

## IF LINCOLN HAD LIVED

*By Lloyd Lewis*

In congratulating Mr. Raney and the University of Chicago upon the acquisition of these collections of Lincolniana, it should be emphasized that data on Abraham Lincoln belong in a great university such as this. For it is the province of a university to relate the present to the past, and the easiest, most interesting and natural way to relate modern youth to the vanished agrarian era of American history is to focus upon the outstanding figure of that era, Mr. Lincoln.

And tonight, it occurred to me that there could be some conjecturing done as to the course of American life if Mr. John Wilkes Booth had not gone to the theater on the night of April 14, 1865.

Suppose, if you will, that Mr. Lincoln had not been murdered at all, and had

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lived out his allotted span of life—or at least his second term in the Presidency.

One reason for considering this, is that it has been considered so often. Many articles, and at least one drama, have been written on the subject—and so far as I know all have agreed that Mr. Lincoln, unmurdered, would have gone on in his second term straight down hill into impeachment and political disaster. It is apparently generally believed that Mr. Lincoln would have met the identical fate of his successor, Andrew Johnson, in attempting to shape the aftermath of the Civil War into something sensible, tolerant, and fair to the conquered South.

It is pointed out that Andrew Johnson was Lincoln's political heir and was practically crucified. And it is argued that the forces of vengeance were too strong for any honest, decent executive to have done anything but to go down to exhausted political defeat.

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You will hear this folk-feeling come out again and again in the sayings, "Lincoln died just in time" or "Lincoln dead is greater than Lincoln alive."

All this is part of the great American error of overemphasizing Lincoln's goodness of heart and underestimating his mentality. And all this, boiled down, is quite ridiculous because it is based on the assumption that what happened in 1865 and 66 to one of the most obtuse, stubborn, and blundering of all statesmen—Andy Johnson, must necessarily have happened to perhaps the most resourceful, sagacious, and diplomatic politician that America has ever produced.

This religio-romantic viewpoint furthermore declares that Mr. Lincoln was a great war President, but was too good, too soft hearted, too innocent to be a great peace time president. It admits he was more than a match for Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee, but could

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not have hoped to match himself against Charles Sumner, Thad Stevens, and Ben Wade, those Radical enemies of his inside the Republican party.

Nine-tenths of this sentimental belief is, I think, due to the discoloration of his character by the deification given him by—and since—his most dramatic murder. The fact that Lincoln was shot at an incredibly spectacular moment in the life of the nation, has thrown him into mythology.

In the first place, if we are ever to be realistic about Mr. Lincoln we must recognize that he was not fitted by nature or temperament to be a maker of war. His mind worked slowly; a general's mind must work rapidly. He was sympathetic, where a great war maker must be deaf to suffering and blind to death. As a young man, Lincoln quelled neighborhood fights, as a lawyer he kept himself poor by coaxing clients to settle cases out of court. As a husband he

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could gentle one of the most scolding wives any man ever had. As a political campaigner, he was unique in avoiding the customary personalities and revilements of his day. He was a born peace maker. He was the first easy boss of the Republican party.

It must be remembered that he never could make war aggressively. For the first three years of the Civil War he attempted to do much actual generalship from the Executive Mansion. For three years he was, to all intents and purposes, a practising commander-in-chief. And, as such, he was not able to stir or fire his field marshals to the remorseless, predatory violence that means victory.

Then, out in the West, largely remote from Administration control, there rose a great war maker, a slugger, a genius at relentless, remorseless campaigns. Ulysses S. Grant had won a succession of victories, partly because he was so far

away from Washington that he could do as he pleased. So, Lincoln brought him East, and gave him the armies, gave him what amounted to full direction in the field. Lincoln quit trying to be a war maker, and, in substance, retired to the business he understood, statecraft.

Mr. Lincoln had played this statecraft surpassingly well as War President. Never one to strike the first blow, he had manipulated the South into the position of firing the opening gun of the war. Thereby the South had lost the moral advantage. Great Britain threatened to recognize the Confederacy, and Mr. Lincoln freed the slaves—a stroke which brought to his side the masses of England and made the pro-Southern kings of Europe helpless to interfere.

Inside his own North, Lincoln used all his subtlety, patience, farsightedness to coax the Border States not only to stay in the Union, but to fight for it against their fellow Slave States of the

Confederacy. And the arts he used to manipulate pro-slavery Democrats and anti-slavery Abolitionists to march side by side in his army—those arts were Oriental in their cunning.

I am satisfied that his astuteness in handling men is almost beyond comprehension today. It may be that Lincoln's parallel in diplomacy is not to be found outside the ranks of China's intellectual rulers in the great days of Cathay.

Consider Lincoln, then, in the springtime of 1865, with the long war dying down. The bold, harsh, decisions of the military were done. Political problems were now all-important. The thing that was *hard* for Lincoln was gone, the thing which was easy for him was at hand.

If ever there was a man born for an hour, it was Abraham Lincoln facing the political Reconstruction of the South. To quiet and compose hostile populations was something for which he was made. As I read the record, the

South was ready to meet him halfway. He was himself a Southerner by birth. a Border State man by geography and by nature. He had no harsh words to recall now when starting to salve a conquered enemy. The South was willing to abide by Lincoln's decision that the slave should remain free, for it understood that Lincoln would not immediately give the freedman the ballotbox. The South realized that Lincoln would not lift the black man to rule over his late master.

It seems certain that the most influential Southerners in the springtime of 1865 were prepared to join Lincoln in allowing those negroes to vote who were educated and who had worn blue uniforms, for this was but a fraction, a scant 200,000 among three million ex-slaves. The important thing to Mr. Lincoln, facing the future in April, 1865, was that the Southern leaders who, in military defeat, were still heroes to the



people, were conservatives like himself. Lee, Joe Johnston, Judge Campbell, General Gordon, Alexander Stephens, were the popular men of the defeated Confederacy—and they had been Union lovers before the war, calm men, slow to join Secession. When Secession collapsed they did not run away as did so many of the original fire-eaters. They stayed, and were in a position to lead the Southern masses in peaceable, friendly Reconstruction. They knew Lincoln as the hope of the South.

The theory that Lincoln would have been defeated in Reconstruction, and have gone down into a wrecked and discredited old age, is based upon the internal revolt that was brooding in his own Republican party. At various times in the past four years, a minority of the Republican party had mustered enough votes in Congress to prevent Lincoln from trying out his liberal, tolerant plans of Reconstruction. These legisla-

tive defeats had come when the President's popularity had been at low ebb. Now in the spring of 1865, with the Confederate armies surrendered, Lincoln's political strength among the people was infinitely greater.

The factional revolt was, at base, a New England revolt against the Western and more national policy of the President. New England senators and Congressmen or Western settlers from New England, principally in colonies around the Great Lakes, were the backbone of the Radicals—that Black Republican Abolitionist faction which opposed Lincoln's negro policy. These hard-headed Radicals declared that no Southern States should reenter the Union until full citizenship and full voting power were given the freed slaves.

This faction, after Lincoln's death, did overthrow his policies, and did impeach Andrew Johnson for carrying out the Lincolnian plan of Reconstruction.

The point is, could Lincoln have won where Johnson failed?

The political battle, with Lincoln still at the helm, would in all probability have narrowed down to a fight between the Northeast—New England and New York—against the West, with the latter supporting the President. There was an old feud between the two sections—the feud between the tradesmen and the farmer, the capitalist and the agrarian.

Sherman's army of the West hated Massachusetts almost as bitterly as it hated South Carolina—feeling that those old, hereditary enemies, with their radical recriminations, had caused the war. The Democrats in the West, primarily an agrarian party, had run wild during the war charging that the Eastern industrialists, rising to power on the mechanical boom caused by militarism, were cheating the midland farmers. And both Republicans and Democrats in Sherman's army, at the war's

end, were so ready to fight the Eastern boys in blue that the War Department had to billet the two armies separately.

After Lincoln's death, the West forgot this sectional hatred of the Northeast, and joined hands with it in impeaching Johnson, but this is no legitimate criterion, for it was, ironically enough, the very tragedy of Lincoln's murder that united the sections.

A simple statement of the complex situation might be this: The Abolitionist—or Black Republican faction of the Republican party—through Stanton, Secretary of War, seized control of the Administration before the breath was out of Lincoln's body and shrewdly dramatized his assassination to convince the conservative Northern majority that the South had slaughtered the President. The Radical faction declared that here was proof Southerners were unrepentant, and that they must be punished further and ruled by the loyal negro.

In such a mad moment, the West and the Northeast struck hands again and began the alliance which was an almost greater tragedy for the Union than the war itself. In that moment it was decreed that vengeful Reconstruction would be forced on the South, that the South should be made solidly Democratic and the North predominantly Republican—and that both sections should vote unreasoningly for generations to come.

After that moment all hope of a properly balanced nation, as between industrialist and agrarian, was gone. The farmer vote was split, the Southern half of it made permanently Democratic, the Northern half of it Republican. Into the breach jumped the industrialist Northeast to seize national control.

If Lincoln had lived, he would, I think, have found it impossible to do anything but form a political party based on reunion of the Southern planter

and the Northern farmer. To have triumphed with his Reconstruction plans he would have had either to read the Black Republican faction out of his party, or to form a new conservative party by uniting the anti-Radical Republicans and the Democrats. There is reason for imagining that such a party would have been successful.

First, Lincoln was the idol of the masses in April, 1865. The masses always love a winner, and Lincoln had just won the war.

Second, if he had formed a Conservative party, the Democrats would have no choice but to join him, since they hated the Black Republicans more than they hated him—and the only great issue would have been Reconstruction on which they agreed with him.

Third: There was the army! In April 1865, one million Federal soldiers were still marching—and at home were approximately a half million more, dis-

charged, convalescent, crippled or resigned. This million and a half of men were strong, strong partisans of Lincoln's. A four year veteran is no fool about where his bread is buttered and the veteran of 1865 was convinced that Lincoln had been his personal friend all through the war. Union soldiers knew exactly how Lincoln had saved hundreds from being executed for technical military errors. The common soldiers had voted overwhelmingly for Lincoln in the 1864 election—voted against McClelland who was extremely popular as a general.

And here is a curious thing—almost all the union generals who had conspicuous influence with the men—the generals of reputation, fame and glory at the end of the war—the important men on horseback whom the soldiers were eager to follow—they were political Conservatives. Four years earlier many of them had been Abolitionists or

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the favorites of Radical politicians who were hot for Negro rights. Among these were Fremont, Butler, Banks, Pope, Palmer, Sigel, Curtis, Hooker, Hunter, Rosecrans.

And now, in 1865, where were they? In obscure posts, commanding unimportant districts, or at home sulking without assignment—or resigned.

And of the generals who sat in the saddles of power at the war's end—almost all had been Democrats. In fact most of them had voted for Douglas against Lincoln four years earlier, thinking that Lincoln would be himself Radical on the negro question. But in four years time they had seen where Lincoln stood, had approved him and his Reconstruction policy. The list is significant—Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, Thomas, Hancock, Meade, Logan, Schofield, Blair, Slocum, Jefferson C. Davis, the Hoosier, and A. J. Smith. The Navy was dominated by Ex-Demo-

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crats or Southern-born Conservatives—Farragut, Porter, Welles, Lee, Fox.

Was it purely accidental that these men should have received promotion at Lincoln's hands, while the Radical generals should have been eliminated as popular heroes?

The army, from first-hand experience in the South, was opposed to the Negro rule as urged by the Black Republican Radicals. And, I think, study of the private papers of Grant, Sherman and Sheridan in the spring of 1865, will be convincing that with Lincoln alive, they would have stood to the Conservative guns. That they did not stand by Andrew Johnson is another story, for Johnson handled Grant and Sherman most unfortunately for himself. And Sheridan was Grant's shadow. That the whole army, indeed, did not stand by Johnson, does not at all mean that it would have deserted Lincoln under similar circumstances, for it held no per-

sonal attachment to Johnson, and when he bespoke mercy for the South, the soldiers answered, sincerely if mistakenly, "The South assassinated Lincoln." I can think of more useful occupations than trying to figure how a million and a half of Union veterans could ever have been alienated from President Lincoln. He had a way with the common soldiers, he loved them—and he had the political patronage which war veterans have always regarded as their immemorial due.

This soldier-vote in 1865 and 1866 would have held the balance of power. It held more loyalty to Lincoln than to the Republican party. At any rate there were only some 4,000,000 votes in the North, and the soldier-vote was over a million at the lowest estimate. Lincoln in 1864 had polled fifty-five per cent of the Northern vote. If a showdown came between him and the Radicals on negro-policy or impeachment, he could, with

this soldier-vote lose to his enemies a full half of the civilian vote, and still win hands down. Moreover, if he obtained votes for Southern whites, there would come to him, on the Reconstruction issue, more than a million more votes.

Deep student of political history that he was, Lincoln must have known that the traditional path to victory lay along the road laid out by Jefferson and Jackson in the founding of their dynasties—the alliance of the Western and Southern farmers against the commercial Northeast. This was also the way toward national peace in 1865.

To have formed a new party would have meant no wrenching of loyalties in him. The Republican party was too new, too much of a hybrid assembly of factions to demand much fidelity. He had left the Whig party only a year before. Lincoln had even played down the name "Republican" in the 1864 campaign in favor of the more national title

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of "Union Party" and he had picked a War Democrat for his running mate.

The most poignant thought in all this conjecture of what might have been, is the likelihood if Lincoln had lived to unite the agrarian South and West and to revive that traditionally dominant dynasty, the United States might very easily have been happier today. Perhaps the industrialist and the financier might not have prospered so disproportionately to the farmer. Perhaps the old American agrarian civilization could have survived longer, tempering the excesses of privilege. It is said that the agrarian civilization—that calmer, less high-pressured, more stable way of life, was doomed anyway by the march of science and invention—all that rush of mechanistic expansion and financial concentration which had got its headway during the Civil War.

But restraint *was* possible.

France used it.

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