**Abraham Lincoln: The Great Campaigner**

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**Some consider politics a dirty word. But the 16th president was a master of political ruthlessness—for the sake of the highest ideals.**

The latest Lincoln boom—kicking off with the bicentennial of his birth in 2009 and the continuing sesquicentennial of the Civil War—shows no sign of abating. It may not even reach its apogee with the release immediately post-election of Steven Spielberg’s *Lincoln*, a biopic starring Daniel Day-Lewis in the title role. Spielberg, according to a source familiar with the production, has deliberately withheld the film until the current, divisive presidential campaign is over in order to prevent Lincoln from being seized upon to score political points.

But lifting Lincoln above the fray doesn’t remove him from politics. While the political Lincoln may be difficult for us to acknowledge at a time when politics and partisan commitments are widely denigrated, Lincoln’s presidency demonstrates that partisanship and political ruthlessness can be used to advance the highest ideals. And there were no clearer cases than during his 1864 battle for reelection (without which the slave-owning South would almost certainly have triumphed) and subsequent effort to pass the 13th Amendment, which at long last purged slavery from the Constitution. In the end, Lincoln became the master of events because he was the master of politics.

The mythology of Lincoln as too noble for politics began at the moment of his death, with his body sprawled across a small bed in a house across from Ford’s Theatre, where he was shot. At the president’s last breath, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton famously pronounced, “Now he belongs to the ages.” Every age since has invented its Lincoln. Martyred on Good Friday, Lincoln the Christ has rivaled Lincoln the Common Man and Lincoln the Idealist in America’s collective imagination.

The historical truth reveals one of the most astute professional politicians the country has produced. Many of Lincoln’s contemporaries viewed him as little more than a provincial hack—“a vulgar village politician,” as James Gordon Bennett’s *New York Herald* put it. But they learned not to underestimate his political abilities. “He was the deepest, the closest, the cutest, and the most ambitious man American politics has produced,” observed Gustavus Fox, his assistant secretary of the Navy. “Lincoln was a supreme politician,” wrote Charles A. Dana, his assistant secretary of War. “He understood politics because he understood human nature.”

The self-made man transformed himself through relentless political aspiration. In the words of his law partner William H. Herndon, “Politics were his Heaven, and his Hades metaphysics.” From his first day as a state legislator to his last as president, he was in the middle of the dealmaking, or what was then called “log-rolling.” Running for the legislature at the age of 23, he was unrelenting in his aspiration to higher office. “His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest,” said Herndon. Lincoln became the Whig floor leader in the Illinois Legislature at 27 and was the state’s leading Whig politician until he emerged as the unifying figure at the founding convention of the Illinois Republican Party in 1856.

Once he reached the White House, his survival and that of the nation depended on his political skill. Lincoln never believed that politicians were unsavory creatures he was compelled to associate with out of unfortunate necessity. He was not a plebeian saint who withheld himself from the give-and-take of the political game; neither did he feel it was a sordid distraction from his higher calling. He loved the relationships of politics—the fraternity, friendship, and humor. He badgered journalists for gossip they didn’t report. If politics was his Heaven, it was also his school. He entered every legislative chamber and saloon, every political gathering and social party, every backroom and courtroom as a potentially invaluable learning experience. He called them his “public opinion baths.” There was little he liked more, especially in the White House, than a late-night conversation with a group of politicians—except perhaps a night at the theater.

Lincoln knew from experience that great change required a thousand small political acts. Never did he apply his granular political skills more cleverly and effectively than during his reelection campaign and the fight to secure passage of the 13th Amendment. His feat was all the more remarkable for having been set in motion during what looked to be the nadir of his presidency, when his reelection seemed almost impossible.

“This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this administration will not be reelected,” Lincoln wrote to himself on Aug. 23, 1864. Then he devised a plan to win the war and save the Union during the imagined desperate months of transition to a new administration, since the new president “will have secured his election on such ground that he cannot possibly save it afterwards.” Alone in his office in the White House, Lincoln folded and glued his note describing the plan and called a cabinet meeting. There he brought out the mysterious piece of paper and instructed each cabinet secretary carefully to sign his name to its back, committing them to a future course of action he would not let them read.

If Lincoln lost the coming election, he expected the Confederacy would be recognized as a separate nation, the Emancipation Proclamation freeing its slaves rescinded, and the projected amendment to the Constitution to abolish slavery once and for all abandoned. Hundreds of thousands would have been killed and wounded as the price of defeat. Lincoln’s own personal losses since coming to Washington had been devastating enough. The first Union officer killed in the war, his Springfield law clerk Elmer Ellsworth, was shot through the heart after taking down a Confederate flag waving above an Alexandria, Va., tavern. “My boy! My boy!” Lincoln cried upon hearing the news. “Was it necessary this sacrifice should be made?” He insisted that Ellsworth’s body lay in state in the White House. A few months later, Lincoln’s best friend from Illinois, Sen. Edward Baker, was killed in the botched Battle of Ball’s Bluff. Then, in February 1862, Lincoln’s 11-year-old son, Willie, died of typhus. Mary Todd Lincoln sequestered herself in deepest mourning in the upper story of the White House for nearly a year.



Lincoln feared that if he lost the 1864 campaign, the South would triumph and slavery would endure. (Library of Congress via Getty Images)

Lincoln had begun his reelection year with high hopes of winning the war and enacting the 13th Amendment. In April the Senate voted in favor: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude ... shall exist within the United States ...” Though the House of Representatives fell short of the required two-thirds majority, Lincoln was not discouraged. His handling of the Emancipation Proclamation—waiting to announce it after a military victory, the Battle of Antietam—gave him a blueprint. He understood that he had to bring the public along through events to build momentum for change. He was playing a long game.

Lincoln believed that the abolition of slavery required a constitutional amendment and that the Proclamation was merely a temporary measure justified by military necessity. The Constitution enshrined slavery, and the Supreme Court had upheld it long before the infamous *Dred Scott* decision of 1857 that ruled that blacks were “so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” At the convention that nominated him as a candidate for a second term, in June 1864, Lincoln operated behind the scenes, instructing that the 13th Amendment be the subject of the keynote address and be treated as the “keystone” of the Republican Party platform.

But Lincoln knew that such efforts would come to nothing if he lost the election—and that he would likely lose if the war continued to go badly for the North. In Ulysses S. Grant, Lincoln had at last found the general in chief who would go on to win the war after a succession of arrogant, incompetent, and dilatory commanders. Yet within six bloody weeks, from May 5 to June 12, the Army suffered about 65,000 casualties, the equivalent today of about 880,000 killed and wounded. In a frontal assault on Confederate lines on June 2 at the Battle of Cold Harbor, more than 7,000 men, who had pinned their names on their backs expecting to be killed, fell in less than 10 minutes. Hospitals overflowed with the wounded. One nurse in the Washington hospitals, Walt Whitman, suffered a nervous breakdown. He described the triage in the wards: the “worst cases get little or no attention. We receive them here with their wounds full of worms ... Many of the amputations have to be done over again ... many of the poor afflicted young men are crazy ... it is perhaps a privilege that they are out of their senses.” “O years and graves!” Whitman wrote.

With the entire Army of the Potomac stalled in miles of trenches south of Richmond, Lincoln’s political advisers believed he was doomed. Running for reelection against former general George B. McClellan—the very man Lincoln had tapped to organize the Union Army in 1861 and whose indecisiveness had led to a string of bloody defeats for the North during the crucial opening months of the war—Lincoln was beset on all sides. Peace Democrats, who gained effective control of the party at the convention, assailed him as a military despot, enemy of liberty, and violator of the Constitution—and demanded an immediate end to the war and recognition of the Confederacy. From the opposite end of the spectrum, many abolitionists and Radical Republicans, scorning Lincoln as an equivocating politician, created a third party. “I would cut off both hands before doing anything to aid Abraham Lincoln’s election,” declared the prominent abolitionist Wendell Phillips.

The Democrats ran on two issues: the war’s failure—and racial-sexual panic. They coined a scary new pseudo-scientific word to describe Lincoln’s supposed hidden agenda of race mixing: miscegenation. “Miscegenation Endorsed by the Republican Party,” screamed a pamphlet published by the Democratic Central Campaign Committee. *The New York World*, the leading Democratic newspaper in the country and one that was strongly behind McClellan’s campaign, published a sensational story of a fabricated event, “The Miscegenation Ball,” complete with an illustration of “colored belles” shimmying with Republicans and Union officers at the Lincoln Club. Perhaps the most popular piece of campaign literature was entitled “Abraham Africanus I; His Secret Life Revealed Under the Mesmeric Influence; Mysteries of the White House,” featuring his dialogues with Satan.

“Victory Certain” ran the banner headline across the *New York World* on the morning of Sept. 5. McClellan, with characteristic slowness, was in the fifth day of drafting his letter of acceptance to the Democratic convention that had nominated him on a platform declaring the war “a failure.” The public was unaware of a dispatch that had been received by the War Department. Sent by William Tecumseh Sherman, the man Grant had named general of the Army of the West, the telegram declared, “So Atlanta is ours, and fairly won.” It was the first news of the Battle of Atlanta—the fiery cataclysm later depicted in *Gone With the Wind*—and a decisive victory that marked the turning of the tide.

From the instant that Sherman’s triumph became known, the chances of Lincoln’s reelection dramatically improved. Lincoln himself did everything he could to ensure it. He purged his cabinet of disruptive figures, quelled third-party agitation, and worked to settle down his party. While his generals maneuvered armies, he mobilized his political troops. Under Lincoln’s direction, *The New York Times* founding editor Henry Jarvis Raymond, who was also the Republican National Committee chairman, dunned campaign contributions from every federal employee, contractor, and newspaper editor who received advertising from the government. The country was soon flooded with millions of pieces of pro-Lincoln propaganda cranked out by the Union League and the Loyal League. Behind the scenes Lincoln micromanaged the campaign, personally intervening to stymie potential challengers to supportive congressional candidates and advising state officials on tactics. When he heard that postmasters in Philadelphia and Chicago were deploying employees against incumbent congressmen who were his allies, he issued written orders calling on them to cease and desist.

Lincoln won resoundingly. A week after his victory, the president convened a cabinet meeting and unfurled the folded note that he had made his cabinet secretaries sign the previous August. Lincoln read it aloud, sharing his plan, in the event of a loss at the ballot box, to encourage a victorious McClellan to prosecute and win the war during the final lame-duck months of Lincoln’s presidency. Secretary of State William H. Seward spoke up, one politico to another: “And the General would answer you, ‘Yes, yes,’ and the next day when you saw him again and pressed these views upon him, he would say, ‘Yes, yes,’ and so on forever, and would have done nothing at all.”

With his contingency plan rendered superfluous by the outcome of the election, Lincoln now made it clear that he intended to use his victory to work for congressional passage of the 13th Amendment. The outcome of this culminating act in the greatest crisis in the nation’s history would depend upon the president’s political leadership.

For early help in executing his strategy, Lincoln turned to Charles A. Dana, a former journalist who the president and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton often deployed as their personal ears and eyes at the front—and for discreet political missions. Now, maneuvering to admit Nevada to the Union to guarantee a three-quarters majority of the states required for ratification of the amendment, Lincoln called on him again. “Dana,” said Lincoln, “I am very anxious about this vote. It has got to be taken next week. The time is very short. It is going to be a great deal closer than I wish it was.”

According to Dana, Lincoln “mentioned three particular congressmen who might be susceptible to persuasion.” “What will they be likely to want?” Dana asked. “I don’t know,” said Lincoln. “It makes no difference, though ... [W]hatever promise you make to them I will perform.”

Two of the congressmen asked to be appointed internal revenue collectors, while the other sought an appointment at the New York Custom House. In return for being granted these favors, all three threw their weight behind the amendment. “I have always felt,” wrote Dana, “that this little piece of side politics was one of the most judicious, humane, and wise uses of executive authority that I have ever assisted in or witnessed.”

By January 1865 the effort to pass the amendment in the House was floundering, with the measure falling 14 votes short. The congressman in charge of the vote, James Mitchell Ashley of Ohio, was the moralizing son of a minister. “You must help us one vote,” Ashley begged Lincoln. “Don’t you know of a sinner in the opposition who is on praying ground?”

Lincoln knew that to abolish slavery once and for all, more worldly means than prayer would be required. Congressman James S. Rollins, one of the largest slave owners in Missouri and an adamant opponent of the Emancipation Proclamation, was sitting at his desk on the floor of the House when he received an invitation from Lincoln, written in pencil. “Rollins,” he said, “I have been wanting to talk to you for some time about the 13th Amendment.” When Rollins arrived at the White House, Lincoln waxed nostalgic about old political times before beginning his pitch for the amendment. Rollins replied that he had decided to vote for it immediately after the election result. Lincoln wasted no time, running down a list of undecided congressmen from Missouri and assigning Rollins the task of persuading them to join their side. “Tell them of my anxiety,” he said. To provide an incentive, Lincoln kept vacant a federal judgeship in Missouri, whose appointment would be influenced by one of those voting in favor of the amendment.

The list of political favors paid out didn’t end there. Congressman Alexander Coffroth, a Pennsylvania Democrat, had won reelection so narrowly that Republicans were challenging the outcome. But opposition to Coffroth taking his seat miraculously disappeared as soon as he voted in favor of the amendment. Shortly after Democratic Congressman Moses Odell of New York came out in favor of the amendment, Lincoln named him the new naval agent for his home state. Congressman George Yeaman of Kentucky, who had introduced a resolution denouncing the Emancipation Proclamation as “an assumption of power dangerous to the rights of citizens,” announced his support for the amendment and was soon appointed minister to Denmark.

The formal debate lasted almost three weeks, with the final vote scheduled for Jan. 31. “The galleries, corridors, and lobbies were crowded to the doors, and the reporters’ gallery was invaded by a mob of well-dressed women, who for a time usurped the place of the newspaper men,” reported Noah Brooks. Five Supreme Court justices marched onto the floor to observe, led by the newly appointed Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase, Lincoln’s former secretary of the Treasury, a political rival who had tried to deny him a second nomination but whom Lincoln named to the court as an unbending abolitionist to sustain the amendment. Dozens of senators and members of the cabinet filled the chamber. Every Republican voted for the measure, 16 Democrats (five from New York), with eight Democrats strangely -absent—two votes more than the two-thirds majority needed. “Then,” wrote an observer, “there was an explosion, a storm of cheers, the like of which probably no Congress of the United States ever heard before. Strong men embraced each other with tears. The galleries and aisles were bristling with standing, cheering crowds.”

The next night revelers serenaded Lincoln at the White House, drawing him out onto the portico to speak. “This amendment,” he said, “is a King’s cure for all the evils. It winds the whole thing up.” He noted that Illinois had already ratified the amendment. “I feel proud that Illinois is a little ahead.” Lincoln was so buoyant that he signed the document, which required no presidential signature, in a gesture of enthusiasm: “Approved. February 1, 1865. A. Lincoln.”

At a packed Boston Music Hall four days later, the venerable William Lloyd Garrison joined in a celebration of the amendment’s passage. Mounting the stage, the founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society, who had once burned the Constitution as a “pact with the Devil” and proclaimed participation in American politics “sinful,” hailed the redeeming moment. “To whom is the country more immediately indebted for this vital and saving amendment of the Constitution than, perhaps, to any other man?” he asked the crowd of New England abolitionists. “I believe I may confidently answer—to the humble railsplitter of Illinois—to presidential chainbreaker for millions of the oppressed—to Abraham Lincoln!”

“The greatest measure of the nineteenth century,” Thaddeus Stevens, the Radical Republican congressman of Pennsylvania confided to a friend, “was passed by corruption, aided and abetted by the purest man in America.”

Two months later, on the night of April 11, the buildings of Washington were illuminated. At the War Department, gas jets lit up the huge letters, “GRANT,” and above that “PEACE.” It was two days after Lee’s surrender at Appomattox. Thousands gathered at the White House, where Lincoln appeared on a balcony, quieting the throng with an unexpectedly complex talk on Reconstruction. He was already thinking about what would follow emancipation. It was not enough that the slaves be freed. He proposed they become citizens. Now, in what was sure to be merely a first step, he suggested voting rights for the “very intelligent” and “soldiers.” As Lincoln saw it, achieving Reconstruction of the bitterly divided nation would call for political acumen, charting “point to point” like a riverboat pilot, as he confided to a congressional leader.

Listening intently to the president’s speech was the renowned actor John Wilkes Booth. When he heard Lincoln endorse enfranchising blacks, he turned to his co-conspirator Lewis Powell and told him to shoot the president as he stood in the window. Powell refused. Afterward, Booth and Powell paced around Lafayette Square across from the White House. “That means nig--r citizenship,” said Booth. “Now, by God, I’ll put him through. That is the last speech he will ever make.”

*Sidney Blumenthal, journalist, author, historian, and former senior adviser to President Clinton, is completing a book titled The Man Who Became Abraham Lincoln: How He Won the Civil War and Was Assassinated .*