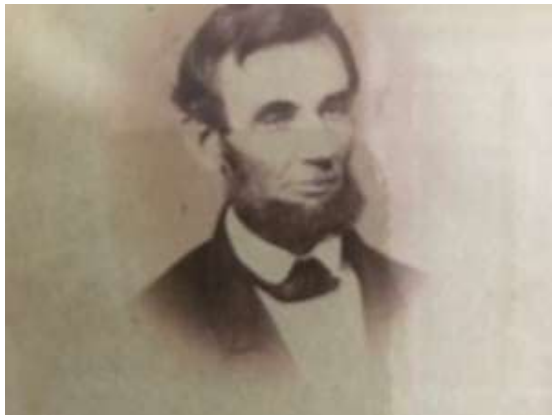
Marking Presidents’ Day weekend

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By Alan Y. Lowcher

A few years ago, I was a panelist in “Abraham Lincoln: 15 Captivating Stories from His Law Practice” with Glenn LeBoeuf at the New Jersey Bar Association Continuing Legal Education (CLE) program. In order for the lawyers to get CLE credit, a lawyer needed to be a panelist. I was Glenn’s “second chair” and tied in Glenn’s anecdotes and what Lincoln said about the practice of law (“Notes on a Law Lecture,” variously 1850-1858) to the Rules of Professional Conduct governing the modern practice of law. The room was packed with lawyers, as were the rooms where the program was simulcast. Given the attention paid to



the presentation, the questions raised by the audience, and the people who came up to the panelists, it was obvious that the lawyers were there not so much for the credit as they were to hear about Lincoln, especially Lincoln the lawyer. It is natural for lawyers to claim Lincoln for themselves: he was one of us. And yet 25 of the 46 presidents have studied or practiced law. What makes Lincoln the standout? Why are there hundreds

of statues and memorials to Lincoln in this country, as well as in several countries around the world? Why are dozens of new books written about him annually to add to the estimated 16,000 published titles on Lincoln? Why has Lincoln remained so popular?

Historians and Polls

Numerous polls taken over the last 65 years consistently rank Abraham Lincoln in the top three of US Presidents along with George Washington and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Most of the polls are conducted among historians who rate the presidents on a number of categories (leadership, accomplishments and crisis management, political skill, character, integrity, etc.). Lincoln achieved an overall rating of Number One. But it is not just historians. Among those who identify themselves as liberal or conservative, Lincoln again is Number One. John Q. Public, responding to a C-Span presidential leadership survey in 1999 rated Lincoln as Number One, as did surveys conducted by ABC and Washington College. When all the poll results are considered, more than 80% of Americans give a favorable rating to Lincoln. He was surpassed only by George Washington in the hearts and minds of Americans. Lincoln often harkened back the Founders in his writings and speeches. I don't think he would mind at all taking second place behind George Washington.

Lincoln's Enduring Popularity, Relevance, and Our "Unfinished Work"

Writing on the occasion of the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth, James McPherson pondered the "Why" question of Lincoln's enduring popularity and ranking by historians as our greatest president. He posited several answers:

- Lincoln took office facing the greatest crisis of any President: a nation divided and soon to be engaged in a civil war "testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure." His leadership and single-minded determination to assure the survival of the "experiment" that began in 1776 ensured that that nation would live.
- Lincoln's essentially military action authorizing the seizure of enemy property — slaves — used in the Confederate war effort, thereby depriving the South of the manpower it needed to sustain the war, brought the power of the Federal government to bear to attack the "monstrous injustice of slavery." These efforts, culminating in the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the 13th Amendment in 1865, assured Lincoln's place in history.

- Lincoln the “westerner,” who grew up in a log cabin, split rails, piloted a flatboat on the Mississippi, was a store keeper and postmaster, read the law, became a successful trial attorney, one term Congressman and then President, epitomized the uniquely American belief that if you worked hard, you could go as far as your energy, intelligence, and talents could take you. This opportunity for self-improvement was Lincoln’s definition of equality, which is also why, in addition to his moral aversion to the institution, he opposed slavery. Slavery was the antithesis of this definition of “equality.”
- And, of course, Lincoln was a superb craftsman of the written word. As a lawyer, he wrote concisely and with persuasion. As President, McPherson observed that “Lincoln had the unique ability to write for both the eye and the ear.”

... the closing lines of his first inaugural address

... the opening lines of the Gettysburg Address

... his second inaugural address

McPherson was surely right when he said “[e]ven if his deeds were to be forgotten, his words will live as long as there is a United States.”

- And, finally, Lincoln’s violent death when he should have savored the fruits of victory assured the martyred president immortality.

And, so, we remember Abraham Lincoln on this Presidents’ Day weekend. For us, and for historians, Lincoln matters. He guided the country through the crucible of civil war, and we emerged a stronger, although still not perfect, nation. His leadership skills, determination, ability to compromise, fundamental fairness, and integrity are worthy of study and emulation by today’s politicians and leaders of all stripes. There is something there for “average Americans” too in Lincoln’s words that should inspire us to be “governed by the better angels of our nature.” Lincoln’s birthday, as with the Dr. Martin Luther King holiday, should be a time of reflection on what these men achieved – and imagining what they might have achieved had they lived a full life.

I urge the reader to consider spending a day at Gettysburg, the venue of what is perhaps Lincoln’s greatest speech. Make your way past the

Pennsylvania Monument to the monument erected in memory of the officers and soldiers of the First New Jersey Brigade. Consider the following:

“ . . . and when the First New Jersey’s Brigade monument was constructed . . . and dedicated . . . on the battlefield of Gettysburg in 1888 . . . in what likeness was the actual monument (the largest brigade monument on the battlefield) constructed ?”

A watch-tower.

A watch tower? Why that? Certainly the war was now long over in 1888 . . . and the veterans gathered there at the dedication . . . fewer in number . . . most in their 40s or 50s . . . had had their fill of war.

Why would they want future generations to gaze upon . . . and ponder . . . a “watch-tower”?

Because it is for ***“us the living”*** . . . to man the watch-towers now . . . light the watch fires . . . and to remind . . . instill . . . and teach generations to come of the sacrifices made by so many . . . over such a long time . . . to maintain . . . ***“a more perfect union.”***

Lincoln’s legacy – and their legacy – should inspire each of us to redouble our efforts as Americans to keep history alive and relevant. This is our ***“unfinished work.”***

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