

"Now He Belongs To The Ages"-- Lincoln's Convictions Offer an Eternal Creed
For a Troubled World (from The Fargo Forum, February 8, 1959)

(Editor's Note--Ever since that fatal scene at the Ford Theatre, the name of Abraham Lincoln--whose 150th birthday comes Feb. 12--has had an enduring hold on men's hearts and opinions. What is the secret of this vital influence? A noted American historian, twice a Pulitzer Prize winner, explores the mystery in a searching article, written for The Associated Press.)

By Allan Nevins
Copyright, 1959, by The Associated Press

It is 150 years since Abraham Lincoln opened his eyes in a one-windowed, dirt-floored cabin near Hodgenville, Kentucky; it is almost 94 years since Stanton broke the hush at his deathbed with the words, "Now he belongs to the ages."

No statesman ever grew more sturdily than Lincoln grew between 1854 and 1865; grew from a prairie politician to the beneficent dictator of a great nation in its most terrible crisis. No leader of modern times has grown more steadily in fame and world-wide influence since his death. He is like the mountain peak that at near view seemed little more than equal with its fellows, but that as we recede and gain perspective rises higher and higher above their level.

The self-taught railsplitter reached Washington relatively unknown and untested. He died so trusted that the once-skeptical New York diarist G. T. Strong wrote: "No prince, no leader of a people, was ever so lamented . . . his name is faithful and true. He will stand in history beside Washington, perhaps higher."

What is the deeper secret of the hold this son of the prairies has taken on the imagination of the world? More books, foreign and domestic, are written on him than on any other civil ruler of the past.

We would look in vain for the explanation merely in his principal public acts. He was the Great Emancipator, but he was a reluctant emancipator, who for all his intense desire to free the slaves would have preferred gradual compensated emancipation to an abrupt liberation. He was an unmatched war leader, but never a highly efficient administrator; two other wartime presidents, Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, showed more skill in organizing the energies of the nation.

He was a farsighted national chieftain, but never an astute planner with the many-sided talents of a Theodore Roosevelt. We reached a partial understanding of his grip on succeeding generations when we turn from his acts to examine two underlying traits, his sagacity and his magnanimity.

The sagacity with which he was always correctly credited did not lie in a simple grasp of what was expedient. It lay in his ability to pierce to the heart of a complex problem, where right and wrong seem inextricably mingled, with unerring logic. The supreme illustration of this wisdom is offered by his proposal for meeting the terrible national disease of slavery and sectional friction. From 1854 onward he preached that the nation could not endure half slave and half free; that a crisis must be reached and passed before it could be safe. He was our first statesman to define that crisis without evasion.

What did passing the crisis mean? Not a decision to abolish slavery immediately. No, simply a decision to put bounds around slavery, to contain it, accepting the principle that within a reasonable time it must be gradually erased; and meanwhile to sit down and calmly consider ways and reasons for erasing it. This was the one courageous, morally sound, and practical remedy ever proposed for the difficulties of racial readjustment,

economic revolution, and regional strife bound up in slavery. Its sagacity, had Americans adopted it, would have saved the country a million lives, a mountain of treasure, and a grievous retardation of growth.

His magnanimity, innate and unfailing, matched his sagacity. In the course of a long, bitter war he never once uttered an abusive word about the Southern people. Throughout that war he maintained his hope that it should end in no mere political reunion, but a reunion of hearts and purposes.

Lincoln's greatest qualities, however, lay deeper than sagacity and magnanimity. One was his passionate faith in the virtue and strength of the plain people. God must have loved them, he said, or he would never have made so many of them.

Out of his passionate regard for common folk came his unerring instinct for popular sentiment; he knew just how far and fast he could go in leading the country without losing touch with the majority. Out of it came his consistent refusal to talk down to the people or appeal to their passions. As Lowell said, he never played the Cleon--the demagogue.

Instead, he presented the people with careful arguments, addressed to their reason and their best sentiments. "I beg of you a calm and enlarged consideration of them," he said of one set of reasons. This instinct for the popular heart made his most memorable public act, the Emancipation Proclamation, seem to good judges just right.

And out of his deep feeling for popular government was born Lincoln's crowning quality: his vision of the larger meaning of the grim struggle he had to conduct. It was not just a war to determine whether the Union should survive or perish. It was an ordeal to determine whether democracy had sufficient strength to survive, whether America would replay the devotion of the hosts who died for it by seeking "a new birth of freedom," and whether the Republic would serve the future of mankind. From the Bible, from Shakespeare, from long reflection, Lincoln had gained an understanding of the meaning of history. He knew that whatever is done in one part of the globe affects the lot of peoples in other parts. He knew that the adventure of mankind has but begun, and that the course chosen by a continental power like the United States must have its influence on the long ages to come.

The truest tribute the American people can pay Lincoln on every celebration of his birthday is to try to share his earnest conviction that the Republic has a great world destiny; that in every crisis men must do their duty not for the country alone but for all countries, and not for the hour only, but for the long generations ahead.