

VITAL SPEECHES

— OF THE DAY —

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THE BEST THOUGHTS OF THE BEST MINDS ON CURRENT NATIONAL QUESTIONS

IMPARTIAL · CONSTRUCTIVE · AUTHENTIC

Lincoln

A TRANSFORMATIONAL GENIUS

Address by DAVID ABSHIRE, President, Center for the Study of the Presidency
 Delivered to the Military Order of the Loyal Legion, Washington, D.C., February 11, 2009

On this, the eve of Abraham Lincoln's 200th birthday, it is my pleasure to address the Military Order of the Loyal Legion. This noble organization formed at the time of Lincoln's death. You have commemorated this fabled President through the decades sense.

A year ago, I published *A Call to Greatness: Challenging the Next President* and gave all Presidential candidates advanced copies, for these were the men and women being challenged. The opening chapter describes a gathering storm of increasing magnitude hanging over the newly elected president. At no time in my decades in Washington had our nation so lost its strategic, budgetary, and fiscal freedom of action, unity at home, and leverage and influence abroad. This would be the "call to greatness" for our next President.

Little did I know that the challenges I described would become vastly multiplied by the devastating collapse of our financial system, and the subsequent world wide recession. Now President Obama must not just be Commander-in-Chief, but also Financier-in-Chief and Strategist-in-Chief.

In the book we offered the next president two models of our greatest Commanders-in-Chief, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt. Both were what we would call *transformational leaders*, a term coined by my friend, Professor James Burns. It describes leaders who change the entire landscape with broad stroke, reverse trends, and move the nation to higher ground. This distinguishes them from *transactional leaders*, good managers who make changes at the margin without altering course.

Abraham Lincoln, both Roosevelt's, and Ronald Reagan were all transformational leaders. Most transformational leaders, however, are not good managers. I particularly saw this phenomenon in Ronald Reagan when I was called back from NATO to restore trust in the Presidency after the Iran-Contra fiasco. Reagan was neither good at nor interested in management. I found that in this middle period of the Reagan Presidency, when the crisis occurred, there was not good management and accountability to support this intuitive President. In this same Presidency on the other hand, there were excellent managers, including first Chief of Staff James Baker, and then later Howard Baker and Ken Duberstein, all practical political strategists and good managers. At its beginning and end, the Reagan Presidency was outstanding.

Reagan did, however, have a rare intuitive ability, as

Richard Neustadt notes in the preface to my book, *Saving the Reagan Presidency*. It was that intuitive ability in Reagan's meeting in Geneva where he saw Gorbachev as a man in deep economic trouble, looking for a way out. When Reagan left that private meeting and reported back to his advisors, they thought the Gipper had been taken in. To the contrary, Reagan's intuition was brilliant and allowed him to begin his dance with Gorbachev – a dance that would bring the Cold War to an end, and begin steps toward genuine disarmament. Thus was achieved one of the greatest transformations in human history.

Neustadt also notes the intuitive similarities between Reagan and Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt's cabinet member, Sec. of War Stimpson, wrote about Roosevelt's grasshopper mind, in that he would only follow something for 28 seconds. Roosevelt, like Reagan, could see openings in history that others would totally miss. However there is a difference between Roosevelt and Reagan. Roosevelt was shrewder about the people he had around him so there was never such a break down in management as occurred in the Reagan Administration.

Lincoln was different. He was a transformational genius with an uncanny ability to execute. He mastered the timing and the ways and the means to accomplish great objectives. In his book *The Commander-in-Chief*, Eric Larabee admires Roosevelt, as Commander-in-Chief, but rates Lincoln as a superior military mind. Yet his military experience consisted of nothing more than two weeks as an elected Captain in the Black Hawk War and never fired a shot. Even in his one undistinguished term in Congress, he was primarily a protester against the Mexican War, with no major legislative accomplishments. He started his campaign as the prairie lawyer and was elected President in a 3-way race with a minority vote. As the newspapers said, he "was as green as they come."

In his youth, Lincoln learned to absorb information, studying and fully digesting complex science, history, and law. He internalized the language of the King James Bible and Shakespeare until it became his own. This newcomer to military science similarly immersed himself in strategy, tactics, and logistics in the Library of Congress and elsewhere. He surely learned from Jomini's famous work, *The Art of War*; that the destruction of the opponent's army should be the objective as it was with Napoleon at Austerlitz in 1805. This study proved pivotal when he saw notable West Point graduates who were hesitant to fight against the brilliant General

Lee. Furthermore, Lincoln was flabbergasted that both McClellan at Antietam and Meade at Gettysburg, after initially repulsing Lee, did not corner and destroy his army before he could cross the Potomac. They, too, had read Jomini, but had not learned the art of strategy the way Lincoln did.

Lincoln had a keen eye for talent. When he arrived in Washington as President, he identified Colonel Robert E. Lee as such a superior military mind, based on his reputation from his time in the Mexican War, and the commendations of General Scott. Lincoln promptly had Lee offered command of all the Union Armies. For Lee, this created a dilemma. Lee was not for secession and was uneasy with slavery, but was Southern by heritage. He went to his cousin's house in Alexandria, Virginia, spent part of the night in prayer trying to get his answer, and ultimately declined the offer, opting to sit out the war. When Virginia seceded, however, he went with the Confederacy. Luckily for Lincoln, it was not until about four months before the end of the war that Davis, belatedly, gave Lee the command of all Confederate forces.

If Lee had accepted the command of the Northern armies, in my judgment, the war would have lasted about four months. There would have been no Union rout as in the battle of First Manassas, but a decisive Northern victory, a move on Richmond, and an early defeat of the Confederacy. There is a supreme irony here: At this point, with Lincoln's war objective preservation of the Union, not emancipation, the war might have concluded without significant changes in the institution of slavery.

In the first several years of the war, Lincoln went through a series of commanders (McClellan, Burnside, and Pope) who, as he put it, were "slow to fight" because they knew Lee was a superior General. Lincoln, from his study of military strategy and aptitude as Commander-in-Chief, knew that the objective of a blockade and a move down the Mississippi river was not an adequate strategy. The Union had to defeat the Confederate armies. It was not until he made a name for himself at the Battle of Chattanooga that Lincoln then chose Ulysses S. Grant, an able General, to be the overall commander. I would argue, however, that he wore down Lee only through bloody battles of attrition from Spotsylvania to Coal Harbor, and finally Petersburg.

Lincoln, being a true genius, demonstrated six principals of national strategy to guide a would-be transformational President as Commander-in-Chief in dealing with crisis. He himself excelled at applying these leadership principals, and they still prove valuable today as we face daunting military, economic, and political crises.

The first principal is to respond decisively to the initial crisis. Lincoln did this when he reinforced Fort Sumter early in his first term, against the advice of his

wavering cabinet. This shrewdly forced the Confederates to fire the first shot of the Civil War, and gave Lincoln enough political capital to mobilize 75,000 militia men. The second principal is to set clear priorities. Lincoln set priority on preservation of the Union, despite his campaign promise of emancipation. In this regard, Lincoln established what Doris Kerns Goodwin calls his *Team of Rivals*, referring to his diverse cabinet. Lincoln's priority was preserving the Union. His team had to include not just Republicans, but a very prominent Democrat, Montgomery Blair. His goal was to maintain support not only from the Border States, but also the so-called Copper Heads, or Northern Democrats, who were willing to fight for the Union, but not to abolish slavery.

Thirdly, it is vital to fully mobilize the nation, as Lincoln did after Fort Sumter initiating a draft. Thus, he was able to mobilize 300,000 more men for the army. The fourth principal is to maintain political unity along with shrewd timing. Lincoln demonstrated this by first insisting that the Civil War was a defense against the illegal act of secession, not emancipation. Though this drew criticism from his political base, he was able to gain support of Border States against the Confederacy. He also showed his shrewd sense of timing when, after the Union victory at Antietam in 1862 he announced his goal to move towards abolition in the Confederate states, which he did the following January with the Emancipation Proclamation. This way, he forced Europe to shift support from "King Cotton", that is, the Confederacy and its textiles, to the Union's "holy war" against slavery. Emancipation also allowed Lincoln to recruit 185,000 black troops who fought valiantly, creating unrest in the southern slave population, and most importantly, to start the nation on the fulfillment of the unrecognized Declaration that "All men are created equal." Lincoln achieved one of the greatest transformations in American History.

Today's challenges, like those preceding them, require more than an extraordinary military mind. In his last two principals, Lincoln defined success beyond war: Communicating a strategy and a vision to take America beyond conflict. Lincoln's extraordinary capacity in this regard looked beyond the War. He established the National Academy of Science at the Smithsonian Institution, furthered the Land Grant Colleges, which now make up some of our greatest Universities, and promoted the Homestead Act for Westward expansion. Throughout his career he was also interested in invention, and is still the only President to hold a patent. These investments in the future offered a war-torn country hope for a life after the bloody Civil War.

In *A Call to Greatness*, written over a year ago, I noted that a call to match Lincoln was unrealistic because Lincoln was a genius who could combine conception and execution. Therefore, a more limited Roosevelt who surrounded himself with good managers

should be the model. I saw no geniuses among the various candidates at that time.

Now, I've come to believe that this man, who also began his campaign from the steps of the State House in Springfield, may have some of the same DNA as Abraham Lincoln. No doubt thinking of Lincoln, Obama said in his Inaugural Address,

Every so often, the oath is taken amidst gathering clouds and raging storms. At these moments, America had carried on not simply because of the skill of vision of those in high office, but because We the People have remained faithful to the ideals of our forbearers, and true to our founding documents. So it has been. So it must be with this generation of Americans.

Obama organized and directed a national campaign where the odds were enormously against him, paired in both the Democratic Primary and the General Election against far more experienced opponents. He developed a grassroots campaign driven by the younger generation not generally moved by politics.

Yet against Hillary Clinton, he had an awesome challenge. This was when he reached his first crisis with his preacher, Jeremiah Wright. The challenge was severe and it appeared that his public trust was diminishing. He went into isolation from his staff overnight and wrote a highly disciplined speech, rooted in history and American values. When he met again with his staff the next morning, they bit their nails nervously. Senator Obama coolly assured them that they had nothing to worry about. He had written his speech, and it simply would determine whether he won or lost the election.

His words:

The profound mistake of reverend Wright's sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It's that he spoke as if our society were static; as if no progress has been made; as if this country- a country that has made it possible for one of its own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of white and black; Latino and Asian; rich and poor, young and old- is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know – what we have seen – is that America can change. This is the true Genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope – the audacity of hope – for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.

As the financial crisis hit the country full face, that same cool confidence that helped Obama prevail over a more highly experienced John McCain, a true War Hero.

As the press said, Obama seemed cool, and McCain seemed hot.

The test of greatness is the capacity to readjust, reposition, and grow to meet new circumstance. Both Lincoln and Obama started from the left. Although we would not call the noble cause of anti-slavery left wing today, it was when Lincoln began his campaign. Similarly, Obama had the most liberal voting record in the Illinois State House, and also in his short period as Senator. As both of these individuals progressed, they moved squarely toward the center, each making the unity of our country their prime objective, and learning from setbacks.

Obama has already suffered political setbacks from some of his political appointments and the mishandling of the economic stimulus. But Lincoln, too, had a very early setback when he pushed McDowell prematurely to fight at Manassas. In 1864 he faced a future so uncertain that he wrote a private letter in preparation for a possible McClellan victory in the election of 1864. Only the fall of Atlanta changed that.

Over the several years ahead with a desperate economy, two wars, and the danger of more terrorism, Obama will face more setbacks. It is reassuring that Obama is not afraid to admit his error. In response to the withdrawn appointments, he took full responsibility, saying, "I screwed up." He has also told the country to hold him accountable for his actions: "judge me by my results." It is rare for politicians to take responsibility for setbacks, but it is necessary if trust is to be restored.

President Eisenhower, leader of the "Greatest Generation," coined the phrase "Trust is the coin of the realm." He understood, as did Lincoln, that trust is the most sacred quality of Presidential leadership. As I mentioned, trust is given only if a leader is truthful, and competent. Furthermore, it can be easily lost, as it was when Lincoln prematurely sent troops into the battle at Bull Run, Roosevelt left the Pacific fleet exposed at Pearl Harbor, Kennedy stumbled into the Bay of Pigs, and Reagan got embroiled in the Iran-Contra scandal. Each of these Presidents, however, learned from his mistakes, assumed responsibility, and was able to restore public trust in the Presidency.

I close by turning to Abraham Lincoln, whom we gather here to celebrate. We should take comfort that President Barack Obama has read many on him and digested his art of leadership and holds him as a role model.

In Lincoln's second inaugural, he had this vision of reconciling a torn country, noting that people on both sides read the same Bible, prayed to the same God, and were both responsible for slavery. He ended this way: "...let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

In an earlier address, he challenges us: “We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth. “
The extraordinary human being, whom the

Loyal Legion celebrates tonight, is captured best by Tolstoy’s language: “his example is universal and will last thousands of years.” ♦

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