

Abraham Lincoln: The Paris Years^{*}

According to one authority, there are more than 7,000 books on Abraham Lincoln. Not one examines his Paris years. Why? The easy explanation is that there is no evidence that Lincoln ever stepped foot outside the United States, let alone visited these shores. Yet facts have not stood in the way of many recent Lincoln scholars, who have manufactured a bundle of Lincolns out of thin air—with ingenious theories and little supporting data. As one more sober Lincoln student observed this year, “So we have what I call ‘Brokeback Lincoln’ or ‘Prozac Lincoln’ [succeeding] ‘Dictator Lincoln’ or ‘Racist Lincoln,’ which we saw in the 1960s at the height of the civil rights revolution.”¹

On close examination, however, there is overwhelming evidence that both France and the City of Light cast a shimmering shadow over Lincoln and his White House. Consider these stubborn facts: The wallpaper in many White House rooms was “French Gray.”² Mrs. Lincoln favored French caterers for important state dinners. (I must admit that the effect was not always entirely successful: the Prince Napoleon remarked that Mrs. Lincoln “dressed in the French style without any taste; she has the manner of a petty bourgeois and wears tin jewelry.”³) Nonetheless, the Lincolns reveled in things French, from the state dining room to an open-air supper with the 55th New York Regiment, which consisted largely of French immigrants who had volunteered.⁴

With the minor exception of Prince Napoleon, France reciprocated the affection. When Lincoln was assassinated, Americans raged and grieved; France convulsed in mourning. A gold medal was struck and presented to Mrs. Lincoln, thanks to nation-wide donations from peasants to noblemen. The French

^{*} Remarks by Dennis J. Hutchinson, William Rainey Harper Professor in the College and Senior Lecturer in Law, The University of Chicago, Oct. 1, 2009, on the occasion of the dedication of a statue of Abraham Lincoln at the Paris Center of the University.

¹ Richard Norton Smith, *The News Hour* (PBS), Feb. 12, 2009 (transcript at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/white_house/jan-june09/lincoln_02-12.html)

² Herbert Mitgang, ed., Noah Brooks, WASHINGTON, D.C., IN LINCOLN'S TIME 60-61 (Athens: Univ. of Ga. Press, 1989).

³ Michael Burlingame, *I ABRAHAM LINCOLN: A LIFE* 271 (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2008).

⁴ *I QUATRE ANS DE CAMPAGNES À L'ARMÉE DU POTOMAC, PAR RÉGIS DE TROBRIAND, EX-MAJOR GÉNÉRAL AU SERVICE VOLONTAIRE DES ETATS UNIS D'AMÉRIQUE* 131 (PARIS, 1867). See generally Jean Jules Jusserand, *WITH AMERICANS OF PAST AND PRESENT DAYS*, CH. IV (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916).

Academy awarded a prize for the best poem on Lincoln and extolled Lincoln's literary style as a model for statesmen and princes alike.

And now, in a unique Franco-American and Sister-Cities partnership, Lincoln is honored here once again, this time with an unforgettable statue that captures what might be called a "lost Lincoln"—a Lincoln of mirth and whimsy. Lincoln was renown as a story-teller and a wicked mimic, talents which gave him pleasure and opened doors to political and professional worlds that otherwise might have been closed to a tall, awkward, and homely country man from the West.

When Lincoln entered the White House, the warm cracker barrel humor of the prairie became tinged with irony and melancholy. He used his "little anecdotes" for a variety of purposes—to say "no" in a roundabout way, to evade a hard choice, to illustrate a hard policy with a homespun reference, or simply to change the chronically dark mood of those around him. He famously read aloud to his cabinet the latest Artemus Ward story one day and was met with cool silence. "Gentlemen," he said, "why don't you laugh? With the fearful strain that is upon me night and day, if I did not laugh occasionally, I should die, and you need this medicine as much as I do."⁵ A minute or two later, he turned to the business of the day—reading the first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation.

If Judge David Davis is right, no retelling of a Lincoln story can quite capture the full-bodied delivery of the author himself: "His countenance and all his features seemed to take part in the performance. As he neared the pith or point of the joke or story every vestige of seriousness disappeared from his face. His little gray eyes sparkled; a smile seemed to gather up, curtain like, the corners of his mouth; his frame quivered with suppressed excitement; and when the point—or 'nub' of the story, as he called it—came, no one's laugh was heartier than his."⁶

The war naturally tempered Lincoln's manner. As his remarks to the Cabinet suggest, the casualty toll of the war cast a pall over Washington in every quarter, and good taste required a modulated tone. For example, one of Lincoln's secretaries

⁵ Don Seitz, *ARTEMUS WARD: A BIOGRAPHY AND BIBLIOGRAPHY* 113-114 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1919; New York: Beekman, 1974).

⁶ Multiple sources, as quoted in Benjamin Thomas, "Lincoln's Humor: An Analysis," *3 JO. OF THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN ASSN.* 28, 30 (1981).

recounted a story Lincoln told when advised that General Ambrose Burnside was being pursued in Tennessee by General James Longstreet and that gunfire had been heard near Burnside's position. "That is good," Lincoln said. When his secretary startled at Lincoln's response, the President responded: "I had a neighbor out west, a Sally Taggart, who had a great many unruly children whom she did not take very good care of. Whenever she heard one squall in some out-of-the-way place, she would say, 'Well, thank goodness, there's one of my young ones not dead yet!' As long as we hear guns, Burnside is not captured."⁷

Another time, Lincoln received a delegation of politicians who were complaining about the conduct of the war in the West. He listened patiently, then pulled himself up and said: "Now, gentlemen, I am going to make you a curious kind of speech. I announce to you that I am not going to do one single thing that any one of you have asked me to do. But it is due to myself and to you that I should give my reasons. . . . [This] reminds me of an anecdote which I heard a [man] tell in Burlington, Iowa. He was trying to enforce upon his hearers the truth of the old adage that 'three removes are worse than a fire.' As an illustration, he gave an account of a family who started from Western Pennsylvania, pretty well off in this world's goods, when they started. But they moved and moved, having less and less every time they moved, till after a while they could carry everything in one wagon. He said that the chickens of the family got so used to being moved, that whenever they saw the wagon sheets brought [out] they laid themselves on their backs and crossed their legs, ready to be tied. Now, gentlemen, if I were to be guided by every committee that comes in at that door, I might just as well cross my hands and let you tie me. Nevertheless, I am glad to see you."⁸

The War-time anecdotes could be multiplied, of course, although one must be careful of provenance: it has been estimated that more than half of the tales attributed to Lincoln were never said by him. Nonetheless, the point is clear: humor became for Lincoln a tool and a source of relief more than a pleasure. As Judge Davis put it, the "stories and jokes [were] intended to whistle off sadness."⁹ Especially during the summer of 1864,

⁷ Michael Burlingame, *AT LINCOLN'S SIDE: JOHN HAY'S CIVIL WAR CORRESPONDENCE AND SELECTED WRITINGS* 128 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 2000).

⁸ Joshua Fry Speed, *REMINISCENCES OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN* 30 (Louisville: J. P. Morton & Co., 1884).

⁹ Francis Fisher Brown, *EVERYDAY LIFE AT THE WHITE HOUSE* 113 (Chicago: Brown & Howell, 1914).

when the body count soared and the War seemed deadlocked, Lincoln must have been the saddest, and loneliest, man in America.

Today, all of that has changed. Thanks to an inventive sculptor, Henri Marquet, and an imaginative mosaicist, Vincent Charra, Abraham Lincoln has been restored to his pre-War humor, when whimsy could be enjoyed for its own sake. Lincoln has been revived. Consider, in particular, his sartorial transformation. When Lincoln delivered the Cooper Union Address in 1860, New York observers derided his appearance—including the lackluster black suit, new for the trip, but “evidently the work of an unskilled tailor.”¹⁰ Now he is resplendent in a coat of many colors that might make Joseph blush. All those who view this reborn Lincoln will be forever grateful to Ambassador Rivkin and to M. Bensidoun for their generous donation to the Paris Center and to the magnificent link between the Sister Cities of Chicago and Paris.

I am told by experts that the best place here to watch the world pass by is on the terrace of the Café de la Paix on the right Bank. So, if in the next few days while taking your coffee at the Café, you see a tall, gaunt man, brightly attired and with a fresh spring in his step, salute Abraham Lincoln, who, at last, is beginning to enjoy his Paris Years.

¹⁰ David Herbert Donald, *LINCOLN* 238 (NEW YORK: Simon & Schuster, 1995).