REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. **PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.**

1. REPORT DATE *(DD-MM-YYYY)* 03-22-2023	**2. REPORT TYPE** FINAL	**3. DATES COVERED** *(From - To)* N/A

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE
Abraham Lincoln, the Declaration of Independence, and the Enduring Principles of Self-Government

5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
N/A

5b. GRANT NUMBER
N/A

5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
N/A

6. AUTHOR(S)

Michael D. Dovilla

5d. PROJECT NUMBER
N/A

5e. TASK NUMBER
N/A

5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
N/A

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)

Writing & Teaching Excellence Center
Naval War College
686 Cushing Road
Newport, RI 02841-1207

8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
N/A

9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)

N/A

10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
N/A

11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)
N/A

12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release; Distribution is unlimited.

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES A paper submitted to the faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the curriculum. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.

14. ABSTRACT

Many Americans over the past nearly 250 years have stood up to defend the Declaration of Independence, but few have done so with as deep an understanding and as clear an expression of its political significance for the governance of a free people as Abraham Lincoln. This brief exploration employs selected speeches from the life of the sixteenth U.S. president to illustrate how he came to be such an articulate exponent of the principles of self-government. At a time when some have suggested the country is more divided than it has been since the 1850s and subsets of the body politic seem prepared once again to resort to bullets rather than ballots to get their way, contemporary Americans may learn anew from Lincoln's inspiration for the United States to live up to the aspirations of its Founders.

15. SUBJECT TERMS (Key words)
constitutional government; freedom; oratory; political philosophy; self-rule; U.S. history

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			**17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT**	**18. NUMBER OF PAGES**	**19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON** Director, Writing Center
a. REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	**b. ABSTRACT** UNCLASSIFIED	**c. THIS PAGE** UNCLASSIFIED	N/A		**19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER** *(include area code)* 401-841-6499

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)

Abraham Lincoln, the Declaration of Independence, and the Enduring Principles of Self-Government

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the United States Naval War College, Newport, RI.

DISTRIBUTION A. Approved for public release: distribution unlimited.

The contents of this paper reflect the author's own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

DEVOTION TO PRINCIPLE

On February 22, 1861, the president-elect of the United States arrived at Independence Hall in Philadelphia on a three-week journey from Springfield, Illinois to Washington, D.C. It was no mistake that Abraham Lincoln, a man steeped in American history and possessing a deep understanding of the premise on which the nation was established, came to this famous edifice on George Washington's birthday. The incoming chief magistrate's primary responsibility that winter morning was to hoist the national ensign, but his remarks accompanying that simple act would be among the most noteworthy of the 1,904-mile odyssey across seven northern states during which his life was threatened on at least two occasions. Seeming to recognize this reality, Lincoln commented in "an unexpected speech" that he "would rather be assassinated on this spot than surrender" the principle contained in the document signed in that building in early July 1776. In those same brief remarks, he declared in his most frequently quoted words of the event that he "never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence"[1]

It is clear that Abraham Lincoln's affinity for the first of America's three Charters of Freedom developed much earlier than his final trip from the Midwest to the nation's capital in 1861. But when did this autodidact acquire such appreciation of the founding document's meaning? How did he become such an articulate exponent of the principles of self-government? And what can we, more than a century and a half later, learn from Lincoln's inspiration for the country to live up to the aspirations of its founders, even as those values have been – and continue to be – vigorously assailed by their detractors? This brief exploration of Lincoln's life will endeavor to answer these questions, employing selected speeches that reveal the thinking and character of this rare leader who comprehended and communicated the meaning of the Declaration of Independence as well as any other person in American history.

---

[1] Roy P. Basler, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (Cambridge: DaCapo Press, 2001), 577-578.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN: ARTICULATE ADVOCATE FOR SELF-GOVERNMENT

It is the quintessential American story that a boy born in a log cabin on the Kentucky frontier in the first decade of the nineteenth century should grow up to be president of the United States. It is something special that such a boy would mature into the greatest man ever to hold that esteemed office. The son of a father who could neither read nor write and a mother who could only read, Abraham Lincoln, through assiduous self-study developed into a thinker, writer, and speaker whose words captured the central principles of this new experiment in self-government.

Elements of Lincoln's childhood and youth may reveal something about his adult beliefs on liberty and equality. His father's decision in 1816 to leave Kentucky for Indiana was based in part on a desire to move from a slave state to a territory in which the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 explicitly banned the deplorable institution. Moreover, Lincoln's 1828 and 1831 trips on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans, where he directly witnessed slave markets, served as an abiding source of shock and "torment" for him.[2] It seems likely that Lincoln also chafed under the law requiring all wages earned prior to age twenty-one to be turned over to one's father, albeit a mild analogue to the circumstances he witnessed on that pair of flatboat journeys to Louisiana. In the aggregate, these and other experiences likely informed his thinking, albeit in an embryonic state, on the abiding questions of human freedom and self-government.

---

[2] James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.

Upon settling in the village of New Salem, Illinois in his twenty-second year, Lincoln promptly engaged in the community, served as an elected militia captain in the abbreviated Black Hawk War, and expressed nascent political aspirations by running for the state legislature. He revealed early self-awareness, commenting "Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition. Whether it be true or not, I can say for one that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem."[3] Although he lost his first campaign in 1832, he easily won the privilege of representing Sangamon County in the Illinois House of Representatives two years later. He was reelected three times and quickly rose to the position of floor leader for the Whigs.

Combined with politics, Lincoln earned his law license in 1836 and developed a thriving practice on the circuit of county courthouses in central Illinois. Doubtless the pursuit of this pair of vocations, both of which are reliant upon effective oral communication, allied with an active mind nourished by voracious reading, led him to begin making speeches on the issues of the day and the still young nation's form of government. The first of these worthy of examination is a set of remarks he offered just before his twenty-ninth birthday in Springfield, the growing town to which he had recently moved and that, due in part to his leadership, would soon become the new state capital.

Political Religion

Observers have pondered how Lincoln, given his scant formal education, became such a successful lawyer. In undated notes for a law lecture, which his presidential secretaries, John Nicolay and John Hay, later assigned the year 1850, he wrote, "Extemporaneous speaking should be practiced and cultivated."[4] Nor was effective public speaking only a useful skill before judges and juries. It was also an essential way in which politicians in a democracy conveyed their visions, earned their reputations, and gained power through elections.[5] One way Lincoln sought to follow his own counsel about public speaking (more than a decade before he committed the advice in his law lecture notes to paper) was to attend the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield.

---

[3] Basler, *Abraham Lincoln*, 57.

[4] Ronald C. White, *Lincoln in Private* (New York: Random House, 2021), 36.

On January 27, 1838, at Springfield's Second Presbyterian Church, Lincoln, then a second-term state legislator, offered his maiden speech at a meeting of the Lyceum, selecting as his topic "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions." In these remarks, although considered by some to be wordy or even sophomoric, the modern reader, benefiting from time and historical perspective, can discern the rudiments of Lincoln's political philosophy. At root, Lincoln's viewpoint is inextricably connected to that of the nation's founders, the liberties for which they fought, the political institutions they formed, and the obligation of each succeeding generation to maintain that constitutional form of government. Central to Lincoln's message is a deep concern that such liberties, if not faithfully transmitted, would evaporate. In one of the more notable lines of his address he stated, "If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide."[6]

In this first public speech, Lincoln cited disturbingly fresh examples of democracy's self-immolation, such as mobs engagaing in vigilante justice by lynching five alleged gamblers in Mississippi, lynching a black man in Missouri, and murdering an abolitionist pastor and publisher in Illinois. Apparent in the young state legislator's rhetoric was a partisan tint that linked this lawless behavior to the immediate past occupant of the White House, populist Andrew Jackson, for all three extralegal events had taken place in Democratic states.[7] He asserted that a mob, whipped up by a Napoleonic "towering genius,"[8] was a clear and present danger to the protection of the Lockean principles of life, liberty, and property that the founders cast in similar language in the Declaration of Independence.

---

[5] Richard Brookhiser, *Founders' Son: A Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 8.
[6] Basler, 77.
[7] Brookhiser, *Founders' Son*, 62.

Lincoln's solution was a rational respect for the law rather than a passion-induced lawlessness, and he suggested this "political religion of the nation"[9] would save it from an internal despot. One may infer that, in a representative republic, this is an evergreen process that must be employed against ambition, passion, and other ignoble characteristics that human beings inhabiting a fallen world so readily exhibit. Although historians are generally aligned in their assessment that Lincoln's style on that frigid night in 1838 was somewhat overblown, they also note the buds of rhetoric, reasoning, values, and vision that would flower fully within the next 27 years of his life. Regardless, it is clear that this rising leader had already begun seriously contemplating the form of government the founders bequeathed to his generation and, if they could keep it, those that would follow.

A House Divided

Although two decades would pass between Lincoln's initial entry into the realm of public speaking on the principles of the Declaration of Independence at the Lyceum and the next set of remarks this brief analysis will explore, the man who would become the sixteenth president was anything but static during this period. A married man who fathered four boys, a one-term Congressman who took an unpopular stance opposing the Mexican War, and a country lawyer who built a successful private practice, Lincoln was thrust back into political life by the enactment of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. Historians note that from that point forward, the

---

[8] Stephen B. Smith, "Lincoln and the Politics of the "Towering Genius"." *American Political Thought* 7, no. 3 (2018): 379.

[9] Basler, 81.

Declaration of Independence, a subject worthy of Lincoln's intellect and ambition, would be central to his position on the looming national crisis.[10]

Lincoln ran and was elected once more to the Illinois House of Representatives but resigned in order to be considered as a candidate for the U.S. Senate. Having lost that race after ten ballots in the legislature, he remained involved in the political arena, formally joining the Republican Party, whose members nominated him in 1858 for the U.S. Senate to challenge Stephen A. Douglas, the incumbent Democratic senator. The events of the ensuing campaign remain among the most noteworthy in U.S. history.

In remarks accepting his nomination at Springfield on June 16, 1858, Lincoln asserted that "slavery agitation" could only be resolved by way of passing through "a crisis" and invoked Scripture, "'A house divided against itself cannot stand.' I believe this government cannot endure permanently half *slave* and half *free*....It will become *all* one thing, or *all* the other."[11] During an eight-week period from August 21 to October 15, Lincoln and Douglas met in seven of Illinois' nine Congressional districts for a series of three-hour debates. In these engagements, Lincoln continued to expound his rational for the Declaration of Independence as the source document for the republic's fundamental principles.

In the first debate at Ottawa, for example, Lincoln remarked, "there is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence—the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."[12] Although Lincoln, who recognized taking an outright position in favor of civil rights for African Americans was anathema to many Illinois voters, would make "his infamous paean to white supremacy"[13] in the fourth debate at Charleston, he nevertheless would "[keep] his ground in declaring that the Declaration of Independence included all men in its claim for natural rights."[14] As the debates advanced into the autumn, Lincoln refuted more strongly Douglas' popular sovereignty argument that the incumbent senator insisted derived from the founders' intentional division of the country into slave and free states.[15] Countering this misinterpretation of the premise on which the nation was established, Lincoln, in his rejoinder at the Quincy debate, stated that Douglas "assume[d] what is historically a falsehood"[16] that the founders deliberately made the nation half slave and half free, when in fact they were attempting to deal with a preexisting institution of which they overwhelmingly disapproved. By the final debate at Alton, Lincoln offered his most compelling contrast with his rival's position, observing plainly that slavery amounted to a "tyrannical principle" whereby, "You work and toil and earn bread, and I'll eat it."[17] In equating slavery with tyranny, Lincoln clearly linked Stephen Douglas to King George III while aligning himself with the nation's founding fathers.[18]

---

[10] White, *Lincoln*, 51, as cited in Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 63-65.
[11] Robert W. Johannsen, ed., *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 14.
[12] Johannsen, *Lincoln-Douglas*, 52-53.

In November 1858, Lincoln came up short in his second campaign for the U.S. Senate. Republican and Democratic legislative candidates earned a comparable number of popular votes across Illinois, but apportionment favored the Democrats and yielded a majority in the newly seated legislature. Returning to his legal practice and campaigning for Republican candidates in the off-year elections of 1859, he continued to make the case, which he believed mirrored that of the founders, for slavery's containment and eventual elimination. Among these speeches and letters are several in and with leaders in Ohio, then the nation's third largest state, where he would form important political associations that would benefit him the following year.[19] But his most significant remarks would take place during a trip to the East in the winter of 1860.

---

[13] Mark E. Steiner, *Lincoln and Citizenship* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2021), 83.

[14] Oliver Vernon Burton, "The Passage of Lincoln's Republic," in *The War Worth Fighting: Abraham Lincoln's Presidency and Civil War America*, ed. Stephen D. Engle (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015), 28.

[15] Brookhiser, 136.

[16] Johannsen, 277.

[17] Johannsen, 319.

[18] Brookhiser, 138.

Our Fathers

On February 27, 1860, Lincoln mounted the stage at Cooper Union in New York City and delivered one of the most important speeches of his life and one of the most clearly developed defenses of the perspective taken by the founders and their immediate successors with respect to the institution of slavery in the United States. Whether or not Lincoln actually assessed the speech, along with Matthew Brady's photograph taken the same day, as the two things that made him president, historians seem to believe the address had such a catalytic effect.[20] Extrapolating that short-term impact to its logical conclusion, one may infer that had Lincoln not delivered the Cooper Union address and subsequently been elected to the presidency, the United States would not exist today. As Harold Holzer opined without hyperbole in a 2010 article, "It can be argued that without Cooper Union, hence without Lincoln at the helm, the United States might be remembered today as a failed experiment that fractured into a North American Balkans."[21]

In a masterful oration crafted as a three-part composition in which each movement reinforced the overall theme, Lincoln exhibited the well-practiced skills of a lawyer and politician in making his case. He did so before an audience in a city that was already the growing country's financial, cultural, and media capital *and* the turf of his leading rival for the

---

[19] Daniel J. Ryan, *Lincoln and Ohio* (Dover: Old Hundredth Press, 2008), 25.

[20] Harold Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech That Made Abraham Lincoln President* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 5-6.

[21] Harold Holzer, "The Speech That Made the Man." *American Heritage*, Winter 2010, https://www.americanheritage.com/speech-made-man.

Republican presidential nomination, Senator William Seward of New York.[22] In part one, Lincoln exegeted a sentence from a speech Douglas delivered in Ohio the previous September in which the Illinois senator asserted the founding fathers who framed the national government understood the question of slavery better than he and his mid-nineteenth century contemporaries. Having carefully prepared what he considered a political history lecture over several months of research in the Illinois state library,[23] Lincoln took on Douglas' contention about the founders by first defining what was meant by that term. Proceeding to identify thirty-nine such men, he examined their speeches and votes in the Continental Congress, Constitutional Convention, and early sessions of the new U.S. Congress, finding that twenty-one of them, "a clear majority of the whole,"[24] had voted to restrict or ban slavery in new territories. In making this declaration, he effectively concluded that the Republican Party, founded in part on an anti-slavery platform, was the rightful heir to the founders.[25]

In the second and third parts of the address, Lincoln delivered messages to Southerners and Republicans, respectively. First dismembering the Democratic argument that the Republican Party was group of extremists in a single section of the country, he went on to accuse Southerners of threatening to break up the Union if they do not get their way on slavery. In a particularly memorable turn of phrase, Lincoln suggested that Southerners desired to "rule or ruin in all events."[26] And finally going on to address Republicans and tie together the entire speech, Lincoln encouraged his political compatriots and connected the case he has made to a moral obligation. Building to a crescendo, he emboldened the audience with words later printed in all capital letters, "LET US HAVE FAITH THAT RIGHT MAKES MIGHT, AND IN THAT FAITH, LET US, TO THE END, DARE TO DO OUR DUTY AS WE UNDERSTAND IT."[27] Holzer has suggested that at Cooper Union, Lincoln "offered…an anchor…to save what the founders had created, purified of the one blight that violated the promise of equality enshrined in the Declaration of Independence."[28] In that effort, he once again revealed his deep understanding of that founding document as the philosophical premise on which the American republic is based.

---

[22] Brookhiser, 144-145.

[23] Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 31-32.

[24] Basler, 523.

[25] Eric Foner, *The Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 10.

[26] Basler, 532.

A New Birth of Freedom

In November 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected president of the United States, vanquishing not only his Illinois rival, Douglas, but two other candidates who divided the vote in the Electoral College. He was elected with the smallest popular vote percentage in U.S. history, a plurality of 39.8 percent. Seven southern states seceded before his inauguration on March 4, 1861, joined by four additional states soon thereafter, and as Lincoln himself would observe in his second inaugural address four years later, "the war came."[29] It would be a four-year conflict paid for with the blood of as many as 750,000 soldiers and countless civilian casualties.

Following what would come to be viewed as the turning point in the war – the Union victories at Vicksburg, Mississippi and Gettysburg, Pennsylvania – Lincoln made a journey to the latter in the fall of 1863, accepting an invitation to offer dedicatory remarks at a new cemetery. The small town of just 2,400 residents, which had been the site of the deadliest battle of the Civil War, promptly understood its historic relevance, resulting not only in the establishment of a final resting place for the Union fallen but the preservation of key parts of the battlefield.[30] Lincoln's remarks, "the most famous speech in American history,"[31] would cement its place in Americans' hearts and minds forever.

---

[27] Basler, 536.
[28] Holzer, *Lincoln*, 236.
[29] Basler, 792.

The nucleus of Lincoln's address on November 19, 1863, was evident in extemporaneous words he offered on July 7, 1863, in a response to a serenade less than a week after the Union victory. Not surprisingly, he looked once more to the touchstone of his public life and the cornerstone of the republic, the Declaration of Independence. On that summer evening he mused, "How long ago is it—eighty odd years—since on the Fourth of July for the first time in the history of the world a nation by its representatives, assembled and declared as a self-evident truth that 'all men are created equal.'"[32] At Gettysburg, he would open his 272-word remarks with the more precisely, eloquently, and biblically crafted words, "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."[33]

Among others, Boritt observes that the words of the Declaration of Independence and nation's birthday, July 4, 1776, marked his public life and "stayed on Lincoln's lips from the 1850s into his presidency."[34] These concepts were present in the 1852 eulogy of Henry Clay, his "*beau idéal* of a statesman,"[35] the 1854 Peoria speech, and other letters and writings, not to mention those already cited in this brief survey of his public remarks. But his frequent references to that document and that day were not mere recitations of facts – that this was how the new country announced its separation from the British crown and that this was the moment in time that act occurred. Lincoln used the Declaration again and again as the bedrock on which the country was still being built. The Gettysburg Address contained two births: the nation's birth 87 years earlier and the "new birth of freedom," a new birth that Lincoln seemed to envision would include people of color and people from other lands, all bound together in the republic the founders established and that was now his and future generations to protect. In highlighting both the apple of gold – the Declaration of Independence – and the picture of silver – the Constitution of the United States – in this masterful oration,[36] Lincoln tied together the very premise *and* promise of constitutional democracy.

---

[30] Gabor Boritt, *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech That Nobody Knows* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 36.
[31] McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln*, 51.
[32] Basler, 709.
[33] Basler, 734.
[34] Boritt, *Gettysburg Gospel*, 113-114.
[35] Johannsen, 66.

A HISTORY OF DETRACTORS: OPPONENTS OF SELF-GOVERNMENT

As Lincoln understood, each generation in U.S. history has had its supporters and detractors of representative government of, by, and for the people. From the Whiskey Rebellion rebels to the Civil War insurrectionists, it seems as if a portion of the population stood ready to resort to violence rather than adhere to the duly enacted Constitution and federal statutes adopted by the people's elected representatives. In the years since the Civil War and Reconstruction, opponents of self-rule have presented themselves in different ways, but they have remained an ever present threat. For the past 125 years, the Progressive movement has, albeit cloaked by the benign-sounding veil of improving public administration, similarly sought to undermine democratic self-government by shifting power from the elected branches – particularly the Congress – to an ostensibly independent class of "expert" administrators.

And in the recent past, the nation witnessed two indisputable examples of extralegal behavior outside the Constitution and the law – riots led by neo-Marxists that took possession of, or destroyed, sections of great American cities in the summer of 2020 and a riot encouraged by the immediate past president of the United States and led by his followers that overran the legislative branch of the United States government on January 6, 2021. Again, each of these movements functioned under the guise of an ostensibly valid cause, namely racial equality and fair elections. But Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his fellow civil rights leaders did not resort to violence to achieve the equal rights they appropriately sought. And neither Richard Nixon nor Al Gore, each of whom had the unpleasant duty as the incumbent vice-president of presiding over the certification of Electoral College ballots in a closely contested race he personally lost, incited their supporters to take the U.S. Capitol by force in a futile effort to overturn the results.

---

[36] Brookhiser, 242-245.

The thread running through all of these instances, not unlike those who initiated the Civil War, is the ever-present danger of anarchy, whether by disaffected individuals or groups, or tyranny in the form of the "towering genius" Lincoln feared. Both cases are abominations that aim to supplant the *consent of the governed* on which constitutional self-rule is based with a mob or a despot that can only rule by force. Returning to the Lincoln record for a brief consideration of a text that this analysis did not previously evaluate, the Message to Congress in Special Session of July 4, 1861, one finds the president's clearly articulated view on this matter. He wrote that the people who supported popular government must "demonstrate to the world that those who can fairly carry an election can also suppress a rebellion; that ballots are the rightful and peaceful successors of bullets, and that when ballots have fairly and constitutionally decided there can be no successful appeal back to bullets."[37]

WHITHER LINCOLNIAN SELF-GOVERNMENT?

Some observers suggest that the country is more divided today than it has been since the 1850s. It is clear that a substantial portion of the American citizenry across the political spectrum is dissatisfied for a variety of reasons with modern government and that subsets of the body politic seem prepared once again to resort to bullets rather than ballots to get their way. In some respects, this is nothing new, as the founders understood and their contemporary citizens confirmed through their anarchical actions in western Pennsylvania in 1794. Perhaps more troubling is the apparent root cause of today's circumstances: the general public's abysmal level of knowledge about how government works – the very government in which we, the people, are the sovereign.

---

[37] Basler, 608.

As Lincoln expressed nearly 185 years ago at the Lyceum, each succeeding generation of Americans has an obligation to protect and sustain this experiment in self-government. Inertia is not sufficient for its continuance, for human nature itself works against any form of government. As Madison wrote in Federalist No. 51, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary."[38] President Ronald Reagan, recognizing the need for evergreen civic education, observed in his first gubernatorial inaugural address in 1967, "Perhaps you and I have lived too long with this miracle to properly be appreciative. Freedom is a fragile thing and it's never more than one generation away from extinction. It is not ours by way of inheritance; it must be fought for and defended constantly by each generation, for it comes only once to a people. And those in world history who have known freedom and then lost it have never known it again."[39]

The founders unequivocally understood that education was the tie that binds each generation to the next in order to sustain democratic self-government. Even before the Constitution became effective, the Confederation Congress enacted the Northwest Ordinance, which included the missive, "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."[40] For much of the nation's history, education that focused on these essentials – religion, morality, and knowledge – was part and parcel of the social fabric of each community.

---

[38] Clinton Rossiter, ed., *The Federalist Papers: Alexander Hamilton; James Madison; John Jay* (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 322.

[39] Ronald Reagan, *January 5, 1967: Inaugural Address (Public Ceremony)*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/january-5-1967-inaugural-address-public-ceremony.

It seems, then, that a key to resolving today's civil strife is a return to a robust citizenship education rooted in historical realities and a "broad spirit of patriotism."[41] Efforts such as the 1619 Project, which baldly aim to supplant the established facts of the nation's founding with an alternative narrative based on racism and identity politics, must be vehemently turned back. The ideology its proponents seek to advance is hardly novel. It would be easily recognized by the founders as anarchy, by Lincoln as "popular sovereignty," and by anyone with a rudimentary understanding of the republic's founding principles as an existential challenge to constitutional self-government.

In the final analysis, this offers perhaps one of the most important reasons for studying the speeches, writings, and even private papers of Abraham Lincoln. Although many Americans over the past nearly two and a half centuries have stood up to defend the Declaration of Independence, arguably no one has done it with a deeper understanding and clearer articulation of its political significance for the governance of a free people than Lincoln. If we exhibit the wisdom to do so, we can continue to benefit today from his sound interpretation of this foundational document outlining the principles of self-rule – principles that are now *ours* to protect. Indeed, they are principles we *must* defend if we are to "nobly save…the last best hope of earth."[42]

---

[40] U.S. Congress. *United States Code: Ordinance of: The Northwest Territorial Government 1934*. 1934. Periodical. https://www.loc.gov/item/uscode1934-001000009/, xxiv.
[41] Wilfred M. McClay, "America-Idea or Nation?," *Public Interest* (Fall 2001): 48.
[42] Basler, 688.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Basler, Roy P., ed. *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*. Cambridge: DaCapo Press, 2001.

Boritt, Gabor. *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech That Nobody Knows.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.

Brookhiser, Richard. *Founders' Son: A Life of Abraham Lincoln.* New York: Basic Books, 2014.

Engle, Stephen D., ed. *The War Worth Fighting: Abraham Lincoln's Presidency and Civil War America.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015.

Foner, Eric. *The Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019.

Holzer, Harold. *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech That Made Abraham Lincoln President.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.

Holzer, Harold. "The Speech That Made the Man." *American Heritage*, Winter 2010. https://www.americanheritage.com/speech-made-man.

Johannsen, Robert W., ed. *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1965.

McClay, Wilfred M. "America-Idea or Nation?." *Public Interest* (Fall 2001): 44-58.

McPherson, James M. *Abraham Lincoln.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Reagan, Ronald. *January 5, 1967: Inaugural Address (Public Ceremony).* Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum. https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/january-5-1967-inaugural-address-public-ceremony.

Rossiter, Clinton, ed. *The Federalist Papers: Alexander Hamilton; James Madison; John Jay.* New York: Penguin Books, 1961.

Ryan, Daniel J. *Lincoln and Ohio*. Dover: Old Hundredth Press, 2008.

Smith, Steven B. "Lincoln and the Politics of the “Towering Genius”." *American Political Thought* 7, no. 3 (2018): 375-399.

Steiner, Mark E. *Lincoln and Citizenship*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2021.

U.S. Congress. *United States Code: Ordinance of: The Northwest Territorial Government 1934.* 1934. Periodical. https://www.loc.gov/item/uscode1934-001000009/.

White, Ronald C. *Lincoln in Private.* New York: Random House, 2021.