

# INTERPRETATION

## A Journal of Political Philosophy

Volume 8/2, 3

May, 1980

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QUEENS COLLEGE PRESS

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Volume 8

Issue 2, 3

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An Excerpt from  
"LINCOLN'S GREATNESS"

MARTIN DIAMOND

What constitutes Lincoln's greatness? In what does Lincoln's greatness lie?

That we love him is good for us, and it does us credit. But to understand rightly what it is in Lincoln that warrants love would do us still more good, and would even do us honor. I do not pretend fully to understand Lincoln's greatness. But I propose to examine with you tonight, briefly, some of the ways men have viewed Lincoln and to learn, from a critical examination of those views, the direction in which our minds will have to move if we are to comprehend and thus appreciate this man.

How do we love Lincoln? As what, for what? May I tell you how my own love for him was kindled? Perhaps you will recognize in this something of your own experience. When I was a boy in grade school, there was always in my classrooms a framed picture of Lincoln. It was always located just over one of the blackboards. I remember distinctly that it was always covered with chalk-dust. And there—as in a gauzy film shot of a Hollywood heroine—was the silent, sad, infinitely kind countenance of Mr. Lincoln. This countenance with its soft, deep, brown eyes instantly confirmed the stories one had heard of sentry boys fallen asleep on duty, condemned to death, but saved when Mr. Lincoln tearfully answered a mother's prayer. This is the Man of Sorrows Lincoln, the gentle, the tender Lincoln. But the harsh fact is that during the Civil War two hundred and sixty-seven soldiers were executed for various derelictions of duty and all this with Lincoln's tacit approval. How should it be otherwise, given the terrible circumstances of the war he had to fight? Do I scoff at the Lincoln of my classroom, whom I have portrayed deliberately with an exaggerated bathos? Not in the least. But the view of the tender Lincoln must be enlarged to comprehend the hard Lincoln, in whose armies two hundred and sixty-seven men were executed, who slapped men into jail and suspended the writ of habeas corpus, who drew unto himself extraordinary executive power, and who pressed his generals to vigorous attack, to destroy armies and not to take cities. The tender Lincoln of tears is a true, but only partly true Lincoln; it ignores the other side of the man, and thus lessens him. It does not do his greatness justice. We have all known and loved gentle men. But gentleness alone—no more than strength alone—does not constitute greatness. If we are to see Lincoln in a way that squares with the greatness

we assign to him, then we must go beyond the popular view of the tender Lincoln. We must go beyond that view, preserving its truth but adding to it that which renders more fully the man's greatness. In this way. Yes, he was a gentle man, but he was steel when steel was needed. He forced the crisis of the Union with his famous House Divided policy, and this was no tender thing to do. He fought a war, and wars are not won by gentleness. But the soul of a nation is saved, and the peace that follows war *is* won by the gentleness of soul of him who does the implacable and terrible things that have to be done in crises and wars. And, to vary a famous modern prayer, he had the intellect, the wisdom to distinguish the things that call for strength from the things that call for gentleness. Lincoln was hard only when and only insofar as hard measures were truly required. It was thus, by his profound understanding of the nature of politics and of the political situation he faced, that he could meet every test with the strength it required, and yet bequeath to his nation a heritage of moderation and kindness.

This is why we tend to forget that Lincoln pressed the Constitution to its utmost limits, and perhaps beyond. It is because we know he wisely discerned, as far as any man can, what was necessary and exerted power only as it was necessary to his great purposes. We forget, or better, we vindicate his conduct because we know that he never was victimized by the exertion of power, never came to enjoy it for its own sake, apart from the great ends to which he was dedicated. I offer one quote from Lincoln to support my point. You all remember these words from The Second Inaugural: "With malice toward none, with charity for all." We sometimes forget the words that follow: "With firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right." It is the combining of charity and firmness that makes Lincoln great.

Let me leave this point with one further indication of my meaning. Lincoln wielded great power, and at times wielded it nearly dictatorially. You all know Lord Acton's famous and valuable statement. "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." There is something in Lincoln which goes against Acton or, rather, warns against too simple an agreement with Acton. I think Lincoln shows us the greater wisdom of a wiser man than Acton. I mean the great French writer on America, Tocqueville, who wrote: "Men are not corrupted by the exercise of power or debased by the habit of obedience, but by the exercise of a power which they believe to be illegitimate, and by obedience to a rule which they consider to be usurped and oppressive." There is much more to this problem but I must leave it at this. Lincoln, by his superb and just compound of the tender and the strong has taught Americans how not to be corrupted by the exercise of power or by obedience to it. He teaches us how to face—

with a proper fear and yet with a reasonable hope—the task of governing men in a free republic. It is easy to be soft, it is easy to be hard. It is greatness to be both gentle and strong and to know when and how to be each. John Drinkwater in his play has Lincoln say, “I accepted this war with a sick heart.” Yes, his heart shrank, but his head and hand were ready to the task. That is his greatness, and we must love it in its fullness.

I turn now to another popular view of Lincoln—Lincoln, the Common Man. He was one of us, this loud-laughing, sometimes rowdy, tall galoot of a man. This is the view of Lincoln as the wisecracker, the joke teller, the simple man of homely truths. The poor boy, without education, without advantages, who made good, who was “plain folks” writ large. Is this a true view? Will the Lincoln thus portrayed fit the mantle of greatness we lay upon him? Again I do not scoff. But we must go beyond this. There were a thousand, ten thousand men then, and ten thousand men now who fill this bill—joke tellers as funny, men without advantages who have made good. It is wrong and it is demeaning to Lincoln to exaggerate his commonness. Let me paraphrase Lincoln to make my point. He was *of* us, and he was *for* us, but he was not *by* us. He was *of* us, yes. He had our ways, our speech, he sprang from this soil. And he was *for* us. He bent his efforts to our well-being, he gave infinite dignity to our principles of popular government, and he cared for us. But he was not *by* us. We did not make him what he was. He was greater than that. His greatness of soul and mind belong not to us, but to man as man. He transcended the conditions of any society as such. But what we can everlastingly claim is that we did accept this prince of men, we gave ourselves to him, we let him lead us, and we have the sense to love him. It is the noblest claim of democracy that this man of humble origin could rise from our ranks, and through our ways, to the height of human achievement.

Let me be specific. Common man? Uneducated? We all remember the story of his scratching his sums on a shovel, by the light of the fireside. True. Fine. But if we flatter ourselves that that is all, that a simple education, a good clear head, and lots of practical experience is enough for the greatness which is Lincoln, we go wrong. Let me remind you of some things about his education. I do not of course mean the schoolroom. I mean his studies. Unfortunately, and as I know only too well, schoolrooms and studies are not always synonymous. As it were, you can lead the student to the schoolroom, but you can't make him think. Lincoln was an extraordinarily well read man. I have been going over the list of books he read. Merely to name some will make my point. The Bible, Shakespeare, Aesop's Fables, Robert Burns, Lord Byron, Milton, Gibbons, Paine, Euclid, Bacon, Feuerbach, Fichte, Paley, Homer, Plutarch, Cervantes, Blackstone, Story's and Kent's Commentaries, and dozens more. He read lots of history. He

mastered some science. He even devoured a Greek grammar. And of course he read nearly all the great speeches and writings of American statesmen, and much American history. And of course he read more journals, papers, periodicals than I could here list. Let me add this; when I say he read these great books, I mean he really read them. He read intensely, studiously. He committed to memory endless pages of what he had read. He was in the deepest sense, a learned man.

What is my point? I want to show what is lacking in the view of Lincoln as Common Man. Certainly Lincoln had frontier wit, but he had also the brilliance and depth of Shakespeare. He had the best of cracker barrel commonsense and he had also that philosophical wisdom that comes only from intense scholarly, intellectual study. He had the richness and flexibility that comes of practical experience and he had the depth and rigor of the trained philosophical mind, the depth and rigor that comes only to the uncommon mind and that comes only with an uncommon devotion to intellectual reflection. The view of Lincoln as common man is true, but only partly true. Frontier wit, cracker barrel commonsense, practical experience—these make him a splendid fellow. When to this is added genius honed by intense study and reflection we begin to perceive Lincoln's greatness. Frontier wit, cracker barrel commonsense and practical experience—this was *by us*. This we gave him, and in this he was only the best of what all Americans had in some degree. But the genius reaching out to the company of great minds in every age and place, that is beyond us. We may give thanks that he happened among us and that we had it in us to accept him. Let me put it this way. He was not, as some would have it, a "cross-section of humanity," but rather a man who shows us to what height the human nature can reach. He was the Common Man's Uncommon Man. We must learn to love his uncommonness and pray that such will rise among us again, and prepare ourselves to accept and not reject it.