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Lincoln's Fame

The Endurance of an International Icon

By James McPherson

Far and away the individual that Americans and non-Americans alike identify with the Civil War is, of course, Abraham Lincoln. That wasn't necessarily true during the war itself when Lincoln was more ridiculed than admired abroad, but his martyrdom by assassination at the moment of victory elevated him quickly to a sort of secular sainthood. In fact, that was precisely what Leo Tolstoy called Lincoln on the centenary of Lincoln's birth in 1909: "A Christ in miniature, a saint of humanity."

Tolstoy also recounted a story that showed the reach of Lincoln's faith. When traveling in the Caucasus on one occasion, Tolstoy met a Muslim chief who described Lincoln as a hero: "He spoke with a voice of thunder, he laughed like the sunrise, and his deeds were as strong as the rock."

These Christian and Islamic images of Lincoln as Christ and Lincoln as the rock were combined in an interesting fashion a half century later by the Hindu prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, who kept on his desk a bronze cast of Lincoln's hand and a gold statuette of Mahatma Gandhi.

"Lincoln's hand," said Nehru, "symbolized strength and unity, Gandhi symbolized compassion."

Of course the outstanding example occurred in 1959 on the sesquicentennial of his birth when a commemoration of that event took place in 90 countries all over the world, including, by the way, Afghanistan.

Seven million people in Britain watched a BBC special on Lincoln. Forty-five thousand people in West Berlin, including some who came over from East Berlin, visited a replica of the log cabin in which Lincoln was born. Five thousand West German high school students participated in an essay contest about Lincoln. The Federation of the West Indies also held a Lincoln essay contest which was won by a young man from Saint Kitts whose essay was read into the Congressional record, including, interestingly enough, this sentence: "Lincoln is loved and respected by people who have never seen America, people who will never see America, and people who do not wish to see America." The young author of this essay did not include which category he fit into.

In any event, for someone who never set foot outside the United States, Lincoln's international fame is extraordinary but in a way that is appropriate because Lincoln expressed better than anyone else the international significance of what he described in the Gettysburg address as a test in whether a nation "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," a government of, by, and for the people, could long endure or would perish from the earth.



James McPherson's talk was part of the center's "Lincoln Lecture Series."

James McPherson participated in the Hauenstein Center's 2001 Lincoln Lecture Series. The above text is excerpted from his lecture.