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Three Heroic Journeys Abraham Lincoln and the Power of Myth

Speech by [Brian Flanagan](#), associate director of the Hauenstein Center

"**T**here is no new thing to be said about Lincoln," a congressman from Kansas once eulogized, *There is no new thing to be said of the mountains, or of the sea, or of the stars. The years go their way, but the same old mountains lift their granite shoulders above the drifting clouds; the same mysterious sea beats upon the shore; the same silent stars keep holy vigil above a tired world. But to the mountains and sea and stars, men turn forever in unwearied homage. And thus with Lincoln. For he was a mountain in grandeur of soul, he was a sea in deep undervoice of mystic loneliness, he was a star in steadfast purity of purpose and service. And he abides.*[1]

One year before these words were uttered, President Warren Harding dedicated the Lincoln Memorial. Housed in a shrine designed to mimic the Temple of Zeus in Olympia, Lincoln's massive, 20-foot, marble statue towers above visitors, below the inscription: "In this temple, as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the Union, the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever." A surviving 19th century silver print has Lincoln in the arms of George Washington, wearing Apollo's laurel crown, and ascending bodily into heaven. Since his assassination, it's fair to say, we Americans have been none too bashful in our praise of Lincoln.

Mythology and marble, however, can obscure flesh and blood, and it is the work of historians to bring Lincoln back to life as a human being – to give us a more intimate view of the man. It is important, for example, to understand Lincoln's views on race and on civil liberties in wartime. It is important to explore the controversies of Lincoln's life and legacy, and to find substance and truth. Lincoln scholars today – Donald, McPherson, Goodwin, Guelzo, Holzer, Neely, White, Burlingame, and others – are doing a commendable job of it. *Yet*, I'm going to argue, this should not detract from the Myth of Lincoln, which itself is quite powerful.



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Joseph Campbell, the late writer and mythologist, spent a career finding red threads connecting myths from the great cultures of the world. Mythology, said Campbell, has a "pedagogical function, of how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances." "Myths," he said, "can teach you that." [2] Those of you familiar with Joseph Campbell will be familiar with his best-known work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which traces the journey of what he calls the archetypal hero and links Odysseus to Mohammed to Christ to the Buddha and King Arthur and George Washington and Luke Skywalker. In the hero's journey, Campbell found a mythology that spans all cultures in all times, a truly human story. The plot is simple. Our heroes receive a call to adventure, accept it, cross a threshold into an unfamiliar world, endure a road of trials, and ultimately obtain a boon – often at the cost of great personal sacrifice – that will redound to the benefit of the broader society.

These heroes are sometimes fictional, sometimes factual, but their journey – one we will clarify through Lincoln's example in a moment – blazes a trail that we can envision when we hear our own calls to adventure. "[W]e have not ... to risk the adventure alone," Campbell said, "for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero path..." [3] We read and hear stories in our youth and adolescence, we witness heroic actions throughout our lifetime, and along the way we learn important lessons. One of which, in Campbell's words, is that "at the bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation.... At the darkest moment comes light." [4] Lincoln, as we shall see, made use of this lesson in his life. He, of course, had numerous heroes – men who helped light the path when he received *his* call. He grew up with Parson Weems's heroic depiction of George Washington. Shakespeare's political and tragic heroes – Marcus Brutus, Lear, Macbeth, and Hamlet – fascinated Lincoln. In politics he had Henry Clay and Daniel Webster. Most importantly, he had his Bible and the heroic journeys of Moses and Jesus. These heroes had an enormous impact on Lincoln's thinking, and they helped shape his life and work. *Of course* we must bring heroes down to the ground, to the flesh and blood, to the fullest substance of truth we can obtain. But we must also celebrate what is heroic in them, internalize their lessons, and then we can call upon their example when we face our own physical and spiritual trials.

Hero's Journey I: Lincoln's Depression

Lincoln, I think, is truly heroic in three primary ways. We can recognize three hero's journeys in which Lincoln accepted a call to action, endured great trials, and obtained a boon for his fellow man. First, he overcame his own debilitating depression, and the sorrowful events of his life, and emerged with an ambition, in his words, to make the world "a little better for my having lived in it." [5] Second, he overcame his own poverty and emerged as a competent professional with the skill set and the wherewithal to achieve his ambition, and to rise from the log cabin to the White House. Third – Lincoln's most recognizably heroic act – he overcame the nation's profound divisions and removed forever, from the land, the great sin of slavery.

First, let's look at Lincoln's depression: his inner hero's journey. We recognize today that Lincoln was likely genetically predisposed to depression. His father had a depressive streak, often striking out on long, lonely walks in the woods, muttering to himself. His mother was known for her melancholy, and the family of his uncles and cousins exhibited symptoms of mental illness, several of them landing later in asylums. [6] Lincoln, himself, was remembered – by family, neighbors, and work associates – as a profoundly melancholy man. He wore his sadness on his face. There's a now famous story about Leo Tolstoy venturing up into the Caucusus Mountains between Europe and Asia, and discussing Lincoln's accomplishments with a Muslim chieftain there. "He spoke with a voice of thunder, he laughed like the sunrise, and his deeds were as strong as rock," the chieftain said of Lincoln. [7] After seeing a photograph of Lincoln, however, his mood changed. "He gazed [at it] for several minutes silently," Tolstoy later said,

like one in a reverent prayer; his eyes filled with tears. He was deeply touched and I asked him why he became so sad. After pondering my question for a few moments he replied ... "Don't you find, judging from his picture, that his eyes are full of tears and that his lips are sad with a secret sorrow?" [8]

Lincoln struggled mightily with his depression. His neighbors and friends would long remember his withdrawn, moody spells. They were common, and in the words of Lincoln biographer, Joshua Wolf Shenk, they were,

just one thread in a curious fabric of behavior and thought that Lincoln's friends and colleagues called his "melancholy." He often wept in public and recited maudlin poetry. He told jokes and stories at odd times – he needed the laughs, he said, for his survival. As a young man he talked of suicide, and as he grew older, he said he saw the world as hard and grim, full of misery, made that way by fates and forces of God. [9]

According to one of Lincoln's legal associates, "No element of Mr. Lincoln's character was so marked, obvious and ingrained as his mysterious and profound melancholy." [10] According to Lincoln's longtime law partner William Herndon – who conducted numerous interviews with Lincoln's family, friends, and colleagues, and wrote one of the first and best-researched biographies after Lincoln's death – "His melancholy dripped from him as he walked." [11] Lincoln recognized his sorry state, and he recognized – as did those around him – the dangers inherent. In one of his deepest moments of sorrow, he wrote to yet another legal associate (he was not bashful about his depression), "To remain as I am is impossible; I must die or be better...." [12] This was Lincoln's first call to action. He recognized that he must overcome his depression if he was going to continue on.

In his life, Lincoln would endure a long road of trials. He was tried by the deaths of those he most loved. His younger brother died when he was an infant in Kentucky. In 1818, when Lincoln was nine, his uncle and aunt – Thomas and Elizabeth Sparrow – and then his mother, Nancy Lincoln, all died in a wave of infectious disease that swept his community in rural Indiana. The disease, called “milk sick,” would have been the salmonella or bacterial meningitis of the day, with cases thickly announced to the dread of neighbors. “When the individual is about to be taken down,” biographer Shenk quotes in describing the disease’s course,

“he feels weary, trembles more or less under exertion, and often experiences pain, numbness and slight cramps.” Nausea soon follows, then “a feeling of depression and burning at the pit of the stomach,” then retching, twitching, and tossing side to side. Before long, the patient becomes “deathly pale and shrunk up,” listless and indifferent, and lies, between fits of retching, in a “mild coma.”[13]

Lincoln watched his mother suffer and die this way, in their small, one-room cabin. His older sister, to whom he was very attached, moved out of the family home when Lincoln was seventeen, only to die in childbirth the next year. The baby, Lincoln’s nephew, was stillborn. A neighbor later recalled Lincoln’s reaction to the news about his sister: “He sat down in the door of the smoke house and buried his face in his hands,” the neighbor remembered. “The tears slowly trickled from between his bony fingers and his gaunt frame shook with sobs.”[14]

Lincoln’s trials did not end with the deaths of three of the most important women in his childhood. His relationship with the men of his family was a second trial to be endured. His father, who was barely literate, never understood his son’s literary bent. Lincoln would often wander away from his chores to read a book under the shade of a tree. He would get up early in the morning to read; steal away throughout the day to read; and read well into the evening by the fireside. To his father, stepbrother, and cousins – who expected to live and die laboring on a farm – this seemed beyond indulgent; it was wasteful, lazy, contemptible. His father, not generally harsh or abusive, would often beat his son for this behavior. “Lincoln was lazy – a very lazy man,” his cousin concluded.[15] Neighbors agreed: he was “awful lazy”; “he was no hand to pitch in at work like killing snakes.”[16] Lincoln, for his part, rejected their way of life and their worldview. Such a distance came between Abraham and his father that, years later, despite pleas from his father’s bedside where he lay dying, Lincoln elected not to return home. He stayed away, too, during his father’s funeral.

A third trial Lincoln endured was a *terrible* love life. First, there was Ann Rutledge. It’s debated among historians – as it was among contemporaries – whether or not Abraham and Ann were engaged to marry, after Lincoln left his father’s home and established himself independently in New Salem. But many believe that Ann was the love of Abraham’s life. Rutledge was “a very pretty girl,” according to historian David Herbert Donald, “with fair skin, blue eyes, and auburn hair.”[17] A neighbor remembered that she was “as pure and kind a heart as an angel, full of love – kindness – sympathy.”[18] Herndon later claimed that Ann was the only woman Lincoln ever loved.[19] In the fall of 1835, however, Abraham was once again devastated by death. He lost Ann to typhoid, and afterward he endured a prolonged emotional collapse that we will revisit in a moment.

Next, there was Mary Owens, with whom Lincoln had a love affair when he was twenty-seven. Abraham and Mary had an informal understanding that they would eventually wed. However, Mary went away for some months to return to her parents’ home, and upon her return Lincoln began having second thoughts. Biographer David Herbert Donald recounts Lincoln’s response to Mary’s eagerness to wed:

He feared “that her coming so readily showed that she was a trifle too willing.” He began finding defects in her appearance. From her first visit [to New Salem] he remembered that she was pleasingly stout – weighing between 150 and 180 pounds, according to contemporaries – but now she appeared [in Lincoln’s words] “a fair match for Falstaff”[20]

Lincoln later recalled the transformation this way:

Now, when I beheld her, I could not for my life avoid thinking of my mother; and this, not from withered features, for her skin was too full of fat, to permit its contracting in to wrinkles, but from her want of teeth, weather-beaten appearance in general, and from a kind notion that ran in my head, that nothing could have commenced at the size of infancy, and reached her present bulk in less than thirty five or forty years.[21]

The two were separated by geography again, for some months, when Lincoln moved from New Salem, Illinois, to Springfield. Lincoln took advantage of the opportunity to engage in a six-month campaign to convince Mary, in writing, that *she* should break off their engagement. Out of a sense of honor, you see, Lincoln could not break the engagement himself. He told Mary that she would be unhappy, uncomfortable, and poor, if she came to Springfield to marry him. She would not fit in. Their match would cause her much physical and emotional distress. “You have not been accustomed to hardship,” he told her, “and it may be more severe than you now imagine.”[22] He ended his final letter to Mary, saying “I am willing, and even anxious to bind you faster, if I can be convinced that it will, in any considerable degree, add to your happiness.”[23] Mary rejected Abraham’s offer, and to Lincoln’s surprise he was devastated. The rejection led him to believe that he might have been in love with her after all.

Next, there was Mary Todd, who had come to town, from her home in Kentucky, to visit a cousin. Lincoln and Mary Todd spent much time together, and Mary Todd – a hugely ambitious woman who saw potential in Abraham’s career – did most of the courting. Abraham, 6’4”, and Mary Todd, 5’, differed in more than height. One neighbor remembered that the two “were not a congenial couple; their tastes were so different. . . .”[24] Herndon decided that they were polar opposites in “figure and physical proportions, in education, bearing, temperament, history – in everything.”[25] Ever indecisive in love, Lincoln himself came to believe that they were a poor match. They were, in his words, “not congenial, and were incompatible.”[26] He broke off their engagement, and was much humiliated for it.

After Mary Todd, Lincoln briefly courted two other women. First, there was 18-year-old Matilda Edwards – rumored to be a factor in Lincoln’s break from Mary Todd. Second, after he was rejected by Matilda, he proposed to yet another woman – sixteen-year-old Sarah Rickard – who rejected his offer, in her words, because “his peculiar manner and his General department would not be likely to fascinate a young girl just entering the society world.”[27] As we know, Lincoln eventually returned to Mary Todd and married her, ending his tumultuous series of love affairs. The two, however, did not live happily ever after. Mary Todd also had a history of mental illness in her lineage, and she would eventually be institutionalized after she survived her husband and three of their four sons – all of whom died in childhood.

Through Lincoln’s trials, he had two severe emotional collapses that give us a glimpse into just how profound his depression was. One of them occurred in the fall of 1835, after the death of Ann Rutledge, and the other in January 1841, after his separation from Mary Todd, and at a time when his political career appeared to be in shambles, and his best and closest friend – Joshua Speed – was moving back to his parents’ home in Kentucky. In both instances, friends feared that Lincoln had lost his mind forever, and that he might commit suicide. Several later recalled hiding his razor blades and knives for this reason, and, in fact, a poem glorifying suicide appeared in a local paper and is widely attributed to Lincoln today. In both instances, Lincoln required considerable help from friends – and even from medical doctors – before he could recover. According to historian Michael Burlingame, Lincoln likely underwent many of the “customary procedures” of that time, including a “painful regimen of bleeding, leeching, the application of heated cups to the temples, mustard rubs, foul-tasting medicines, and cold-water baths.”[28] He made a public spectacle of himself, breaking down, crying, and talking of suicide. “For not giving you a general summary of news you *must* pardon me,” Lincoln wrote to his law partner in the midst of his second collapse,

it is not in my power to do so. I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth. Whether I shall ever be better I can not tell; I awfully forbode I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible; I must die or be better. . . .[29]

Lincoln wrote this letter a month before his thirty-second birthday, twenty years before he took the oath of office as president.

If a determination to overcome depression was Lincoln’s call to adventure, and his road of trials included the deaths of numerous loved ones, poor relations with his father, a miserable love life, and two emotional collapses, then the boon that Lincoln brought back from his journey was an ambition to make the world a better place. Lincoln wielded two powerful weapons against his depression: his sense of humor and his passion for learning. (I will explore these further in a talk I’m giving tomorrow.) But perhaps his strongest weapon was his overweening ambition. During his 1841 emotional collapse, Lincoln declared to Speed, that he “would be more than willing to die,” but “I have an irrepressible desire to live till I can be assured that the world is a little better for my having lived in it.”[30] He wanted to connect himself with the great “events transpiring in his generation,” according to Speed, and to “so impress himself upon them as to link his name with something that would redound to the interest

of his fellow man.”[31] Lincoln’s first hero’s journey, through the depths of his soul, awakened his ambition to change the world.

Hero’s Journey II: Lincoln’s Rise

Now, this ambition was a tall order for a boy born into a one-room, sixteen by eighteen foot, log cabin, with dirt floors and no glass windows. [32] Lincoln’s poverty was not uncharacteristic of the American frontier in that day, but his rise was singular and stunning. Lincoln’s philosophy of economics and opportunity combined elements of Thomas Jefferson’s vision for America and Alexander Hamilton’s (and I will explore this in greater depth during my talk tomorrow.) But Lincoln did not come to his philosophy by studying these men. He came to it through his own lived experience, through his own trials and achievements, through his second hero’s journey.

Lincoln was born into the America that Jefferson had envisioned. His father, Thomas Lincoln, was an independent farmer, who moved his family from Kentucky to Indiana to Illinois in pursuit of more fruitful lands. Lincoln labored hard on his father’s property, clearing wooded areas, “farming, grubbing, hoeing, [and] making fences.” As Thomas’s health declined, he came to depend more and more on young Abraham’s labor, even hiring him out to neighbors at times to earn extra money.[33] However, Abraham despised his physical labors, much preferring, in Shenk’s words, the “mental labor that the market economy would make abundant.”[34] Lincoln later wrote scornfully about his father, who “grew up, literally without education,” and “never did more in the way of writing than to bunglingly sign his own name.”[35] “The usual hero adventure begins with someone,” said Joseph Campbell, “who feels there’s something lacking in the normal experiences available or permitted to the members of his society.” “This person then takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary,” Campbell continues, “to discover some life-giving elixir.”[36] Lincoln’s determination to leave his father’s world, and to “discover some life-giving elixir” in Alexander Hamilton’s world of bustling urban pursuits, was his second call to adventure.

In this journey, Lincoln would again confront a long road of trials. First, he was tried by the lack of educational opportunities on the frontier. Lincoln obtained, in his lifetime, some eighteen months of formal education. During these eighteen months, spread across several years, he outpaced his peers. “Lincoln outshone his schoolmates,” writes historian Michael Burlingame,

He arrived at school early, paid close attention to his studies, read and reread his assignments, never wasted time, made swift progress, and always stood at the head of his class. As [his cousin] John Hanks observed, he “worked his way by toil; to learn was hard for him, but he worked slowly [and] Surely.”[37]

His success in eighteen months of school, however, would not compare to the success of many peers in the state legislature, the United States Congress, or even in his own cabinet. Among his Illinois colleagues in the Thirtieth Congress, for example, were graduates of Hamilton College, Union College, Transylvania University, and Dartmouth.[38] His cabinet included graduates of Kenyon College, Dartmouth, Norwich University, Union College, and the U.S. Military Academy. In his famously brief autobiography, provided for the 1858 *Dictionary of Congress*, Lincoln stated tersely: “Education defective.”[39]

Yet, Lincoln toiled at his personal studies, from an early age, working to master grammar, writing, and mathematics. According to his family members, he was “a Constant ... Stubborn reader,” who would “read all the books he could lay his hands on.”[40] “He read diligently – studied in the day time ... went to bed Early – got up Early and then read.”[41] Lincoln later told a friend, “he had got hold of and read through every book he ever heard of in that country for a circuit of about fifty miles.”[42] He read the Bible, *Aesop’s Fables*, Shakespeare, Bunyan, Burns, Defoe, Byron, Poe, and practical books about spelling, grammar, mathematics, and history. According to his stepmother,

when he came across a passage that Struck him he would write it down on boards if he had no paper & keep it there till he did get paper – then he would re-write – look at it repeat it.... He ciphered on boards when he had no paper or no slate and when the board would get too black he would shave it off with a drawing knife and go on again....[43]

He read newspapers and letters for illiterate neighbors, stood before his boyhood peers to recite word for word stories or sermons he had heard, and he read political reports – primarily from National Republican journals that railed against Andrew Jackson’s democrats and favored Lincoln’s political hero Henry Clay.

He continued with great discipline into his adult life. In New Salem, he read for pleasure and for self-improvement. “After studying hard for two or three hours in the evening,” writes Burlingame, “[Lincoln] would relax with a volume of his poems.”[44] The result was a man, Jacques Barzun would later praise as a “literary genius;” a man who could write letters and speeches that were “destined to wide fame,” in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s words. “What pregnant definitions,” Emerson said about Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address and other utterances, “what unerring commonsense, what foresight, and on great occasions what lofty, and more than national, what human tone!”[45]

Despite his aggressive self-education, Lincoln faced a second trial: the limited number of economic opportunities offered by the frontier. His father, for example was in perpetual poverty: a constant struggle to survive. How was Lincoln to advance himself in the face of such limitations? The short answer is that Lincoln busied himself trying every opportunity that was available. In the course of ten years, writes David Herbert Donald, Lincoln “tried nearly every ... kind of work the frontier offered: carpenter, riverboat man, store clerk, soldier, merchant, postmaster, blacksmith, surveyor, lawyer, politician.”[46] He began by striking out from his father’s farm to help at house raisings and to sell firewood to steamers on the Ohio River.[47] He hired himself out to drive a riverboat, to kill hogs, to build and mend fences, and to plow.[48] Lincoln later recalled a particular occasion that encouraged his ambitions. He was hired by two men to row them out to a larger boat. He expected “a few bits” payment in return, but when they arrived at their destination the men paid him with two silver half dollars. “I could scarcely believe my eyes,” Lincoln later recalled. “Gentleman,

you may think it was a very little thing ... but it was a most important incident in my life. I could scarcely credit that I, a poor boy, had earned a dollar in less than a day.... The world seemed wider and fairer before me.[49]

Lincoln’s horizons expanded even further when he and a friend were hired by local storeowner James Gentry to drive a flatboat, stocked with goods, down river for sale in New Orleans. “New Orleans was by far the largest city the two country boys had ever seen,” recounts historian David Herbert Donald, “with imposing buildings, busy shops, and incessant traffic.”[50]

Lincoln got a more thorough education in commerce when, after a second trip to New Orleans, another storeowner, Denton Offutt, opened a new shop in New Salem, Illinois, for Lincoln to manage. Lincoln left his father’s home for good to accept the position, and eventually opened his own store in town. Lincoln was never successful in business, but it was in New Salem – a town of one hundred residents, a sawmill, a gristmill, and a half dozen or so private shops – that he first established himself independently. It was in New Salem that Lincoln gained confidence and the admiration of his peers. It was in New Salem that Lincoln first ran for political office – at first unsuccessfully – and engaged in an aggressive self-study of the law before qualifying for the Illinois bar. It was in New Salem that Lincoln first began to thrive.

Of course, law and politics eventually took Lincoln to the Illinois state capitol in Springfield. As a partner at Stuart & Lincoln, Lincoln & Lamon, and later Lincoln & Herndon, he became one of the best-known and most successful lawyers in the state. He was involved in more than five thousand cases in his twenty-three year legal career. He argued thousands before Illinois district and circuit courts, more than three hundred before the state Supreme Court, and better than seventy in federal courts. He argued criminal cases, most famously defending accused murderer William Armstrong. “Though it was eleven o’clock at night and [he] was standing 150 feet away,” Donald recounts, the key witness “claimed that he could see the attack clearly by the light of the nearly full moon shining directly overhead.”[51] Producing a *Farmer’s Almanac* during his cross-examination, Lincoln showed – to a court that roared with laughter – that at the time of the attack the moon had already set. Lincoln won acquittal and much praise for his ingenuity. He argued corporate cases, often representing railroad companies before the Illinois Supreme Court. His winning arguments earned him much notice – and high fees. His highest fee, in fact, was \$5 thousand from the Illinois Central Railroad – the modern day equivalent of about \$170 thousand. Most years Lincoln’s practice earned him about \$2,000, but he came to own real estate valued at \$5,000 and a personal estate of \$12,000.[52] This would be the equivalent, today, of a \$70 thousand income, \$170 thousand in real estate, and a \$400 thousand personal estate. By the time he left for Washington, Lincoln would have been a man of considerable wealth in 1850s Springfield. His was a stunning rise.

Wealth, however, was not enough to fulfill Lincoln's ambition. He desired reputation, position, and if he truly was going to make his mark on the world, he needed wider fame outside his home state. Making a name for himself, nationally, was a third trial. After four terms as a leading Whig in the Illinois legislature, Lincoln won election in 1846 to the United States House of Representatives. He took up cause, there, against Democratic President James Polk and against his Mexican War. He claimed that Polk was fighting a war strictly for military glory – "that attractive rainbow," in Lincoln's words, "that rises in showers of blood."^[53] Unfortunately for Lincoln, he gave his most high profile speech on the subject – one in which he demanded that the president identify the exact spot on the map where Mexico had invaded the U.S. and initiated the war – just one month before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the war and ceded present day California, Utah, Nevada, and parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado to the United States. Polk had won a tremendously popular victory, and Lincoln's first appearance on the national stage appeared to be an enormous embarrassment.

Lincoln left Congress in 1849, and it would be several years before he would again seek election to a national office as a result of a third call to adventure that we will explore in a moment. For now, it is worth noting that with his 1858 U.S. Senate race – and particularly his debates with Stephen Douglas, which were widely reprinted and consumed – Lincoln grew his national reputation. And from the fall of 1859 through Election Day 1860, Lincoln simply outworked his competitors for the Republican presidential nomination, giving high profile and widely reprinted speeches in Columbus and Cincinnati, Ohio; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; New York City, New York; and New Haven, Connecticut. While William Seward, Salmon Chase, and other leading rivals for the nomination chose to stay home, Lincoln's well-received speeches brought him ever-wider fame and reputation. Lincoln's second hero's journey, from the log cabin to the White House, equipped him with the wherewithal, the skill set, and the *position* to make good on his ambition to change the world.

Hero's Journey III: Lincoln and Emancipation

Now, immediately upon Lincoln's departure from Washington in 1849, began the political controversy that would inspire his return. It had been suspected by many in the north that Polk's war had been waged in the south – against Mexico – to open new states for slavery. "I am naturally anti-slavery," Lincoln would later say. "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I can not remember when I did not so think, and feel."^[54] New slave states would threaten Lincoln's long-standing hope – and the hope of many Americans going back to the founders – that "the monstrous injustice of slavery," as Lincoln called it, would slowly but surely disappear from the United States. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 fueled that hope by outlawing slavery above the Mason-Dixon line in the old Louisiana Territory. But now, if new slave states were opened in the West, in the lands acquired from Mexico, the domestic slave trade could again flourish, and the slave power could add to its numbers in Congress. Henry Clay struck a compromise, and Lincoln supported it, that attempted to end the controversy and save the union by bringing California in as a free state, while allowing popular sovereignty – or the will of the people – to decide whether the New Mexico and Utah Territories would be free or slave.

Lincoln now believed that the debate over extending slavery further was "settled forever," in his words. There was a good chance that free states would be carved out of the New Mexico Territory – since its climate was not ideal for cultivating cotton or tobacco – and Utah, surrounded by free states, would likely follow suit. However, Lincoln received his third call to adventure, in 1854, when Senator Stephen Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act repealed the Missouri Compromise, and reopened the Kansas and Nebraska Territories to the possibility of slavery. The two territories, consisting of modern day Kansas and Nebraska, much of Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado, and parts of North and South Dakota, would answer the slavery question through popular sovereignty. The people, stated Douglas's Act, were "perfectly free to form and regulate their domestic institutions in their own way."^[55] Lincoln objected on principle, and he feared a broader conspiracy to allow slavery in *any* and *every* state of the Union. "I hate it," Lincoln said of the Kansas-Nebraska Act,

because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world ... causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity, and especially because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty – criticizing the Declaration of Independence, and insisting that there is no right principle of action but self interest.^[56]

Stepping into the battle against the extension of slavery, Lincoln reentered politics and began a new journey.

Once again, Lincoln would confront a long road of trials. His first trial reminds us of a recurrent motif in world mythology: the slaying of the dragon, of the dark figure. "[O]n encountering the power of the dark," writes Campbell, "[the hero] may overcome and kill it..."^[57] Stephen Douglas was Lincoln's dragon, whom Lincoln sought to defeat in the 1858 senatorial campaign. Now, Douglas was not nearly so dark or ominous as a dragon. In fact, at 5'4", he stood a full foot shorter than Lincoln – this was not your typical David and Goliath. And, of course, the two were political opponents, not mortal enemies; neither was *actually* trying to kill the other.

Lincoln and Douglas had known each other going back twenty years. They had confronted each other in the Illinois Supreme Court, in the Illinois legislature, and even in the United States Congress. In fact, the two had already debated Kansas-Nebraska twice before. On October 3, 1854, Douglas returned to Springfield to give a speech in defense of his bill in the lower chamber of the state capitol. As the excited crowd filed out after Douglas's rousing speech, Lincoln stood at the stairway announcing loudly that he would return to the capitol the next day to respond. On the fourth, with Douglas himself seated in front, Lincoln railed against the bill and against slavery for three hours, the two bickering back and forth throughout. "No man," Lincoln declared, "is good enough to govern another man, *without that other's consent*. I say this is the leading principle – the sheet anchor of American Republicanism."^[58] They met again at Peoria later that month, even though Douglas was reluctant to debate against, in his words, "the most difficult and dangerous opponent that I have ever met."^[59]

In 1858, the two debated seven times in Illinois: at Ottawa, Freeport, Jonesboro, Charleston, Galesburg, Quincy, and Alton. Enormous crowds turned out for each confrontation, and newspaper coverage was widespread. In the high-profile debates, the two focused on laws and legal decisions governing slavery: the Northwest Ordinance, Missouri Compromise, Missouri Ordinance, Compromise of 1850, Kansas-Nebraska, Dred Scott. They distinguished between natural and human rights, Lincoln declaring to the chagrin of his admirers today, "I agree with Judge Douglas [the black man] is not my equal in many respects – certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment." "But in the right to eat the bread," Lincoln concluded, "without the leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man."^[60]

They debated the principle of slavery in moral terms, and in terms of republican governance. This is where Lincoln most excelled. "That is the real issue," said Lincoln at Alton,

That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles – right and wrong – throughout the world. They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time; and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings.

The founders "set up a standard maxim for free society," Lincoln said,

which should be familiar to all: constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even, though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people, of all colors, every where.^[61]

Lincoln turned famous words of his political hero, Henry Clay, against Douglas. "Judge Douglas is going back to the era of our Revolution," Lincoln said at Ottawa,

and ... muzzling the cannon which thunders its annual joyous return. When he invites any people willing to have slavery, to establish it, he is blowing out the moral lights around us. When he says, 'he cares not whether slavery is voted down or voted up,' ... he is ... penetrating the human soul and eradicating the light of reason and the love of liberty in this American people.^[62]

Lincoln, we know, did not slay his dragon in 1858; Douglas was returned to the Senate. However, in the course of the debates, Lincoln did cause

Douglas to utter his Freeport Doctrine, which turned popular sovereignty against the slave states. According to Douglas, regardless of what branches of the federal government had to say about it, the people could, “by lawful means, exclude slavery from their limits...”[63] This opinion would splinter the Democratic party when Douglas won its nomination for president in 1860, and once Lincoln won the Republican nomination, his victory over Douglas was all but assured.

Now, people often ask why Lincoln, once he took the oath of office as president, didn’t immediately emancipate the slaves and achieve his ambition. The short answer is that he did not have the constitutional power to do so unilaterally. The more complex answer is that two trials remained: Roger Taney’s Supreme Court, and the struggle – through the Civil War – to preserve the Union. First, Chief Justice Taney’s reprehensible *Dred Scott* opinion proved that he would defend the institution of slavery if at all possible. He would strike down any presidential proclamation that did not pass constitutional muster. To overcome Taney, then, Lincoln would have to accomplish emancipation through unquestionably constitutional means. This is why Lincoln favored an emancipation scheme that was gradual, compensated, and consensual. His plan, which he tried to implement in Delaware, “was to offer a federally financed compensation scheme to persuade the slave states themselves to abolish slavery by an act of their own legislatures.”[64] Taney could not object if the states themselves emancipated their slaves. Historian Allen Guelzo and others have also argued that this is why Lincoln overturned two emancipation schemes implemented by generals. He did not believe that they would hold up in court, and therefore he did not believe they accomplished permanent emancipation.

Furthermore, these schemes would harm Lincoln’s chances in the greatest trial of his life: the prosecution of the Civil War. More than is commonly recognized, the Border States – slave states that remained in the Union – were key to the defeat of the Confederacy. “One sharp jolt, one careless word, one idiot in newly made shoulder straps practicing ‘a little of the abolition system,’” writes Guelzo,

and the whole Border might fall over into Confederate hands, and that would be the end of it all, for Lincoln, the North, and the slaves. The Border states held the wheat, corn, meat, and manufacturing that the cotton-bloated South lacked; they accounted for more than a third of the white population in the South; and they controlled the great inland rivers – the Ohio, the Mississippi, the Potomac – that were the highways of the American economy.[65]

In other words, should Lincoln (or his generals) scare the border states into the hands of the confederacy, the war would soon be over, the Union broken, government of the people, by the people, and for the people would perish.

We know now that Lincoln decided on issuing the Emancipation Proclamation in the fall of 1862, before writing his now famous letter stating, “If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that.”[66] He chose the latter course. Using his power as commander-in-chief of the Army and Navy, Lincoln took the one decisive action that Roger Taney’s Supreme Court could not challenge and that would not rouse the Border States into rebellion; as a war measure he declared slaves in the *rebellious* states “thenceforward, and forever free.”[67] Only by the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, passed by Congress with Lincoln’s vigorous encouragement and approved by the states in December 1865, would all the slaves in all the states be forever free.

Of course, Lincoln did not live to see that day. Struck down by an assassin’s bullet, Lincoln completed his final hero’s journey the way heroes from around the world often do. “Many of them give their lives,” said Joseph Campbell.[68] “But then the myth also says that out of the given life comes new life”[69] “A legendary hero is usually the founder of something new,” Campbell continued, “the founder of a new age, the founder of a new religion, the founder of a new city, the founder of a new way of life.”[70] Lincoln knew what he was founding when he spoke at Gettysburg. “[T]hese dead shall not have died in vain,” he said there. “[T]his nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom...”[71] A new birth of freedom was accomplished, for a whole nation of people, by a depressed man born into poverty in the back woods of Kentucky. Two hundred years after his birth, it is important to remember what is heroic about Abraham Lincoln. By recalling *his* better angels, we may be able – when *our* trials come – to call upon the better angels of our *own* nature.

Thank you.

End Notes

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[3] Campbell, p. 151.

[4] Campbell, p. 44.

[5] Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 183.

[6] Joshua Wolf Shenk, *Lincoln’s Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), p. 13.

[7] Count S. Stakelberg, “Tolstoi Holds Lincoln the World’s Greatest Hero,” in *The Lincoln Anthology: Great Writers on His Life and Legacy, 1860 to Now*, ed. Harold Holzer (New York: The Library of America, 2009), p. 389.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Shenk, p. 4.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Abraham Lincoln to John T. Stuart, January 23, 1841, in *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: The Library of America, 1989), p. 68.

[13] Shenk, p. 13.

[14] Shenk, p. 14. (find original)

[15] David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 33.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 55.

[18] Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 56.

[19] Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 608.

[20] Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 68.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] *Ibid.*

- [23] Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 69.
- [24] Burlingame, p. 176.
- [25] *Ibid.*
- [26] Burlingame, p. 181.
- [27] Burlingame, p. 187.
- [28] Burlingame, p. 184.
- [29] Abraham Lincoln to John T. Stuart, January 23, 1841.
- [30] Burlingame, p. 183.
- [31] William Herndon, *Herndon's Life of Lincoln*, ed. Jessie W. Weik (New York: World Publishing Company, 1942), pp. 524-25.
- [32] Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 23
- [33] Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 32.
- [34] Shenk, p. 73.
- [35] Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 33.
- [36] Campbell, p. 152.
- [37] Burlingame, p. 34.
- [38] David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era* (3rd ed., New York: Vintage Books, 2001), p. 63.
- [39] Donald, *Reconsidered*, p. 63.
- [40] Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 67.
- [41] *Ibid.*
- [42] Burlingame, p. 34.
- [43] Burlingame, p. 34.
- [44] Burlingame, p. 64.
- [45] Paul F. Boller, *Presidential Anecdotes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 129.
- [46] Donald, *Reconsidered*, p. 38.
- [47] Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 34.
- [48] Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 34.
- [49] Shenk, p. 73.
- [50] Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 34.
- [51] Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 151.
- [52] Donald, *Lincoln*, pp. 151-52.
- [53] Abraham Lincoln, "Speech on the Mexican War," in *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858* (New York: The Library of America, 1989), p. 168.
- [54] Abraham Lincoln to Albert G. Hodges, April 4, 1864, in *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings: 1859-1865* (New York: The Library of America, 1989), p. 585.
- [55] Kansas-Nebraska Act
- [56] Abraham Lincoln, "Speech on Kansas-Nebraska Act," in *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858* (New York: The Library of America, 1989), p. 315.
- [57] Campbell, p. 183.
- [58] Lincoln, "Speech on Kansas-Nebraska Act," p. 328.
- [59] Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 178.
- [60] Abraham Lincoln, "Sixth Lincoln-Douglas Debate, Quincy, Illinois," in *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858* (New York: The Library of America, 1989), p. 734.
- [61] Abraham Lincoln, "Seventh Lincoln-Douglas Debate, Alton, Illinois," in *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858* (New York: The Library of America, 1989), p. 794.
- [62] Abraham Lincoln, "First Lincoln-Douglas Debate, Ottawa, Illinois," in *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858* (New York: The Library of America, 1989), p. 527.
- [63] Abraham Lincoln, "Second Lincoln-Douglas Debate, Freeport, Illinois," in *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858* (New York: The Library of America, 1989), p. 551.
- [64] Allen Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), p. 60.
- [65] Guelzo, p. 34.
- [66] Abraham Lincoln to Horace Greely, August 22, 1862, in *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings: 1859-1865* (New York: The Library of America, 1989), p. 358.
- [67] Abraham Lincoln, "Final Emancipation Proclamation," in *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings: 1859-1865* (New York: The Library of America, 1989), p. 424.
- [68] Campbell, p. 165.

[69] *Ibid.*

[70] Campbell, pp. 165-67.

[71] Abraham Lincoln, "Address at Gettysburg," in *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings: 1849-1865* (New York: The Library of America, 1989), p. 536.

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