

*The
American Political
Tradition
And the Men Who Made It*

By

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CHAPTER V

*ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE
SELF-MADE MYTH*

I HAPPEN, temporarily, to occupy this White House. I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father's child has.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN to the 166th Ohio Regiment

His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest.

William H Herndon

THE Lincoln legend has come to have a hold on the American imagination that defies comparison with anything else in political mythology. Here is a drama in which a great man shoulders the torment and moral burdens of a blundering and sinful people, suffers for them, and redeems them with hallowed Christian virtues—"malice toward none and charity for all"—and is destroyed at the pitch of his success. The worldly-wise John Hay, who knew him about as well as he permitted himself to be known, called him "the greatest character since Christ," a comparison one cannot imagine being made of any other political figure of modern times.

If the Lincoln legend gathers strength from its similarity to the Christian theme of vicarious atonement and redemption, there is still another strain in American experience that it represents equally well. Although his metier was politics and not business, Lincoln was a pre-eminent example of that self-help which Americans have always so admired. He was not, of course, the first eminent American politician who could claim humble origins,

nor the first to exploit them. But few have been able to point to such a sudden ascent from relative obscurity to high eminence, none has maintained so completely while scaling the heights the aspect of extreme simplicity; and none has combined with the attainment of success and power such an intense awareness of humanity and moral responsibility. It was precisely in his attainments as a common man that Lincoln felt himself to be remarkable, and in this light that he interpreted to the world the significance of his career. Keenly aware of his role as the exemplar of the self-made man, he played the part with an intense and poignant consistency that gives his performance the quality of a high art. The first author of the Lincoln legend and the greatest of the Lincoln dramatists was Lincoln himself.

Lincoln's simplicity was very real. He called his wife "mother," received distinguished guests in shirtsleeves, and once during his presidency hailed a soldier out of the ranks with the cry: "Bub! Bub!" But he was also a complex man, easily complex enough to know the value of his own simplicity. With his morbid compulsion for honesty he was too modest to pose coarsely and blatantly as a Henry Clay or James G. Blaine might pose. (When an 1860 campaign document announced that he was a reader of Plutarch, he sat down at once to validate the claim by reading the *Lives*.) But he did develop a political personality by intensifying qualities he actually possessed.

Even during his early days in politics, when his speeches were full of conventional platform bombast, Lincoln seldom failed to strike the humble manner that was peculiarly his. "I was born and have ever remained," he said in his first extended campaign speech, "in the most humble walks of life. I have no popular relations or friends to recommend me." Thereafter he always sounded the theme. "I presume you all know who I am—I am humble Abraham Lincoln.... If elected I shall be thankful; if not it will be all the same." Opponents at times grew impatient with his self-derogation ("my poor, lean, lank face") and a Democratic journal once called him a Uriah Heep. But self-conscious as the device was, and coupled even as it was with a secret confidence that Hay called "intellectual arrogance," there was still no imposture in it. It corresponded to Lincoln's own image of himself, which placed him with the poor, the aged, and the forgotten. In a letter to Herndon that was certainly not meant to impress any constituency, Lincoln, near his thirtieth birthday, referred to "my old, withered, dry eyes."

There was always this pathos in his plainness, his lack of external grace. "He is," said one of Mrs. Lincoln's friends, "the ungodliest man you ever saw." His colleagues, however, recognized in this a possible political asset and transmuted it into one of the most successful of all political symbols—the hardfisted rail-splitter. At a Republican meeting in 1860 John Hanks and another old pioneer appeared carrying fence rails labeled: "Two rails from a lot made by Abraham Lincoln and John Hanks in the Sangamon Bottom in the year 1830." And Lincoln, with his usual candor, confessed that he had no idea whether these were the same rails, but he was sure he had actually split rails every bit as good. The time was to come when little Tad could say: "Everybody in this world knows Pa used to split

Humility belongs with mercy among the cardinal Christian virtues. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." But the demands of Christianity and the success myth are incompatible. The competitive society out of which the success myth and the self-made man have grown may accept the Christian virtues in principle but can hardly observe them in practice. The motivating force in the mythology of success is ambition, which is closely akin to the cardinal Christian sin of pride. In a world that works through ambition and self-help, while inculcating an ethic that looks upon their results with disdain, how can an earnest man, a public figure living in a time of crisis, gratify his aspirations and yet remain morally whole? If he is, like Lincoln, a man of private religious intensity, the stage is set for high tragedy.

II

The clue to much that is vital in Lincoln's thought and character lies in the fact that he was thoroughly and completely the politician, by preference and by training. It is difficult to think of any man of comparable stature whose life was so fully absorbed into his political being. Lincoln plunged into politics almost at the beginning of his adult life and was never occupied in any other career except for a brief period when an unfavorable turn in the political situation forced him back to his law practice. His life was one of caucuses and conventions, party circulars and speeches, requests, recommendations, stratagems, schemes, and ambitions. "It was in the world of politics that he lived," wrote Herndon after his death. "Politics were his life, newspapers his food, and his great ambition his motive power."

Like his father, Lincoln was physically lazy even as a youth, but unlike him had an active forensic mind. When only fifteen he was often on stumps and fences making political speeches, from which his father had to haul him back to his chores. He was fond of listening to lawyers' arguments and occupying his mind with them. Herndon testifies that "He read specially for a special object and thought things useless unless they could be of utility, use, practice, etc."¹ When Lincoln read he preferred to read aloud. Once when Herndon asked him about it he answered: "I catch the idea by two senses, for when I read aloud I hear what is read and I see it . . . and I remember it better, if I do not understand it better." These are the reading habits of a man who is preparing for the platform.

For a youth with such mental habits—and one who had no business talents in the narrower sense—the greatest opportunities on the Illinois prairies were in the ministry, law, or politics. Lincoln, who had read Paine and Volney, was too unorthodox in theology for the ministry, and law and politics it proved to be. But politics was first: at twenty-three, only seven months after coming to the little Illinois community of New Salem, he was running for office. Previously he had worked only at odd jobs as ferryman, surveyor, postmaster, storekeeper, rail-splitter, farm hand, and the like; and now, without any other preparation, he was looking for election to the state legislature. He was not chosen, but two years later, in 1834, Sangamon County sent him to the lower house. Not until his first term had almost ended was he sufficiently qualified as a lawyer to be admitted to the state bar.

From this time to the end of his life except for the years between 1849 and 1854, when his political prospects were discouraging—Lincoln was busy either as officeholder or officeseeker. In the summer of 1860, for a friend who wanted to prepare a campaign biography, he wrote in the third person a short sketch of his political life up to that time: 1832--defeated in an attempt to be elected to the legislature; 1834—elected to the legislature "by the highest vote cast for any candidate"; 1836, 1838, 1840--re-elected; 1838 and 1840--chosen by his party as its candidate for Speaker of the Illinois House of Representatives, but not elected; 1840 and 1844—placed on Harrison and Clay electoral tickets "and spent much time and labor in both those canvasses"; 1846--elected to Congress; 1848—campaign worker for Zachary Taylor, speaking in Maryland and Massachusetts, and "canvassing quite fully his own district in Illinois, which was followed by a majority in the district of over 1500 for General Taylor"; 1852--placed on Winfield Scott's electoral ticket, "but owing to the hopelessness of the cause in Illinois he did less than in previous presidential canvasses"; 1854—. . . his profession had almost superseded the thought of politics in his mind, when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused him as he had never been before";

¹ For years Herndon kept on their office table the Westminster Review, the Edinburgh Review, other English periodicals, the works of Darwin, Spencer, and other English writers. He had little success in interesting Lincoln. "Occasionally he would snatch one up and peruse it for a little while, but he soon threw it down with the suggestion that it was entirely too heavy for an ordinary mind to digest."

1856—"made over fifty speeches" in the campaign for Fremont; prominently mentioned in the Republican national convention for the vice-presidential nomination. . . .

The rest of the story is familiar enough.

As a politician Lincoln was no maverick. On the bank question, on internal improvements, on the Mexican War (even at his own political expense), on the tariff, he was always a firm, orthodox Whig. He early became a party wheelhorse, a member of the Illinois State Whig Committee, and in the legislature a Whig floor leader. As Lord Charnwood puts it, "The somewhat unholy business of party management was at first attractive to him." It was during this period that he learned the deliberate and responsible opportunism that later was so characteristic of his statecraft.

In 1848, when he was still in Congress, Lincoln threw in his lot with the shrewd Whig leaders who preferred the ill-equipped but available Zachary Taylor to the party's elder statesman, Henry Clay, as presidential candidate. During the campaign he defended Taylor's equivocations by saying that, far from having no principles, Taylor stood for the highest of principles—"allowing the people to do as they please with their own business. Lincoln himself, because of an agreement to rotate the candidacy for his seat, did not run for re-election to Congress; had he done so, defeat would have been certain. When he tried to get an appointment to the General Land Office he was turned down; a less appealing offer of the Secretaryship of Oregon Territory he declined. For a while it seemed that his political career had come to an end. Thoroughly humbled by his depressing obscurity in Congress, he turned with reluctance to the law to overcome by a melancholy "so profound," says Beveridge, "the depths of it cannot be sounded or estimated by normal minds. Certainly political disappointment had something to do with his despondency." His ambitions were directed toward public life; he had no legal aspirations, lucrative though his practice was. Years later, when the two were preparing their study of him, Herndon objected to Jesse Weik's desire to stress Lincoln's legal eminence: "How are you going to make a *great* lawyer out of Lincoln? His soul was afire with its own ambition, and that was not law."

The repeal of the Missouri Compromise in 1854, which started the dissolution of both major parties and created a fluid political situation, once again aroused Lincoln's hopes. For some time he seems to have thought of the slavery-extension issue as a means of revivifying the Whig Party, which he found it hard to abandon. For two years after the Republicans had formed local and state organizations in the Northwest he refused to join them, and even while supporting their candidate, Fremont, in 1856, carefully avoided speaking of himself or his colleagues as Republicans. In the fall of 1854, hungering for the Senatorial nomination and fearing to offend numerous old-line Whigs in Illinois he fled from Springfield on Herndon's advice to avoid attending a Republican state convention there. One of his most terrible fits of melancholy overcame him when he failed to get the nomination the following year. "That man," says Herndon (whose adoration of Lincoln assures us we are listening to no hostile critic) "who thinks Lincoln calmly gathered his robes about him, waiting for the people to call him, has a very erroneous knowledge of Lincoln. He was always calculating and planning ahead. His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest." With all his quiet passion Lincoln had sought to rise in life, to make something of himself through his own honest efforts. It was this typically American impulse that dominated him through the long course of his career before he became interested in the slavery question. It was his understanding of this impulse that guided his political thought.

III

If historical epochs are judged by the opportunities they offer talented men to rise from the ranks to places of wealth, power, and prestige, the period during which Lincoln grew up was among the greatest in history, and among all places such opportunities were most

available in the fresh territory north and west of the Ohio River—the Valley of Democracy.

Abraham Lincoln was nineteen years old when Andrew Jackson was elected President. Like most of the poor in his part of the country, Thomas Lincoln was a Jacksonian Democrat, and his son at first accepted his politics. But some time during his eighteenth or nineteenth year Abraham went through a political conversion, became a National Republican, and cast his first vote, in 1832, for Henry Clay.

The National Republican (later Whig) Party was the party of internal improvements, stable currency, and conservative banking; Lincoln lived in a country that needed all three. Doubtless there were also personal factors in his decision. If the Democrats spoke more emphatically about the equality of man, the Whigs, even in the West, had the most imposing and affluent men. That an ambitious youth should look to the more solid citizens of his community for political guidance was natural and expedient; the men Lincoln most respected in the Indiana town of his boyhood were National Republicans, great admirers of Henry Clay; and as Dennis Hanks mournfully recalled, Lincoln himself "always Loved Hen Clay's speeches." With one exception, John Hanks, who turned Republican in 1860, Abraham was the only member of the Lincoln or Hanks families who deserted the Democratic Party.

After a few years of stagnation Lincoln advanced with the utmost rapidity in his middle twenties. While many of the stories about the hardships of his youth celebrated in Lincoln legendry are true, it is noteworthy that success came to him suddenly and at a rather early age. At twenty-four he was utterly obscure. At twenty-eight he was the leader of his party in the Illinois House of Representatives, renowned as the winner of the fight to bring the state capital to Springfield, extremely popular in both Sangamon County and the capital itself, and partner of one of the ablest lawyers in the state. Of his first years in Springfield Herndon writes: "No man ever had an easier time of it in his early days than Lincoln. He had . . . influential and financial friends to help him; they almost fought each other for the privilege of assisting Lincoln.... Lincoln was a pet . . . in this city." And, adds Herndon, "he deserved it." Success of this sort eases and fattens smaller men; for more restless souls it is a form of poison.

Like his "influential and financial friends," Lincoln belonged to the party of rank and privilege; it exacted a price from him. In time he was to marry into the family circle of Ninian Edwards, of whom it was once observed that he was "naturally and constitutionally an aristocrat and . . . hated democracy . . . as the devil is said to hate holy water." Lincoln's connection with such a tribe could only spur his loyalty to the democratic ways in which he had been brought up; he never did "belong," and Mary Todd's attitude toward him as a social creature was always disdainful.

In a letter written in 1858, discussing the growth of the Republican Party, he observed: "Much of the plain old Democracy is with us, while nearly all the old exclusive silk-stocking Whiggery is against us. I don't mean all the Old Whig party, but nearly all of the nice exclusive sort." Lincoln's keen sense of not belonging to the "nice exclusive sort" was a distinct political asset. Throughout his early career, no doubt, it enabled him to speak with sincerity for Jeffersonian principles while supporting Hamiltonian measures. For public and private reasons alike he was touchy about attempts to link him with the aristocrats because of his Whig affiliations, and once complained bitterly at being incongruously "put down here as the candidate of pride, wealth, and aristocratic family distinction."

And yet it was true that the young Lincoln fell short of being an outspoken democrat. In the social climate of Illinois he ranked as a moderate conservative. Running for re-election to the legislature in 1836, he submitted to a newspaper a statement of his views which included the following: "I go for all sharing the privileges of the government who assist in bearing its burdens. Consequently I go for admitting all whites to the right of suffrage who pay taxes or bear arms (by no means excluding females)." Now, the Illinois Constitution of 1818 had already granted the suffrage to all white male inhabitants of twenty-one or over

without further qualification, so that Lincoln's proposal actually involved a step backward.²

Lincoln's democracy was not broad enough to transcend color lines, but on this score it had more latitude than the democracy professed by many of his neighbors and contemporaries. One of the extraordinary things about his strangely involved personality is the contrast between his circumspectness in practical politics wherever the Negro was concerned, and his penetration of the logic of the proslavery argument, which he answered with exceptional insight. His keen onslaughts against slavery, in fact, carry the conviction of a man of far greater moral force than the pre-presidential Lincoln ever revealed in action. After 1854, when he renewed his study of the slavery question, Lincoln was particularly acute in showing that the logic of the defenders of slavery was profoundly undemocratic, not only in reference to the Southern scene, but for human relations everywhere. The essence of his position was that the principle of exclusion has no inner check; that arbitrarily barring one minority from the exercise of its rights can be both a precedent and a moral sanction for barring another, and that it creates a frame of mind from which no one can expect justice or security. "I am not a Knownothing," he wrote to Speed:

How could I be? How can anyone who abhors the oppression of Negroes be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation we began by declaring that "all men are created equal." We now practically read it "all men are created equal except negroes." When the Know-nothings get control, it will read "all men are created equal, except negroes and foreigners and Catholics." When it comes to this, I shall prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty,—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.

In Lincoln's eyes the Declaration of Independence thus becomes once again what it had been to Jefferson—not merely a formal theory of rights, but an instrument of democracy. It was to Jefferson that Lincoln looked as the source of his political inspiration, Jefferson whom he described as "the most distinguished politician of our history." "The principles of Jefferson are the definitions and axioms of free society," he declared in 1859. "The Jefferson party," he wrote privately at about the same time, "was formed upon its supposed superior devotion to the rights of men, holding the rights of property to be secondary only, and greatly inferior." The Democratic Party, he charged, had abandoned Jeffersonian tradition by taking the position that one man's liberty was absolutely nothing when it conflicted with another man's property. "Republicans," he added, in an utterly characteristic sentence which ought to be well remembered, "are for both the man and the dollar, but in case of conflict the man before the dollar." There is self-portraiture in the remark: one sees the moral idealism of the man; it is there, unquestionably, but he hopes that the world will never force it to obtrude itself.

The Declaration of Independence was not only the primary article of Lincoln's creed; it provided his most formidable political ammunition. And yet in the end it was the Declaration that he could not make a consistent part of his living work. The Declaration was a revolutionary document, and this too Lincoln accepted. One of his early public statements declares:

Any people anywhere being inclined and having the power have the right to

²The parenthetic inclusion of women was bold enough, however, assuming that Lincoln expected to be taken seriously. The words were written twelve years before the first women's Rights convention met at Seneca Falls, and even then, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton proposed to include suffrage among other demands, her colleague, the Quakeress Lucretia Mott, had chided "Elizabeth, thee will make us ridiculous."

rise up and shake off the existing government, and form a new one that suits them better. This is a most valuable, a most sacred right—a right which we hope and believe is to liberate the world.

Having said so much, he did not stop:

Any portion of such people that can may revolutionize and make their own of so much territory as they inhabit. More than this, *a majority of any portion of such people may revolutionize, putting down a minority, intermingled with or near about them*, who may oppose this movement. Such a minority was precisely the case of the Tories of our own revolution. It is a quality of revolutions not to go by old lines or old laws; but to break up both, and make new ones.

The principle is reiterated with firmness in the First Inaugural Address.

So Lincoln, the revolutionary theorist. There was another Lincoln who had a lawyer-like feeling for the niceties of established rules and a nationalist's reverence for constitutional sanction. This Lincoln always publicly condemned the abolitionists who fought slavery by extraconstitutional means—and condemned also the mobs who deprived them of their right of free speech and free press. This Lincoln, even before he was thirty, warned the young men of Springfield that disrespect for legal observances might destroy free institutions in America, and urged them to let reverence for the laws "become the political religion of the nation." This Lincoln suppressed secession and refused to acknowledge that the right of revolution he had so boldly accepted belonged to the South. The same Lincoln, as we shall see, refused almost to the last minute even to suppress rebellion by revolutionary means. The contradiction is not peculiar to Lincoln; Anglo-Saxon history is full of it.

As an economic thinker, Lincoln had a passion for the great average. Thoroughly middle-class in his ideas, he spoke for those millions of Americans who had begun their lives as hired workers—as farm hands, clerks, teachers, mechanics, flatboat men, and rail-splitters—and had passed into the ranks of landed farmers, prosperous grocers, lawyers, merchants, physicians, and politicians. Theirs were the traditional ideals of the Protestant ethic: hard work, frugality, temperance, and a touch of ability applied long and hard enough would lift a man into the propertied or professional class and give him independence and respect if not wealth and prestige. Failure to rise in the economic scale was generally viewed as a fault in the individual, not in society. It was the outward sign of an inward lack of grace or idleness, indulgence, waste, or incapacity.

This conception of the competitive world was by no means so inaccurate in Lincoln's day as it has long since become; neither was it so conservative as time has made it. It was the legitimate inheritance of Jacksonian democracy. It was the belief not only of those who had arrived but also of those who were pushing their way to the top. If it was intensely and at times inhumanly individualistic, it also defied aristocracy and class distinction. Lincoln's life was a dramatization of it in the sphere of politics as, say, Carnegie's was in business. His own rather conventional version of the self-help ideology³ is expressed with some charm in a letter written to his feckless stepbrother, John D. Johnston, in 1851:

³William C. Howells, father of the novelist, wrote in an Ohio newspaper shortly before Lincoln's inauguration as President that he and his wife represented "the western type of Americans." "The White House," he said, "has never been occupied by better representatives of the bourgeoisie [s-c] or citizen class of people, than it will be after the 4th proximo. If the idea represented by these people can only be allowed to prevail in this government, all will be well. Under such a rule, the practical individual man, who respects himself and regards the rights of others will grow to just proportions."

Your request for eighty dollars I do not think it best to comply with now. At the various times when I have helped you a little you have said to me, "We can get along very well now"; but in a very short time I find you in the same difficulty again. Now, this can only happen by some defect in your conduct. What that defect is, I think I know. You are not lazy, and still you are an idler. I doubt whether, since I saw you, you have done a good whole day's work in any one day. You do not very much dislike to work, and still you do not work much, merely because it does not seem to you that you could get much for it. This habit of uselessly wasting time is the whole difficulty.

Lincoln advised Johnston to leave his farm in charge of his family and go to work for wages.

I now promise you, that for every dollar you will, between this and the first of May, get for your own labor . . . I will then give you one other dollar.... Now if you will do this, you will soon be out of debt, and, what is better, you will have a habit that will keep you from getting in debt again.... You have always been kind to me, and I do not mean to be unkind to you. On the contrary, if you will but follow my advice, you will find it worth more than eighty times eighty dollars to you.

Given the chance for the frugal, the industrious, and the able—for the Abraham Lincolns if not the John D. Johnstons—to assert themselves, society would never be divided along fixed lines. There would be no eternal mud-sill class. "There is no permanent class of hired laborers among us," Lincoln declared in a public address. "Twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer. The hired laborer of yesterday labors on his own account today, and will hire others to labor for him tomorrow. Advancement—improvement in condition—is the order of things in a society of equals." For Lincoln the vital test of a democracy was economic—its ability to provide opportunities for social ascent to those born in its lower ranks. This belief in opportunity for the self-made man is the key to his entire career; it explains his public appeal; it is the core of his criticism of slavery.

There is a strong pro-labor strain in all of Lincoln's utterances from the beginning to the end of his career. Perhaps the most sweeping of his words, and certainly the least equivocal, were penned in 1847. "Inasmuch as most good things are produced by labor, he began,

it follows that all such things of right belong to those whose labor has produced them. But it has so happened, in all ages of the world, that some have labored, and others have without labor enjoyed a large proportion of the fruits. This is wrong and should not continue. To secure to each laborer the whole product of his labor, or as nearly as possible, is a worthy object of any good government.

This reads like a passage from a socialist argument. But its context is significant; the statement was neither a preface to an attack upon private property nor an argument for redistributing the world's goods—it was part of a firm defense of the protective tariff!

In Lincoln's day, especially in the more primitive communities of his formative years, the laborer had not yet been fully separated from his tools. The rights of labor still were closely associated in the fashion of Locke and Jefferson with the right of the laborer to retain his own product; when men talked about the sacredness of labor, they were often talking in veiled terms about the right to own. These ideas, which belonged to the age of craftsmanship rather than industrialism, Lincoln carried into the modern industrial scene. The result is a quaint equivocation, worth observing carefully because it pictures the state of mind of a man living half in one economy and half in another and wishing to do justice to

every interest. In 1860, when Lincoln was stumping about the country before the Republican convention, he turned up at New Haven, where shoemakers were on strike. The Democrats had charged Republican agitators with responsibility for the strike, and Lincoln met them head-on:

. . . I am glad to see that a system of labor prevails in New England under which laborers can strike when they want to, where they are not obliged to work under all circumstances, and are not tied down and obliged to labor whether you pay them or not! I like the system which lets a man quit when he wants to, and wish it might prevail everywhere. One of the reasons why I am opposed to slavery is just here. What is the true condition of the laborer? I take it that it is best for all to leave each man free to acquire property as fast as he can. Some will get wealthy. I don't believe in a law to prevent a man from getting rich; it would do more harm than good. So while we do not propose any war upon capital, we do wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with everybody else. When one starts poor, as most do in the race of life, free society is such that he knows he can better his condition; he knows that there is no fixed condition of labor for his whole life. . . . That is the true system.

If there was a flaw in all this, it was one that Lincoln was never forced to meet. Had he lived to seventy, he would have seen the generation brought up on self-help come into its own, build oppressive business corporations, and begin to close off those treasured opportunities for the little man. Further, he would have seen his own party become the jackal of the vested interests, placing the dollar far, far ahead of the man. He himself presided over the social revolution that destroyed the simple equalitarian order of the 1840's, corrupted what remained of its values, and caricatured its ideals. Booth's bullet, indeed, saved him from something worse than embroilment with the radicals over Reconstruction. It confined his life to the happier age that Lincoln understood—which unwittingly he helped to destroy—the age that gave sanction to the honest compromises of his thought.

IV

A story about Abraham Lincoln's second trip to New Orleans when he was twenty-one holds an important place in the Lincoln legend. According to John Hanks, when Lincoln went with his companions to a slave market they saw a handsome mulatto girl being sold on the block, and "the iron entered his soul"; he swore that if he ever got a chance he would hit slavery "and hit it hard." The implication is clear: Lincoln was half abolitionist and the Emancipation Proclamation was a fulfillment of that young promise. But the authenticity of the tale is suspect among Lincoln scholars. John Hanks recalled it thirty-five years afterward as a personal witness, whereas, according to Lincoln, Hanks had not gone beyond St. Louis on the journey. Beveridge observes that Lincoln himself apparently never spoke of the alleged incident publicly or privately,⁴ and that for twenty years afterward he showed little concern over slavery. We know that he refused to denounce the Fugitive Slave Law, viciously unfair though it was, even to free Negroes charged as runaways. ("I confess I hate to see the poor creatures hunted down," he wrote to Speed, ". . . but I bite my lips and keep quiet.")

His later career as an opponent of slavery extension must be interpreted in the light of

⁴Herndon, however, attested that he heard Lincoln refer to having seen slaves on sale. Herndon.:s Life of Lincoln (Angle ed., 1930), p. 64. In a letter to Alexander H. Stephens, January 19, 1860, Lincoln wrote: "When a boy I went to New Orleans in a flat boat and there I saw slavery and slave markets as I have never seen them in Kentucky, and I heard worse of the Red River plantations."

his earlier public indifference to the question. Always moderately hostile to the South's "peculiar institution," he quieted himself with the comfortable thought that it was destined very gradually to disappear. Only after the Kansas-Nebraska Act breathed political life into the slavery issue did he seize upon it as a subject for agitation; only then did he attack it openly. His attitude was based on justice tempered by expediency—or perhaps more accurately, expediency tempered by justice.

Lincoln was by birth a Southerner, a Kentuckian; both his parents were Virginians. His father had served on the slave patrol of Hardin County. The Lincoln family was one of thousands that in the early decades of the nineteenth century had moved from the Southern states, particularly Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee, into the Valley of Democracy, and peopled the southern parts of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.

During his boyhood days in Indiana and Illinois Lincoln lived in communities where slaves were rare or unknown, and the problem was not thrust upon him. The prevailing attitude toward Negroes in Illinois was intensely hostile. Severe laws against free Negroes and runaway slaves were in force when Lincoln went to the Springfield legislature, and there is no evidence of any popular movement to liberalize them. Lincoln's experiences with slavery on his journeys to New Orleans in 1828 and 1881 do not seem to have made an impression vivid enough to change his conduct. Always privately compassionate, in his public career and his legal practice he never made himself the advocate of unpopular reform movements.

While Lincoln was serving his second term in the Illinois legislature the slavery question was discussed throughout the country. Garrison had begun his agitation, and petitions to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia had begun to pour in upon Congress. State legislatures began to express themselves upon the matter. The Illinois legislature turned the subject over to a joint committee, of which Lincoln and his Sangamon County colleague, Dan Stone, were members. At twenty-eight Lincoln thus had occasion to review the whole slavery question on both sides. The committee reported proslavery resolutions, presently adopted, which praised the beneficent effects of white civilization upon African natives, cited the wretchedness of emancipated Negroes as proof of the folly of freedom, and denounced abolitionists.

Lincoln voted against these resolutions. Six weeks later—the delay resulted from a desire to alienate no one from the cause that then stood closest to his heart, the removal of the state capital from Vandalia to Springfield—he and Stone embodied their own opinions in a resolution that was entered in the Journal of the House and promptly forgotten. It read in part: "They [Lincoln and Stone] believe that the institution of slavery is founded on injustice and bad policy, but that the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends to increase rather than abate its evils." (Which means, the later Lincoln might have said, that slavery is wrong but that proposing to do away with it is also wrong because it makes slavery worse.) They went on to say that while the Constitution does not permit Congress to abolish slavery in the states, Congress can do so in the District of Columbia—but this power should not be exercised unless at "the request of the people of the District." This statement breathes the fire of an uncompromising insistence upon moderation. Let it be noted, however, that it did represent a point of view faintly to the left of prevailing opinion. Lincoln had gone on record as saying not merely that slavery was "bad policy" but even that it was unjust; but he had done so without jeopardizing his all-important project to transfer the state capital to Springfield.

In 1845, not long before he entered Congress, Lincoln again had occasion to express himself on slavery, this time in a carefully phrased private letter to a political supporter who happened to be an abolitionist.

I hold it a paramount duty of us in the free States, due to the Union of the States, and perhaps to liberty itself (paradox though it may seem), to let the

slavery of the other states alone; while, on the other hand, I hold it to be equally clear that we should never knowingly lend ourselves, directly or indirectly, to prevent that slavery from dying a natural death—to find new places for it to live in, when it can not longer exist in the old.

Throughout his political career he consistently held to this position.

After he had become a lame-duck Congressman, Lincoln introduced into Congress in January 1849 a resolution to instruct the Committee on the District of Columbia to report a bill abolishing slavery in the District. The bill provided that children born of slave mothers after January 1, 1850 should be freed and supported by their mothers' owners until of a certain age. District slaveholders who wanted to emancipate their slaves were to be compensated from the federal Treasury. Lincoln himself added a section requiring the municipal authorities of Washington and Georgetown to provide "active and efficient means" of arresting and restoring to their owners all fugitive slaves escaping into the District. (This was six years before he confessed that he hated "to see the poor creatures hunted down.") Years later, recalling this fugitive-slave provision, Wendell Phillips referred to Lincoln somewhat unfairly as "that slavehound from Illinois." The bill itself, although not passed, gave rise to a spirited debate on the morality of slavery, in which Lincoln took no part.

When Lincoln returned to active politics the slavery issue had come to occupy the central position on the American scene. Stephen Douglas and some of his colleagues in Congress had secured the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which, by opening some new territory, formally at least, to slavery, repealed the part of the thirty-four-year-old Missouri Compromise that barred slavery from territory north of 36°30'. The measure provoked a howl of opposition in the North and split Douglas's party. The Republican Party, built on opposition to the extension of slavery, began to emerge in small communities in the Northwest. Lincoln's ambitions and interests were aroused, and he proceeded to rehabilitate his political fortunes.

His strategy was simple and forceful. He carefully avoided issues like the tariff, internal improvements, the Know-Nothing mania, or prohibitionism, each of which would alienate important groups of voters. He took pains in all his speeches to stress that he was not an abolitionist and at the same time to stand on the sole program of opposing the extension of slavery. On October 4, 1854, at the age of forty-five, Lincoln for the first time in his life denounced slavery in public. In his speech delivered in the Hall of Representatives at Springfield (and later repeated at Peoria) he declared that he hated the current zeal for the spread of slavery: "I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself." He went on to say that he had no prejudice against the people of the South. He appreciated their argument that it would be difficult to get rid of the institution "in any satisfactory way." "I surely will not blame them for not doing what I should not know how to do myself. If all earthly power were given me, I should not know what to do as to the existing institution. My first impulse would be to free all the slaves and send them to Liberia, to their own native land." But immediate colonization, he added, is manifestly impossible. The slaves might be freed and kept "among us as underlings." Would this really better their condition?

What next? Free them, and make them politically and socially our equals. My own feelings will not admit of this, and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of whites will not. Whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgment is not the sole question, if indeed it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill founded, cannot be safely disregarded.⁵

⁵Later, in the debate at Ottawa, Illinois, Lincoln repeated a larger passage containing this statement, and added "this is the true complexion of aH I have said in regard to the institution of slavery and the black race."

And yet nothing could justify an attempt to carry slavery into territories now free, Lincoln emphasized. For slavery is unquestionably wrong. "The great mass of mankind," he said at Peoria, "consider slavery a great moral wrong. [This feeling] lies at the very foundation of their sense of justice, and it cannot be trifled with.... No statesman can safely disregard it." The last sentence was the key to Lincoln's growing radicalism. As a practical politician he was naturally very much concerned about those public sentiments which no statesman can safely disregard. It was impossible, he had learned, safely to disregard either the feeling that slavery is a moral wrong or the feeling— held by an even larger portion of the public—that Negroes must not be given political and social equality.

He had now struck the core of the Republican problem in the Northwest: how to find a formula to reconcile the two opposing points of view held by great numbers of white people in the North. Lincoln's success in 1860 was due in no small part to his ability to bridge the gap, a performance that entitles him to a place among the world's great political propagandists.

To comprehend Lincoln's strategy we must keep one salient fact in mind: the abolitionists and their humanitarian sympathizers in the nation at large and particularly in the Northwest, the seat of Lincoln's strength, although numerous enough to hold the balance of power, were far too few to make a successful political party. Most of the white people of the Northwest, moreover, were in fact not only not abolitionists, but actually— and here is the core of the matter—Negrophobes. They feared and detested the very thought of living side by side with large numbers of Negroes in their own states, to say nothing of competing with their labor. Hence the severe laws against free Negroes, for example in Lincoln's Illinois.⁶ Amid all the agitation in Kansas over making the territory a free state, the conduct of the majority of Republicans there was colored far more by self interest than by moral principle. In their so-called Topeka Constitution the Kansas Republicans *forbade free Negroes even to come into the state*, and gave only to whites and Indians the right to vote. It was not bondage that troubled them—it was the Negro, free or slave. Again and again the Republican press of the Northwest referred to the Republican Party as the "White Man's Party." The motto of the leading Republican paper of Missouri, Frank Blair's *Daily Missouri Democrat*, was "White Men for Missouri and Missouri for White Men." Nothing could be more devastating to the contention that the early Republican Party in the Northwest was built upon moral principle. At the party convention of 1860 a plank endorsing the Declaration of Independence was almost hissed down and was saved only by the threat of a bolt by the antislavery element.

If the Republicans were to succeed in the strategic Northwest, how were they to win the support of both Negrophobes and antislavery men? Merely to insist that slavery was an evil would sound like abolitionism and offend the Negrophobes. Yet pitching their opposition to slavery extension on too low a moral level might lose the valued support of the humanitarians. Lincoln, perhaps borrowing from the old *Be-soil ideology, had the right formula and exploited it. He first hinted at it in the Peoria speech:

The whole nation is interested that the best use shall be made of these Territories. *We want them for homes of free white people. This they cannot be, to any considerable extent, if slavery shall be planted within them.* Slave States are places for poor white people to remove from, not to remove to. New free States are the

⁶ The Illinois constitutional convention of 1847 had adopted and submitted to a popular referendum a provision that instructed the legislature to pass laws prohibiting the immigration of colored persons. It was ratified by a vote of 50,261 to 21,297. If this vote can be taken as an index, the Negrophobes outnumbered their opponents by more than two to one. In 1853 the state was in effect legally closed to Negro immigration, free or slave. A Negro who entered in violation of the law was to be fined exorbitantly, and if unable to pay the fine could be sold into service. None of the states of the Northwest allowed Negro suffrage.

places for poor people to go to, and better their condition. For this use the nation needs these Territories.

The full possibilities of this line first became clear in Lincoln's "lost" Bloomington speech, delivered at a Republican state convention in May 1856. There, according to the report of one of his colleagues at the Illinois bar, Lincoln warned that Douglas and his followers would frighten men away from the very idea of freedom with their incessant mouthing of the red-herring epithet: "Abolitionist!" "If that trick should succeed," he is reported to have said,⁷ "if free negroes should be made *things*, how long, think you, before they will begin to make *things* out of poor white men?"

Here was the answer to the Republican problem. Negrophobes and abolitionists alike could understand this threat; if freedom should be broken down they might themselves have to compete with the labor of slaves in the then free states—or might even be reduced to bondage along with the blacks! Here was an argument that could strike a responsive chord in the nervous system of every Northern man, farmer or worker, abolitionist or racist: if a stop was not put somewhere upon the spread of slavery, the institution would become nation-wide.⁸ Here, too, is the practical significance of the repeated statements Lincoln made in favor of labor at this time. Lincoln took the slavery question out of the realm of moral and legal dispute and, by dramatizing it in terms of free labor's self-interest, gave it a universal appeal. To please the abolitionists he kept saying that slavery was an evil thing; but for the material benefit of all Northern white men he opposed its further extension.

The importance of this argument becomes increasingly clear when it is realized that Lincoln used it in every one of his recorded speeches from 1854 until he became the President-elect. He once declared in Kansas that preventing slavery from becoming a nation-wide institution "is *the purpose* of this organization [the Republican Party]." The argument had a great allure too for the immigrants who were moving in such great numbers into the Northwest. Speaking at Alton, in the heart of a county where more than fifty per cent of the population was foreign-born, Lincoln went out of his way to make it clear that he favored keeping the territories open not only for native Americans, "but as an outlet for *free white people* everywhere, the world over—in which Hans, and Baptiste, and Patrick, and all

⁷ The only existing version of this speech is not a verbatim report.

⁸ Stephen A. Douglas's appeal to this fear was as strong as Lincoln's: "Do you desire to turn this beautiful state into a free Negro colony in order that when Missouri abolishes slavery she can send one hundred thousand emancipated slaves into Illinois to become citizens and voters on an equality with yourselves?" But Douglas had no comparable appeal to antislavery sentiment, and Lincoln was able to exploit the fact.

The conception that slavery was a menace to free labor throughout the nation was by no means new, nor peculiar to Lincoln. At the time of the Mexican war, Lowell had made Hosea Biglow say:

wy, it's jest ez clear ez figgers,
Clear ez one an one make two
Chaps that make black slaves o' riggers
Want to make white slaves o' you.

Seward, in his "Irrepressible Conflict" speech, delivered four months after Lincoln's "House Divided" speech, declared "The United states must and will, sooner or later, become either entirely a slaveholding nation or entirely a free-labor nation. Either the cotton and rice-fields of South Carolina and the sugar plantations of Louisiana will ultimately be tilled by free labor, and Charleston and New Orleans become marts for legitimate merchandise alone, or else the rye-fields and wheat-fields of Massachusetts and New York must again be surrendered by their farmers to slave culture and to the production of slaves, and Boston and New York become once more markets for trade in the bodies and souls of men." But largely because Lincoln was considered more conservative than Seward on the slavery question he was chosen for the party nomination in 1860.

other men from all the world, may find new homes and better their condition in life."

During the debates with Douglas, Lincoln dwelt on the theme again and again, and added the charge that Douglas himself was involved in a Democratic "conspiracy . . . for the sole purpose of nationalizing slavery."⁹ Douglas and the Supreme Court (which a year before had handed down the Dred Scott decision) would soon have the American people "working in the traces that tend to make this one universal slave nation." Chief Justice Taney had declared that Congress did not have the constitutional power to exclude slavery from the territories. The next step, said Lincoln, would be

another Supreme Court decision, declaring that the Constitution of the United States does not permit a State to exclude slavery from its limits.... We shall lie down pleasantly, dreaming that the people of Missouri are on the verge of making their State free; and we shall awake to the reality instead, that the Supreme Court has made Illinois a slave State.

So also the theme of the "House Divided" speech:

I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the House to fall—but I do expect it to cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new, North as well as South.

Have we no tendency to the latter condition?¹⁰

The last sentence is invariably omitted when this passage is quoted, perhaps because from a literary standpoint it is anticlimactic. But in Lincoln's mind—and, one may guess, in the minds of those who heard him—it was not anticlimactic, but essential. Lincoln was not emphasizing the necessity for abolition of slavery in the near future; he was emphasizing the immediate "danger" that slavery would become a nation-wide American institution if its geographical spread were not severely restricted at once.

Once this "House Divided" speech had been made, Lincoln had to spend a great deal of time explaining it, proving that he was not an abolitionist. These efforts, together with his strategy of appealing to abolitionists and Negrophobes at once, involved him in embarrassing contradictions. In northern Illinois he spoke in one vein before abolition-minded audiences, but farther south, where settlers of Southern extraction were dominant, he spoke in another. It is instructive to compare what he said about the Negro in Chicago with what he said in Charleston.

Chicago, July 10, 1858:

⁹Historians have dismissed these charges as untrue. Lincoln admitted that they were based on circumstantial evidence.

¹⁰Lincoln is reported to have said to political friends of the "house divided" utterance: "I would rather be defeated with this expression in my speech, and unhold it and discuss it before the people, than be victorious without it." (Herndon refused to believe it would harm him politically, assuring: "It will make you President.") It would probably be truer to say that Lincoln was making the great gamble of his career at this point than to say that he was sacrificing his political prospects for a principle. He had had his experience with pettifogging politics of the timid sort during his Congressional phase, and it had led only to disaster. When Joseph Medill asked Lincoln in 1862 why he had delivered "that radical speech," Lincoln answered "Well, after you fellows had got me into that mess and begun tempting me with offers of the Presidency, I began to think and I made up my mind that the next President of the United States would need to have a stronger anti-slavery platform than mine. So I concluded to say something." Then Lincoln asked Medill to promise not to repeat his answer to others.

Let us discard all this quibbling about this man and the other man, this race and that race and the other race being inferior, and therefore they must be placed in an inferior position. Let us discard all these things, and unite as one people throughout this land, until we shall once more stand up declaring that all men are created equal.

Charleston, September 18, 1858:

I will say, then, that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races [applause]: that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people. .

And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.

It is not easy to decide whether the true Lincoln is the one who spoke in Chicago or the one who spoke in Charleston. Possibly the man devoutly believed each of the utterances at the time he delivered it; possibly his mind too was a house divided against itself. In any case it is easy to see in all this the behavior of a professional politician looking for votes.¹¹

Douglas did what he could to use Lincoln's inconsistency against him. At Galesburg, with his opponent sitting on the platform behind him, he proclaimed: "I would despise myself if I thought that I was procuring your votes by concealing my opinions, and by avowing one set of principles in one part of the state, and a different set in another." Confronted by Douglas with these clashing utterances from his Chicago and Charleston speeches, Lincoln replied: "I have not supposed and do not now suppose, that there is any conflict whatever between them."

But this was politics—the premium was on strategy, not intellectual consistency—and the effectiveness of Lincoln's campaign is beyond dispute. In the ensuing elections the Republican candidates carried a majority of the voters and elected their state officers for the first time. Douglas returned to the Senate only because the Democrats, who had skillfully gerrymandered the election districts, still held their majority in the state legislature. Lincoln had contributed greatly to welding old-line Whigs and antislavery men into an effective party, and his reputation was growing by leaps and bounds. What he had done was to pick out an issue—the alleged plan to extend slavery, the alleged danger that it would spread throughout the nation—which would turn attention from the disintegrating forces in the Republican Party to the great integrating force. He was keenly aware that the party was built out of extremely heterogeneous elements, frankly speaking of it in his "House Divided" speech as composed of "strange, discordant, and even hostile elements." In addition to

¹¹Lincoln was fond of asserting that the Declaration of Independence, when it said that all men are created equal, included the Negro. He believed the Negro was probably inferior to the white man, he kept repeating but in his right to eat, without anyone's leave, the bread he earned by his own labor, the Negro was the equal of any white man. Still he was opposed to citizenship for the Negro. How any man could be expected to defend his right to enjoy the fruits of his labor without having the power to defend it through his vote, Lincoln did not say. In his Peoria speech he had himself said: "No man is good enough to govern another man, without that man's consent." In one of his magnificent private memoranda on slavery Lincoln argued that anyone who defends the moral right of slavery creates an ethic by which his own enslavement may be justified. ("Fragment on Slavery," 1854.) But the same reasoning also applies to anyone who would deny the Negro citizenship. It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that so far as the Negro was concerned, Lincoln could not escape the moral insensitivity that is characteristic of the average white American.

abolitionists and Negrophobes, it united high and low-tariff men, hard- and soft-money men, former Whigs and former Democrats embittered by old political fights, Mainelaw prohibitionists and German tipplers, Know-Nothings and immigrants. Lincoln's was the masterful diplomacy to hold such a coalition together, carry it into power, and with it win a war.

Lincoln may have become involved in a gross inconsistency over slavery and the Negro, but this was incidental to his main concern. Never much troubled about the Negro, he had always been most deeply interested in the fate of free republicanism and its bearing upon the welfare of the common white man with whom he identified himself. On this count there was an underlying coherence in the logic of his career. His thesis that slavery might become national, although probably without factual foundation,¹² was a clever dialectical inversion of a challenge to the freedom of the common white man set forth by the most extreme Southern advocate of slavery. George Fitzhugh, a Virginia lawyer, had written and published a volume in 1854 entitled *Sociology for the South*, in which he carried to its logical conclusion the pro-slavery argument laid down by men like Calhoun. These men had said that Northern industrialism was brutal in its treatment of free labor, while Southern slavery was relatively kind to the Negro. Fitzhugh insisted that since slavery is the best condition for labor, all labor, black or white, should be owned by capital. "Slavery," Fitzhugh predicted, "will everywhere be abolished, or everywhere be re-instituted." Herndon had shown the volume to Lincoln, and Lincoln had read it with mounting anger and loathing. Although a half-dozen Southern papers had toyed with his thesis, Fitzhugh was not taken too seriously in the South, but Lincoln seized upon his ultra-reactionary ideas as a symbol.¹³

Even as early as 1856 the Republicans had been exploiting the theme of the menace of slavery to free labor. The party put out a campaign pamphlet entitled: *The New Democratic Doctrine: Slavery not to be confined to the Negro race, but to be made the universal condition of the laboring classes of society*. The supporters of this doctrine vote for Buchanan. Lincoln carefully cut out the following editorial from a Southern paper and pasted it in his campaign scrapbook:

¹²Historians are in general agreement with such contemporaries of Lincoln as Clay, Webster, Douglas, and Hammond that the natural limits of slavery expansion in the continental United States had already been reached. But even if slavery had spread into new territories, it hardly follows that it would have spread into the free states of the North. As to the territories, if natural causes were not sufficient to keep slavery from going there, Douglas's popular sovereignty probably would have done so. The free population of the North was expanding far more rapidly than the South's population, and it was much more mobile. Many Republicans accepted Douglas's assurances that slavery would be kept out of the territories by action of local settlers alone. After Douglas split with the more Southern faction of the Democratic Party headed by President Buchanan, there was even a movement among Republicans to coalesce with him and offer him the presidential nomination in 1860 on a popular-sovereignty platform! Why, it was reasoned, should opponents of the extension of slavery try to exclude it from the territories by an act of Congress that would be a gratuitous insult to the South, if the same end could be served by letting geography and popular sovereignty have their way? Part of Lincoln's achievement in the Lincoln-Douglas debates was to taunt Douglas into statements that made him absolutely unpalatable to free-soil Republicans. But the supreme irony can be found in the fact that early in 1861 the Republicans in Congress gave their votes to measures organizing the territories of Colorado, Nevada, and Dakota without prohibiting slavery. After beating Douglas in 1860, they organized the territories along the pattern of his policy, not Lincoln's.

¹³ Some of Lincoln's devices were a little sharp. A Springfield newspaper, the *Conservative*, opposed him and spoke in moderate language for acquiescence in extending slavery. Herndon, who knew the editor of the *Conservative*, once came upon an article in the *Richmond Enquirer* justifying slavery for both black and white laborers, à la Fitzhugh. Lincoln observed that it would be helpful if Illinois proslavery papers would take up such an extreme and vulnerable position. Herndon, with Lincoln's permission, induced the editor of the *Conservative* to reprint the *Enquirer's* article with approval. The editor fell for the scheme and his paper was "almost ruined" as a result.

Free society! We sicken of the name! What is it but a conglomeration of greasy mechanics, filthy operatives, small-fisted farmers, and moon-struck theorists? All the Northern and especially the New England states are devoid of society fitted for well bred gentlemen. The prevailing class one meets is that of mechanics struggling to be genteel, and small farmers who do their own drudgery; and yet are hardly fit for association with a southern gentleman's body servant. This is your free society which the northern hordes are endeavoring to extend to Kansas.

This was the direct antithesis of everything that Lincoln had been taught to believe—the equality of man, the dignity of labor, and the right to move upward in the social scale. It defied the beliefs of millions of free men in the North who, like Lincoln, were ambitious to move forward and believed that the most sacred thing free society could do was to give to the common man freedom and opportunity to make his own way. When Lincoln debated Douglas at Galesburg, Republican supporters carried a huge banner reading: "Small Fisted Farmers, Mudsills of Society, Greasy Mechanics for A. Lincoln."

Flouting the aspirations of free labor cost the Southerners dear. The current of proslavery reaction had run its course, and it was somehow fitting that a man like Lincoln should use ideas like Fitzhugh's to destroy the Old South.

V

Before Lincoln took office the issues upon which he was elected had become obsolete. Seven states of the deep South had seceded. The great question was no longer slavery or freedom in the territories, but the nation itself. The Union, if it was to be maintained, as Lincoln, an ardent nationalist, thought it must, could be defended only by the sort of aggressive war that few Northerners wanted to wage. Psychologically on the defensive, the North had to be strategically on the offensive. One of Lincoln's most striking achievements was his tactical and ideological resolution of this difficulty.

By all rational calculation the Confederacy had much to lose and nothing to gain by war. Its strategic aim was merely to preserve itself as an independent state, an end that could be lost in war and achieved in peace. The North, on the other hand, once compromise and reconciliation had failed, had to wage a successful coercive war in order to restore the Union. Northern public opinion, which was in fierce agreement on the desirability of maintaining the Union, was reluctant to consider what saving the Union might cost. There was no more unanimity in the North on waging war to keep the Union than there had been in the South on seceding to destroy it. Always there loomed the danger that an apparently unprovoked attack upon the Confederacy would alienate so many people in the Union and the world at large that it would hopelessly cripple the very cause for which the war would be fought. Such an attack would certainly lose the support of the border states, still not withdrawn from the Union, which Lincoln was desperately eager to hold. He had deferred to this sentiment in his Inaugural Address, saying to the South: "The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors."

And still there were the forts, the troublesome forts belonging to the government of the United States but located in Confederate territory. Particularly urgent was the problem of Fort Sumter, so placed in the mouth of Charleston harbor that it could hardly be reinforced without subjecting Union ships to the fire of Confederate batteries. Already Major Anderson's men there were running short of supplies and calling for help.

The situation had all the elements of a dilemma for both sides. But since Lincoln had to act first to save the fort from starvation, his was the initial problem. He had promised to maintain the Union, and protect, preserve, and defend the Constitution. It was now too late to restore the Union by compromise, because the Republican leaders, with his advice and

consent, had rejected compromise in December.¹⁴ To order Anderson to withdraw Fort Sumter's garrison at the demand of the Confederates was a tremendous concession, which Lincoln actually considered but rejected; it would be an implicit acknowledgment of the legality of secession, and the Union would, by his own recognition, be at an end; the moral stock of the Confederacy would go soaring. And yet a military assault to bring relief to the fort would be a dangerous expedient. If it failed, it would ruin the already diminished prestige of his administration; success or failure, it would be looked upon by peace advocates and the border states as wanton aggression. However, there was one way out: the Confederates themselves might bring matters to a head by attacking Sumter before Anderson should be forced by shortages to evacuate.

It was precisely such an attack that Lincoln's strategy brought about. On March 29, 1861 the Secretaries of War and the Navy were ordered to co-operate in preparing a relief expedition to move by sea on April 6. Governor Pickens of South Carolina was notified that an attempt would be made to supply Fort Sumter "with provisions only," and not with arms, and was advised by Lincoln that "if such an attempt be not resisted, no effort to throw in men, arms, or ammunition will be made without further notice, or [sic] in case of an attack upon the fort."

To Northern opinion such a relief expedition would seem innocent enough—bringing food to hungry men. But to the Confederacy it posed a double threat: force would be used if the attempt to provision the fort were resisted; and should it not be resisted, an indefinite occupation by Union forces could be expected which would weaken the Confederate cause at home and sap its prestige abroad, where diplomatic recognition was so precious. Lincoln had now taken the burden of the dilemma from his own shoulders and forced it upon the Southerners. Now they must either attack the fort and accept the onus of striking the first blow, or face an indefinite and enervating occupation of Sumter by Anderson's soldiers. Could any supposedly sovereign government permit a foreign power to hold a fort dominating the trade of one of its few great harbors? As Professor James G. Randall has observed, the logic of secession demanded that the Confederates take the fort or that the Union abandon it.

Major Anderson refused a demand for prompt evacuation. Knowing that the Union relief fleet was approaching, the Confederates on the morning of April 12 began firing upon Sumter, and thus convicted themselves by an act of aggression. They had not only broken the Union, they had attacked it; and the reception of the deed at the North was everything that Lincoln could wish.

Lincoln's secretaries, Nicolay and Hay, observe in their monumental biography:

Abstractly it was enough that the Government was in the right. But to make the issue sure, he [Lincoln] determined that in addition the rebellion should be put in the wrong.... When he finally gave the order that the fleet should sail he was master of the situation . . . master if the rebels hesitated or repented, because they would thereby forfeit their prestige with the South; master if they persisted, for he would then command a united North.

Nicolay, in his *Outbreak of Rebellion*, asserted his belief that it was Lincoln's carefully matured purpose to force rebellion to put itself flagrantly and fatally in the wrong by attacking Fort Sumter. But there is even more intimate evidence of Lincoln's intention. On July 3 the newly appointed Senator from Illinois Orville Browning (chosen to replace Douglas, who had just died), called upon Lincoln and held a conversation with him. Fortunately Browning kept a diary, and his entry for that evening reads:

¹⁴Always a good party man, Lincoln feared the Republican Party would disintegrate if it sacrificed the one principle its variegated supporters held in common. Compromise, he wrote Thurlow Weed, December 17, 1860, "would lose us everything we gain by the election . . . would be the end of us."

He [Lincoln] told me that the very first thing placed in his hands after his inauguration was a letter from Majr. Anderson announcing the impossibility of defending or relieving Sumter. That he called the cabinet together and consulted Genl Scott—that Scott concurred with Anderson, and the cabinet, with the exception of P M Genl Blair were for evacuating the Fort, and all the troubles and anxieties of his life had not equalled those which intervened between this time and the fall of Sumter. He himself conceived the idea, and proposed sending supplies, without an attempt to reinforce [,] giving notice of the fact to Gov Pickens of S. C. *The plan succeeded. They attacked Sumter--it fell, and thus, did more service than it otherwise could.*

If we may trust Browning, who was one of Lincoln's friends, it was the Confederate attack and not the military success of the expedition that mattered most. In a letter to Gustavus Vasa Fox, the extraordinary naval officer who had led the relief attempt, Lincoln concluded, "You and I both anticipated that the cause of the country would be advanced by making the attempt to provision Fort Sumter, even if it should fail; and it is no small consolation now to feel that our anticipation is justified by the result."

This realistic bit of statecraft provides no reason for disparaging Lincoln, certainly not by those who hold that it was his legal and moral duty to defend the integrity of the Union by the most effective means at his command.¹⁵ The Confederate attack made it possible to picture the war as a defensive one;¹⁶ for some time it unified Northern sentiment. Who can say with certainty that the war could have been won on any other terms?

There was, for all this, a tremendous incongruity in Lincoln as a war leader. He did not want war; he wanted Union, and accepted war only when it seemed necessary to the Union. He had always been pre-eminently a man of peace. Probably the only time in his early political career when he seriously exposed himself by taking an unpopular stand on an important issue had been the occasion of his opposition to the Mexican War. His speech before Congress in 1848 ridiculing his own participation in the Black Hawk War is one of the classics of American frontier humor.

Evidently he did not expect a long fight. His first call for 75,000 volunteers required a three months' enlistment. (These figures must have come back to haunt him: in four years

¹⁵Professor Kenneth Stampp concludes in his admirable review of the Sumter incident "Although Lincoln accepted the possibility of war, which, in retrospect at least, was the inevitable consequence of his strategy of defense . . . the burden rested not on Lincoln alone, but on the universal standards of statesmanship and on the whole concept of 'national interest.... The fact remains that southern leaders shared with Lincoln the responsibility for a resort to force. They too preferred war to submission."

¹⁶"They well knew," said Lincoln of the Confederates in his July message to congress, "that the garrison in the fort could by no possibility comm~it aggression upon them. They knew—they were expressly not)fied— that the giving of bread to the few brave and hungry men of the garrison ~vas all which would on that occasion be attempted, unless themselves, by resisting so much, should provoke more."

the war took some 618,000 lives on both sides.) But it soon enough became clear that the struggle would not be brief or easy. In a short time it loomed up as one of the major crises of modern history. To Lincoln fell the task of interpreting it to his people and the world.

There need be no doubt as to how Lincoln saw the conflict; he had innumerable occasions to state his view of it to Congress, to the country, even to foreign workingmen. It was, of course, a war to preserve the Union; but the Union itself was a means to an end. The Union meant free popular government, "government of the people, by the people, for the people."¹⁷ But popular government is something deeper and more valuable than a mere system of political organization: it is a system of social life that gives the common man a chance. Here Lincoln returns again to his favorite theme—the stupendous value to mankind of the free-labor system. "This," he asserts gravely in his first extended message to Congress,

is essentially a people's contest. On the side of the Union it is a struggle for maintaining in the world that form and substance of a government whose leading object is to elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial weights from all shoulders; to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all; to afford all an unfettered start, and a fair chance in the race of life . . . this is the leading object of the government for whose existence we contend.

Such popular government has often been called an experiment, he went on, but two phases of the experiment have already been successfully concluded: the establishing and administering of it. There remains a final test—"its successful maintenance against a formidable internal attempt to overthrow it." The people must now demonstrate to the world that those who can fairly win an election can defeat a rebellion, and that the power of government which has been honestly lost by ballots cannot be won back by bullets. "Such will be a great lesson of peace: teaching men that what they cannot take by an election, neither can they take it by a war; teaching all the folly of being the beginners of a war."

Then there was his superb formulation of an everlasting problem of republican politics: "Must a government, of necessity, be too strong for the liberties of its own people, or too weak to maintain its own existence?"

Thus, skillfully, Lincoln inverted the main issue of the war to suit his purpose. What the North was waging, of course, was a war to save the Union by denying self-determination to the majority of Southern whites. But Lincoln, assisted by the blessed fact that the Confederates had struck the first blow, presented it as a war to defend not only Union but the sacred principles of popular rule and opportunity for the common man.

Here is a war aim couched in the language of Lincoln's old ideal, the language that had helped to make him President. Notice that while it is politically on the radical or "popular" side of the fight, it is historically conservative: it aims to preserve a long-established order that has well served the common man in the past. The Union is on the defensive, resisting "a war upon the rights of all working people." Sometimes Lincoln's language is frankly conservative. No men living, he insists, "are more worthy to be trusted than those who toil up from poverty.... Let them beware of surrendering a political power which they already possess, and which, if surrendered, will surely be used to close the door of advancement against such as they, and to fix new disabilities and burdens upon them, till all of liberty shall be lost." Again: "There is involved in this struggle the question whether your children and my children shall enjoy the privileges we have enjoyed."

Such being his conception of the meaning of the struggle, is it not understandable that Lincoln thinks in terms of restoring in its pristine simplicity that which has gone before? Is it not understandable that he sets for his cause no such revolutionary goal as destroying the

¹⁷In conversation with John Hay, Lincoln said "For my own part, I consider the first necessity that is upon us, is of proving that popular government is not an absurdity."

South's social fabric? Bring the South back, save the Union, restore orderly government, establish the principle that force cannot win out, and do it with the least cost in lives and travail—there is the Lincoln program. The tremendous forces of social revolution storm about his head, and in the end he bows to them. But not without doubt and hesitation. Not even without a struggle against his own destiny to become the symbol of freedom.

VI

From the beginning, then, everything was subordinate to the cause of Union. In his Inaugural Address Lincoln repeated with pathetic vehemence his several earlier assurances that slavery would not be attacked in the states. He went farther. Congress had recently passed a constitutional amendment guaranteeing that the federal government would never interfere with slavery. Should the amendment be ratified by the states, it would nourish bondage for an epoch by fixing slavery fast in the constitutional structure of the nation. It would expressly make emancipation impossible except by voluntary action of the states severally. Although it was no part of his constitutional function, Lincoln did what he could to speed this amendment toward ratification by announcing that he considered it only an explicit statement of what was already implicit in the Constitution—"I have no objection to its being made express and irrevocable."

When war came, its goal was almost universally considered in the North to be as Lincoln declared it—to bring back the South with slavery intact. So general was this sentiment that when the aged John J. Crittenden of Kentucky introduced into Congress on the day after Bull Run a resolution declaring that the war was not being waged for conquest or subjugation nor to interfere with "the established institutions" of the seceded states, even Republicans of Jacobin leanings were afraid to vote against it. When Lincoln declared to Congress that he was determined not to allow the war to "degenerate into a violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle," he only voiced the initial opinion of a vast majority of Northerners. But before the war was eight months old, the House had significantly refused to re-enact the Crittenden resolution. Lincoln's mind would not change so readily.

As the conflict wore on, the difficulties of fighting a war against a slave power without fighting slavery became painfully evident. Fugitive slaves began to make their way into the Union lines. How were the generals to deal with them? In August 1861 the abolitionist General Fremont, sorely tried by guerrilla warfare in Missouri, declared martial law and proclaimed that all slaves of local owners resisting the United States were freemen. After failing to induce Fremont to revoke his proclamation voluntarily, Lincoln promptly countermanded it. Later he overruled an order of General David Hunter freeing slaves in Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina.

Antislavery men everywhere became impatient with this mode of conducting the war. They were fighting a power based on the labor of slaves, the greatest single wartime resource of the Confederacy. Not only did the administration refuse to issue an injunction to the slaves to free themselves and cease working for the secession cause, but it even withheld freedom from the blacks in those regions where its armies were penetrating the South. Fighting an attack upon the Constitution with the nicest constitutional methods had become preposterous.

Lincoln had genuine constitutional scruples, but his conservatism in everything pertaining to slavery was also dictated by political and strategic considerations. He was determined to hold the loyalty of the four border states, Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri, and Delaware, all of which were unwilling to participate in an antislavery crusade. The three larger states, as a glance at the map will show, were vital to Union strategy and to the safety of the capital itself. They were also contributing soldiers to the cause. Fremont's action, Lincoln reported, had had an extremely unfavorable effect on the Kentucky legislature, and in the field a whole company of volunteers upon hearing it had thrown down their arms and disbanded. Further, a great section of conservative Northern opinion was willing to fight for

the Union but might refuse to support a war to free Negroes, and kept insisting that the war would become more bitter if the South saw that it was fighting avowed abolitionism. In everything he did, Lincoln had to reckon with the political potential of this sentiment, and he well understood its power, for it was of a piece with the old anti-Negro feeling he had always known in Illinois politics.

To become President, Lincoln had had to talk more radically on occasion than he actually felt; to be an effective President he was compelled to act more conservatively than he wanted. The Radicals raged against him with increasing bitterness, and concluded, as one of their representatives reported after an interview, that he had "no antislavery instincts." As the war lengthened, Radical sentiment became stronger. Lincoln was in no position to thrust aside the demands of the very element in the country that supported the war most wholeheartedly. Men who had never thought of attacking the South's peculiar institution before secession were now ready to destroy it in the most abrupt and ruthless way if by so doing they could hasten the end of the war. They argued that it was selfcontradictory to fight the war without smashing slavery and with it the South's entire social structure. Calculating Republican leaders pointed out that to win the war without destroying the slaveowning class would only

bring back the rebel States into full fellowship as members of the Union, with their full delegations in both Houses of Congress. They, with the pro-slavery conservatives of the border States and the Democrats of the Northern states, will control Congress. Republicans and Republican principles will be in the minority under law, and this latter state would be worse than the former—worse than war itself.

There was, then, a logic to social revolution that Lincoln was vainly trying to override. He proposed the impossible, as Harry Williams has remarked: "to conduct the war for the preservation of the status quo which had produced the war."

Lincoln surveyed the scene with his extraordinary brooding detachment, and waited. (He had, reported Charles Francis Adams, Jr., "a mild, dreamy, meditative eye, which one would scarcely expect to see in a successful chief magistrate in these days of the republic.") He listened to the protests and denunciations of the Radicals and their field agents throughout the country, and politely heard abolition delegations to the White House. Like a delicate barometer, he recorded the trend of pressures, and as the Radical pressure increased he moved toward the left. To those who did not know him, it seemed that he did so reluctantly. The Radicals watched his progress with grim satisfaction—with the feeling, as Wendell Phillips expressed it, that if Lincoln was able to grow, "it is because we have watered him." But it is significant that such a haughty and impatient abolitionist as Senator Charles Sumner developed a deep respect and affection for Lincoln. According to one report, Lincoln said one day to Sumner: "We'll fetch 'em; just give us a little time.... I should never have had votes enough to send me here, if the people had supposed I should try to use my veto power to upset slavery." To two famous Unitarian clergymen, William Ellery Channing and Moncure D. Conway, he observed that the masses of the people were concerned only about military success and remained indifferent to the Negro. He added: "We shall need all the anti-slavery feeling in the country and more; you can go home and try to bring the people to your views; and you may say anything you like about me, if that will help. Don't spare me!"

It was all in keeping with his profound fatalism. He had always believed—and in conversations at Springfield had often told Herndon of his faith—that events are governed (the words are Herndon's) "by certain irrefragable and irresistible laws, and that no prayers of ours could arrest their operation in the least . . . that what was to be would be inevitable." It was the conviction of a man without haste and without malice, but it was not the philosophy of a reformer. Back in Illinois, Douglas, knowing and respecting Lincoln, had been asked if he was not a weak man. No, replied the Little Giant, but "he is preeminently a

man of the atmosphere that surrounds him." Looking back upon events in 1864, Lincoln could say with a profound modesty: "I claim not to have controlled events but confess plainly that events have controlled me." As the Radicals gained in strength, he conducted a brilliant strategic retreat toward a policy of freedom.

To say that Lincoln's approach to the slavery question was governed by his penchant for philosophic resignation is not to say that he had no policy of his own. His program flowed from his conception that his role was to be a moderator of extremes in public sentiment. It called for compensated emancipation (at first in the loyal border states) assisted by federal funds, to be followed at length by deportation and colonization of the freed Negroes. To a member of the Senate he wrote in 1862 that the cost of freeing with compensation all slaves in the four border states and the District of Columbia, at an average price of four hundred dollars per slave, would come to less than the cost of eighty-seven days of the war. Further, he believed that taking such action would shorten the war by more than eighty-seven days and "thus be an actual saving of expense." Despite the gross note of calculation at the end (one rescues 432,000 human beings from slavery and it turns out to be a saving of expense), the proposal was a reasonable and statesmanlike one, and it is incredible that the intransigence of all but one of the states involved should have consigned it to defeat.

The alternative idea of colonizing the Negroes abroad was and always had been pathetic. There had been in existence for a generation an active movement to colonize the slaves, but it had not sent out of the country more than the tiniest fraction of the annual increase of the slave population. By 1860 its fantastic character must have been evident to every American who was not determined to deceive himself. Nevertheless, when a deputation of colored men came to see Lincoln in the summer of 1862, he tried to persuade them to set up a colony in Central America, which, he said, stood on one of the world's highways and provided a country of "great natural resources and advantages." "If I could find twenty-five able-bodied men, with a mixture of women and children," he added, with marvelous naivete, . . . I could make a successful commencement."

Plainly Lincoln was, as always, thinking primarily of the free white worker: the Negro was secondary. The submerged whites of the South and the wage workers of the North feared the prospect of competing with the labor of liberated blacks. The venerable idea of deporting emancipated Negroes, fantastic though it was, grew logically out of a caste psychology in a competitive labor market. Lincoln assured Congress that emancipation would not lower wage standards of white labor even if the freedmen were not deported. But if they were deported, "enhanced wages to white labor is mathematically certain.... Reduce the supply of black labor by colonizing the black laborer out of the country, and by precisely so much you increase the demand for, and wages of, white labor."

In the summer of 1862 Congress passed a Confiscation Act providing that the slaves of all persons supporting the rebellion should be forever free. The Radicals had also proposed to make the measure retroactive and to provide for permanent forfeiture of the real estate of rebels. Lincoln was adamant about these features, and had no enthusiasm for the act in general, but finally signed a bill that had been modified according to his demands. Even with these concessions the Radicals had scored a triumph and forced Lincoln part way toward emancipation. He had prevented them from destroying the landed basis of the Southern aristocracy, but he had put his signature, however reluctantly, to a measure that freed the slaves of all persons found guilty of disloyalty; freed them on paper, at least, for the act was unenforceable during the war. It also guaranteed that escaped slaves would no longer be sent back to work for disloyal masters, and in this respect freed some slaves in reality.

When Lincoln at last determined, in July 1862, to move toward emancipation, it was only after all his other policies had failed. The Crittenden Resolution had been rejected, the border states had quashed his plan of compensated emancipation, his generals were still floundering, and he had already lost the support of great numbers of conservatives. The Proclamation became necessary to hold his remaining supporters and to forestall —so he believed—English recognition of the Confederacy. "I would save the Union," he wrote in

answer to Horace Greeley's cry for emancipation. ". . . If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it." In the end, freeing all the slaves seemed necessary.

It was evidently an unhappy frame of mind in which Lincoln resorted to the Emancipation Proclamation. "Things had gone from bad to worse," he told the artist F. B. Carpenter a year later, "until I felt that we had reached the end of our rope on the plan of operations we had been pursuing; that we had about played our last card, and must change our tactics, or lose the game. I now determined upon the adoption of the emancipation policy...." The passage has a wretched tone: things had gone from bad to worse, and as a result the slaves were to be declared free!

The Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863 had all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading. It contained no indictment of slavery, but simply based emancipation on "military necessity." It expressly omitted the loyal slave states from its terms. Finally, it did not in fact free any slaves. For it excluded by detailed enumeration from the sphere covered in the Proclamation all the counties in Virginia and parishes in Louisiana that were occupied by Union troops and into which the government actually had the power to bring freedom. It simply declared free all slaves in "the States and parts of States" where the people were in rebellion—that is to say, precisely where its effect could not reach.¹⁸ Beyond its propaganda value the Proclamation added nothing to what Congress had already done in the Confiscation Act.

Seward remarked of the Proclamation: "We show our sympathy with slavery by emancipating the slaves where we cannot reach them and holding them in bondage where we can set them free." The London *Spectator* gibed: "The principle is not that a human being cannot justly own another, but that he cannot own him unless he is loyal to the United States."

But the Proclamation was what it was because the average sentiments of the American Unionist of 1862 were what they were. Had the political strategy of the moment called for a momentous human document of the stature of the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln could have risen to the occasion. Perhaps the largest reasonable indictment of him is simply that in such matters he was a follower and not a leader of public opinion. It may be that there was in Lincoln something of the old Kentucky poor white, whose regard for the slaves was more akin to his feeling for tortured animals than it was to his feeling, say, for the common white man of the North. But it is only the intensity and not the genuineness of his antislavery sentiments that can be doubted. His conservatism arose in part from a sound sense for the pace of historical change. He knew that formal freedom for the Negro, coming suddenly and without preparation, would not be real freedom, and in this respect he understood the slavery question better than most of the Radicals, just as they had understood better than he the revolutionary dynamics of the war.

For all its limitations, the Emancipation Proclamation probably made genuine emancipation inevitable. In all but five of the states freedom was accomplished in fact through the thirteenth amendment. Lincoln's own part in the passing of this amendment was critical. He used all his influence to get the measure the necessary two-thirds vote in the House of Representatives, and it was finally carried by a margin of three votes. Without his influence the amendment might have been long delayed, though it is hardly conceivable that it could have been held off indefinitely. Such claim as he may have to be remembered as an Emancipator perhaps rests more justly on his behind-the-scenes activity for the thirteenth amendment than on the Proclamation itself. It was the Proclamation, however, that had psychological value, and before the amendment was passed, Lincoln had already become the personal symbol of freedom. Believing that he was called only to conserve, he

¹⁸There was also a cautious injunction to the "liberated" slaves "to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defense," and another to "labor faithfully for reasonable wages." The latter has a sardonic ring.

had turned liberator in spite of himself:

"I claim not to have controlled events but confess plainly that events have controlled me."

VII

Lincoln was shaken by the presidency. Back in Springfield, politics had been a sort of exhilarating game; but in the White House, politics was power, and power was responsibility. Never before had Lincoln held executive office. In public life he had always been an insignificant legislator whose votes were cast in concert with others and whose decisions in themselves had neither finality nor importance. As President he might consult others, but innumerable grave decisions were in the end his own, and with them came a burden of responsibility terrifying in its dimensions. Lincoln's rage for personal success, his external and worldly ambition, was quieted when he entered the White House, and he was at last left alone to reckon with himself. To be confronted with the fruits of his victory only to find that it meant choosing between life and death for others was immensely sobering. That Lincoln should have shouldered the moral burden of the war was characteristic of the high seriousness into which he had grown since 1854; and it may be true, as Professor Charles W. Ramsdell suggested, that he was stricken by an awareness of his own part in whipping up the crisis. This would go far to explain the desperation with which he issued pardons and the charity that he wanted to extend to the conquered South at the war's close. In one of his rare moments of self-revelation he is reported to have said: "Now I don't know what the soul is, but whatever it is, I know that it can humble itself." The great prose of the presidential years came from a soul that had been humbled. Lincoln's utter lack of personal malice during these years, his humane detachment, his tragic sense of life, have no parallel in political history.

"Lincoln," said Herndon, "is a man of heart—aye, as gentle as a woman's and as tender...." Lincoln was moved by the wounded and dying men, moved as no one in a place of power can afford to be. He had won high office by means sometimes rugged, but once there, he found that he could not quite carry it off. For him it was impossible to drift into the habitual callousness of the sort of officialdom that sees men only as pawns to be shifted here and there and "expended" at the will of others. It was a symbolic thing that his office was so constantly open, that he made himself more accessible than any other chief executive in our history. "Men moving only in an official circle," he told Carpenter, "are apt to become merely official—not to say arbitrary—in their ideas, and are apter and apter with each passing day to forget that they only hold power in a representative capacity." Is it possible to recall anyone else in modern history who could exercise so much power and yet feel so slightly the private corruption that goes with it? Here, perhaps, is the best measure of Lincoln's personal eminence in the human calendar—that he was chastened and not intoxicated by power. It was almost apologetically that he remarked in response to a White House serenade after his re-election that "So long as I have been here, I have not willingly planted a thorn in any man's bosom."

There were many thorns planted in his bosom. The criticism was hard to bear (perhaps hardest of all that from the abolitionists, which he knew had truth in it). There was still in him a sensitivity that the years of knock-about politics had not killed, the remarkable depths of which are suddenly illumined by a casual sentence written during one of the crueler outbursts of the opposition press. Reassuring the apologetic actor James Hackett, who had unwittingly aroused a storm of hostile laughter by publishing a confidential letter, Lincoln added that he was quite used to it: "I have received a great deal of ridicule without much malice; and have received a great deal of kindness, not quite free from ridicule."

The presidency was not something that could be enjoyed. Remembering its barrenness for him, one can believe that the life of Lincoln's soul was almost entirely without consummation. Sandburg remarks that there were thirty-one rooms in the White House and that Lincoln was not at home in any of them. This was the house for which he had sacrificed

so much!

As the months passed, a deathly weariness settled over him. Once when Noah Brooks suggested that he rest, he replied: "I suppose it is good for the body. But the tired part of me is inside and out of reach." There had always been a part of him, inside and out of reach, that had looked upon his ambition with detachment and wondered if the game was worth the candle. Now he could see the truth of what he had long dimly known and perhaps hopefully suppressed—that for a man of sensitivity and compassion to exercise great powers in a time of crisis is a grim and agonizing thing. Instead of glory, he once said, he had found only "ashes and blood." This was, for him, the end product of that success myth by which he had lived and for which he had been so persuasive a spokesman. He had had his ambitions and fulfilled them, and met heartache in his triumph.