



HONEST ABE: ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE MORAL CHARACTER

by Daniel Walker Howe

No story in American history has captured the popular imagination better than that of Abraham Lincoln's youth. A poor boy growing up in what was then a remote area, enduring the tragic death of his mother at an early age, confronting but not the realization that he had no inclination to become a farmer like his father. Abe was a thoughtful boy, independent but not rebellious, tall and strong but not a bully, sensitive but not a sissy. We like the story of a poor boy who made good. But I wonder how much longer his story will seem comprehensible to young Americans. The means by which he achieved his goals may seem foreign to twenty-first century Americans. Lincoln did not get ahead by going to the right schools, or by cultivating the right patrons, by achieving high standardized test scores, or by seizing upon a popular fad. He did not seek celebrity. What is more, not only the means but even the end itself of Lincoln's quest for self-realization may not be readily comprehensible to us anymore.¹

Lincoln and his contemporaries lived in a world where, since time immemorial, boys had followed in their fathers' footsteps and pursued their fathers' occupational calling. America's open society brought the new opportunity for boys to leave home--often their father's farm--and seek to find themselves, as Abraham Lincoln left Thomas Lincoln's farm and pursued a vocation more in line with his own inclinations and talents. The revolutions in transportation, commerce, and industry that the United States underwent during the nineteenth century multiplied the occupational options available. Girls as well as boys began to have the chance to leave home, earn their own money, and enjoy a kind of personal independence they did not have in their fathers' households--at least until the women married and became part of their husbands' households. All this was exciting to the young people of Abraham Lincoln's generation, as the historian Joyce Appleby records in her wonderful book, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans*.² What made it so exciting was not simply that young people had a wider variety of economic opportunities, but that they could choose what kind of person they wanted to be, and then, through conscious, serious effort, make themselves into that person they had chosen.

Abraham Lincoln was a self-made man in a way that we no longer use the term "self-made." When we use it, we usually have in mind a businessperson, and we use it to mean they have achieved upward social mobility, specifically in financial terms. If we go back to Lincoln's time, we find the term "self-made" used in a different, much more comprehensive way, one that does not exclude success in business, but is by no means restricted to it. Lincoln's idol Henry Clay seems to have invented the expression "self-made man."³ What Clay and his contemporaries meant by self-made was not the same thing as upward social mobility, nor was it confined to monetary rewards. What they had in mind was a self-conscious development of one's human potential. In 1858 Charles Seymour wrote a collection of biographical sketches entitled *Self-Made Men*. Of his sixty subjects, very few were newly rich entrepreneurs. Instead, most of them were scientists, inventors, and statesmen. They represented the kind of individuals, Seymour believed, who were making the world anew during the era of industrial revolution, geographical expansion, and knowledge explosion. (If we use the term "American Victorian" to characterize this age, it reminds us that its expansionism and dynamism were transatlantic.) For the characters in Seymour's book, the creation of their own identities had been the first step in their energetic innovation and constructive accomplishments. They had been able to remake their world because they had first made themselves.⁴ Abraham Lincoln was such a person.

Better remembered than Seymour as an author is Horatio Alger, Jr. Where Seymour wrote biographies of real people, Alger wrote inspirational fiction about poor boys who made good. Reading Alger's stories today, we are struck by the element of

¹ The present concept of the "self-made man" has almost nothing to do with that held by Lincoln's generation, if one can judge by a study of its contemporary literary and popular uses: James Catano, *Ragged Dicks: Masculinity, Steel, and the Rhetoric of the Self-Made Man* (Carbondale, Ill., 2001).

² (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

³ William Craigie and James Hurlburt, *A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles* (Chicago, 1938-44), IV, 2065; Henry Clay, "The American System" (1832), *Works*, ed. Calvin Colton (New York, 1904), VII, 464.

⁴ Charles Seymour, *Self-Made Men* (New York, 1858). I have addressed this subject in *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), esp. 136-41.

luck that seems to come into play: Ragged Dick saves a little boy from drowning, and the child turns out to be the son of a wealthy man who gives Dick a good job. But these turns of fortune are not what the stories are really about. They are really about the protagonist's formation of character and self-discipline. This is why young people read the stories for generations--until comparatively recently. The moral of Alger's stories is that if you make yourself into the right kind of person, you will be prepared for the luck when it comes. If Ragged Dick hadn't disciplined himself to be alert and courageous, he wouldn't have jumped in when the little boy fell off the riverboat.⁵ Abraham Lincoln's life told a similar story, if not one with a climactic single moment of moral trial. Like Horatio Alger, Lincoln determined to prepare himself for the right moment when it came along.

With no formal schooling available to him, the young Lincoln set out to shape his own character. Without the visual media of today, Lincoln developed himself through reading. Conscious as he was of the limitations of his rural environment, he might have read for escape--but he did not. Instead he read for discipline. He read not only to learn what others had thought and said, but to find out how they did it: he read in order to learn how to think and speak and act for himself. Accordingly, he read classic accounts of individual struggle: *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. He sought out books about thinking--books about geometry and grammar and the hard conundrums of free will and determinism. He read the same few books over and over, making a virtue of necessity, of course. This way, he absorbed their lessons into his very being.⁶

Lincoln's contemporary Ralph Waldo Emerson lived in America's cultural heartland, not on a still-primitive frontier. In metropolitan Boston, in the college town of Cambridge, and within the intellectual community of Concord, Emerson preached the virtues of "self-reliance." He said that we readers should treat books as provocation for our own thinking. He called for the emergence of independent thinkers and actors, for what he called "the American scholar." No better example existed for Emerson's ideal American scholar than Abraham Lincoln. After the Civil War, Emerson could have added a postscript on Lincoln to his book *Representative Men* (published in 1850) with perfect appropriateness. Indeed, Lincoln would have illustrated the self-reliant democratic leader far better than the example Emerson actually chose, Napoleon Bonaparte.⁷ When Emerson came to Springfield to give a set of lectures in 1853, Lincoln was in town, not away attending to his duties on the legal circuit. He probably heard Emerson speak on the subject of "Power" in the Old Illinois Capitol building before attending a dinner given there by the women of the First Presbyterian Church, who included his wife, Mary. Lincoln might also have heard the other two lectures Emerson gave during his stay.⁸ By this time, of course, Lincoln's own views on reading, self-reliance, and self-realization had already been formed and acted upon.

Without having to read Emerson, Lincoln put into practice the philosophy that Emerson propounded. Among Emerson's circle of friends this practice was known as "self-culture." The person who was probably Emerson's best friend, Margaret Fuller, applied the same principle to women, making use of group "conversations" with other women to bring them to a consciousness of their own potential. Countless kids on the frontier, or in city slums, have encountered a blunt question: "Do you think you'll ever amount to anything?" Lincoln answered that challenge with more than just ambition. What he undertook was to engage in self-construction, in search of self-fulfillment.

Moral integrity occupied the core of the kind of person Lincoln made himself. Financial honesty represented one important aspect of this integrity. When his partner in a grocery business, William Berry, died in 1835, leaving behind serious debts, Lincoln worked long and hard to pay off not only his own share but Berry's as well, going beyond his legal obligation in doing so.⁹ Lincoln carried his financial honesty into his politics as well as his personal life. As a member of the state legislature, he worked hard to get the state capital moved to Springfield. As part of this campaign, he succeeded in getting the legislature to stipulate that whatever community became the capital must contribute \$50,000 toward the cost of the public buildings to be erected; Springfield could meet this requirement, but it would force some smaller towns out of the competition. The \$50,000 was payable in three installments, and the third one fell due after the Panic of 1837 had initiated a prolonged economic downturn. Stephen Douglas, the newly elected Register of the Land Office, had recently moved to Springfield, and proposed that Springfield find a way to repudiate its obligation and let the state shoulder more of the cost of the buildings. Lincoln objected: "We have the benefit," he is quoted as saying. "Let us stand to our obligation as men." Money to pay the third installment was borrowed from the State Bank of Illinois and paid off over an eight-year period by leading citizens of Springfield, including Lincoln himself. The liquidated promissory note for \$16,666.67 remained on display in a Springfield bank for many years.¹⁰

There was more to Lincoln's integrity than just *financial* honesty, however. As a lawyer, Lincoln combated, both in word and deed, his profession's reputation for dishonesty. Lincoln won his nickname "Honest Abe" (sometimes "Honest Old Abe," though he was only in his forties at the time) while practicing law in the circuit courts of Illinois during the 1850s. Colleagues ranked him "at the head of his profession in the state" in part because of their absolute confidence that he never told a lie. In

⁵ Horatio Alger, Jr., *Ragged Dick and Mark the Match Boy*, intro. by Rychard Fink (New York, 1961), 208-09.

⁶ See Richard Carwardine, *Lincoln* (London, 2003), 4-5.

⁷ On Emerson's use of Napoleon, see Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), 82-87.

⁸ Sunderine Temple and Wayne C. Temple, *Illinois' Fifth Capitol: The House that Lincoln Built and Caused to be Rebuilt* (Springfield, Ill., 1988), 117.

⁹ David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York, 1995), 54.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 64; Alonzo Rothschild, "*Honest Abe*": *A Study in Integrity* (Boston, 1917), 222-23.

his notes for a lecture on the law, Lincoln advised his audience to dismiss from their minds the “popular belief that lawyers are necessarily dishonest.” Honesty should be the top priority of the young when they selected an occupation. “Resolve to be honest at all events; and if, in your own judgment, you can not be an honest lawyer, resolve to be honest without being a lawyer. Choose some other occupation.”¹¹

There are many examples of Lincoln’s extraordinary intellectual honesty in his political career. One of my own favorites is a speech that he gave to an agricultural society in Wisconsin in 1859. At a time when politicians routinely praised the virtues of yeomen farmers, Lincoln quite candidly informed his audience that he would *not* “flatter” them by praising the peculiar virtue of their occupation. Instead, he told them in all honesty, on the average farmers “are neither better nor worse than other people.”¹²

Lincoln’s consistent honesty when dealing with the explosive subjects of slavery and its expansion into the western territories deserves extended analysis. For present purposes I shall instead discuss another of Lincoln’s speeches illustrating the high value he placed on honesty. This speech is very little known, despite its great interest both at the time of its delivery and today. It comes from his term in Congress as Representative from the Congressional District around Springfield. It was delivered on January 12, 1848, and it constitutes a rebuttal on behalf of the opposition to President James Knox Polk’s Annual Message to Congress of December 7, 1847. (Nowadays presidents deliver these messages in person, and we call them the state of the union addresses.)

President Polk, a Jacksonian Democrat, had devoted most of his message to defending his conduct of the war against Mexico. Polk repeated his insistence that Mexico had started the war by invading the United States and, as he put it in his war message to Congress, “shedding American blood on American soil.”¹³ Members of the Whig party, like Lincoln, did not accept this account. They pointed out that the area where fighting began, between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande, was in dispute between the two countries following the United States’ annexation of Texas. President Polk had sent an army, commanded by General Zachary Taylor, into the disputed area, and after repeated protests Mexico had sent an army of its own there too in response. The Mexican advance was neither unprovoked nor an unmistakable invasion of United States territory.

On December 22, when Lincoln had been in Washington only three weeks, he had assumed a leadership role among the new Whig majority in the House and had introduced a set of resolutions challenging Polk’s claim that the war began on U.S. soil. With the logical organization characteristic of him, this freshman Representative ticked off his points: The “spot” where the armed clash took place had been an acknowledged part of New Spain and Mexico since the Transcontinental Treaty of 1819, the local population recognized no allegiance to the United States and fled before Taylor’s approach, and the U.S. citizens whose blood the Mexicans shed were soldiers in an invading army. The House did not adopt Lincoln’s lucid “spot resolutions,” but on January 3 a party-line vote of 85-81 amended a resolution thanking General Taylor for his services with a statement that the war had been begun by President Polk “unnecessarily and unconstitutionally.”¹⁴ (Of course, the Democrat-controlled Senate did not agree with the amendment.) Lincoln’s “spot” resolutions are well known. His next speech against Polk’s war management is not. But it is interesting for its invocation of the principles of honesty and conscience.

On January 12, 1848, Lincoln took up where the “spot resolutions” had left off. The Texan people’s right of revolution, to declare their independence of Mexico and join the United States, extended only to areas where they enjoyed popular support, Lincoln argued. But the people in the area southwest of the Nueces River were Mexicans who wanted their homes to remain part of Mexico. Polk’s justification for war, Lincoln indignantly proclaimed, “is, from beginning to end, the sheerest deception.” A powerful condemnation, coming from Lincoln. Honesty was just as indispensable to the historical Lincoln as to the “Honest Abe” of popular mythology. Polk should “remember he sits where Washington sat,” and tell the *truth* about the origin of the war, as, of course, Washington was famous for always telling the truth. Lincoln declared: “As a nation *should* not, and the Almighty *will* not, be evaded, so let him attempt no evasion--no equivocation.” Addressing the president in tones worthy of the Prophet Nathan addressing King David, Lincoln declared that Polk *must* be “deeply conscious of being in the wrong”--that he must realize “the blood of this war, like the blood of Abel, is crying to Heaven against him.” Not having been truthful about the beginnings of the war or its objectives, Polk can provide no leadership regarding its ending. Lincoln’s manuscript of his speech reads:

It is a singular omission in this message, that it, no where intimates when the President expects the war to terminate. . . . [A]t the end of twenty months during which time our arms have given us the most splendid successes . . . this same President gives us a long message, without showing us, that *as to the end*, he himself, has, even an imaginary [sic] conception. . . . He is a bewildered, confounded, and miserably perplexed man.¹⁵

¹¹ Quoted in Donald, *Lincoln*, 149.

¹² “Address Before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin” (1859), *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy Basler (New Brunswick, N.J., 1953-55), III, 471-82.

¹³ James K. Polk, War Message to Congress, May 11, 1846; and Third Annual Message, December 7, 1847, in *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, ed. James D. Richardson (Washington, 1901), IV, 437-43; 532-64.

¹⁴ Abraham Lincoln, “Spot” Resolutions in the House of Representatives,” *Collected Works*, I, 420-22. *Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st sess., 95.

¹⁵ “The War with Mexico,” *Collected Works*, I, 431-42. See also Gabor Boritt, “Lincoln’s Opposition to the Mexican War,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 67 (1974), 79-100; and Mark Neely, “Lincoln and the Mexican War,” *Civil War History* 24 (1978), 5-24.

Lincoln does not interpret Polk as a wicked man. He interprets him as a confused man. Why is he confused? Because he does not listen to what his conscience tells him. Lincoln is confident that Polk's conscience is the same as his own; it demands truthfulness and honesty. Like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Lincoln believed in the universality of conscience. All our consciences are alike in content, Lincoln and Emerson agreed, but some are strong and some are weak. Conscience, like other powers, whether physical or mental, needs to be strengthened by practice. Polk had not habitually listened to his conscience and therefore now has difficulty finding and following its guidance.

The historian, alas! must agree with Lincoln about Polk's failures of conscience. As president, Polk betrayed the confidence of so many other politicians so many times that he became a byword for secrecy, double-dealing, and duplicity. For a long time Polk did not avow a plan for bringing the war to an end because he didn't want to admit that he was waging the war to conquer more territory--specifically, California. Eventually the truth came out indirectly, as knowledge of the purposes of the Polk administration generally did. In the end a faction of his own party, feeling misled and betrayed, rose in rebellion against his administration. Much to Polk's chagrin, the Whig candidate Zachary Taylor won the presidency in 1848.

The contrast between President Lincoln and President Polk is highly instructive. Despite his astonishing achievements in expanding the domain of the United States, Polk has never been a hero to the American public, never been a moral exemplar to schoolchildren. His material accomplishments have not been sufficient, in the absence of demonstrated moral integrity, to earn the coveted designation "Great President." Where Lincoln was known as "Honest Abe," James K. Polk's contemporaries nicknamed him "Polk the Mendacious."¹⁶

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¹⁶ Charles Sellers, *James K. Polk: Continentalist* (Princeton, 1966), addresses Polk's disingenuousness in many places; particularly relevant is the description of how his deception of Benton and other Democratic senators over Texas annexation led to self-deception: pp. 217-20.