

“The Political Philosophy of Abraham Lincoln”

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Introduction

From atop the stairs of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., a visitor can simultaneously take in many of the greatest symbols of the United States government. This remarkable view includes the various war monuments of the National Mall, the Washington Monument, and the Capitol Building. Inside the memorial, an imposing, 12-foot-tall statue of Abraham Lincoln stares eternally into the distance, taking in the same monuments and buildings as the memorial’s visitors. In a sense, no vantage point in all of Washington offers a clearer perspective on American government.

This paper explores Lincoln’s thought and explicates the way said thought mirrors this image of physical reality: Lincoln, more than any man before or since, held and articulated a coherent, comprehensive understanding of the American experiment. Partly because he had the benefit of hindsight and partly because of his own genius, the sixteenth president -- the man who led America through its bloodiest struggle -- offers a complete conception of the core of the American political ethos. In other words, this paper seeks to demonstrate the truth in Lincoln’s comment that he “never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence.”¹ Strictly speaking, Lincoln’s political philosophy

¹ Basler Volume IV, Page 240.

was not new, but Lincoln made a novel contribution through his clear *articulation* of American principles.

The primary sources which will help to elucidate Lincoln's political thought will be Lincoln's writings. Some of Lincoln's most important speeches -- his masterfully crafted addresses to his fellow Americans -- will prove most useful. It is worth noting that, in at least some ways, many of these speeches could not be more different from one another. They span three dynamic, tumultuous decades. When Lincoln gave the earliest, he was an unknown state legislator. When he delivered the last, he was a second-term President preparing to suture his nation's wounds. Their central topics vary greatly, from mob rule to slavery, from popular sovereignty to war, and various points in between. These differences are important, and they play a role in understanding Lincoln from a biographical perspective as a man. There is inarguably value in engaging in such exercises, but the main goal of this project is to look beyond these differences and trace a cogent line of thinking that unites Lincoln's thought into a unified whole.

To accomplish this goal, this paper is divided into three sections. The first section covers Lincoln's characteristic brand of rationalism and the way in which he intermixed passion and reverence in with said rationalism. The next section covers Lincoln's theoretical relationship with the foundational document of the United States: the Declaration of Independence. The final section attempts to draw from the previous sections and articulate Lincoln's conception of what America consists of in its essence.

Lincoln's Rationalism

Any serious attempt to understand Lincoln's political thought ought to take note of Lincoln's theoretical methodology. While Lincoln demonstrated a clear knack for and appreciation of passionate evocations and calls for reverence (which will be discussed at the end of this section), Lincoln's rationalism set him apart from many of his contemporaries and plays a significant role in forming his unique literary voice. Lincoln's love for reason as a young man eventually evolved into his love for the Constitution and for maintaining the union.² In this sense, a serious investigation into Lincoln's thought ought to pay proper attention to the way in which Lincoln so valued man's capacity for reason. This section will therefore explore the rationalistic tendency that characterizes Lincoln's thought. It briefly looks to rationalism in Lincoln's personal character, highlights Lincoln's rationalistic writing style, figures rationality's place in Lincoln's political philosophy through an analysis of Lincoln's "Lyceum Address," and finally discusses the role of passion in Lincoln's thought as demonstrated in the same address.

From an early age, Lincoln found reason -- and the elegant yet powerful simplicity of proper reason's unchanging accuracy -- appealing. His young mind found the rational elements of math, history, and literature irresistible.³ A fully-grown Lincoln would later include that he "studied and nearly mastered the Six-books of Euclid" in his remarkably brief autobiography for his first presidential campaign.⁴ Both the fact that his autobiography was so short -- it was

² David Herbert Donald. *Lincoln*. Page 269

³Id. Page 31.

⁴ Selected Speeches and Writings. Page 266.

presented as if consisting only of facts that were absolutely necessary to achieve the barest substantial vision of the man -- and that he would choose to include his mastery of geometry testify to Lincoln's privileging of the rational.

Intense rationality, the kind for which Euclidian geometry stands as paradigmatic, was fundamentally important to Lincoln's being. He would later write in a private letter that he viewed even the Declaration of Independence through a Euclidian framework. He wrote, "One would start with great confidence that he could convince any sane child that the simpler propositions of Euclid are true; but, nevertheless, he would fail, utterly, with one who should deny the definitions and axioms. The principles of Jefferson are the definitions and axioms of free society."⁵ An art involving particulars, such as politics, does not require a fundamentally different approach than arts involving things that can not be otherwise (of which mathematics is a paradigmatic example); they are united in their ultimate intelligibility in fundamental axioms or principles. This is how Euclidian rationalism is, at least in a certain sense, central to Lincoln's understanding of the Declaration of Independence -- and therefore to his entire conception of American government. One should keep in mind that Lincoln used passion and reverence to great effect, but, if there exists one characteristic of Lincoln's personal being necessary to properly understanding the core of his theoretical process, it is surely his unwavering faith in the power of human reason.

The compositional structure of some of Lincoln's most remarkable speeches further reveal Lincoln's rationalism. Lincoln's canon offers many fine examples to prove this point, but

⁵ *Id.* 216

his “House Divided” speech is perhaps the best example of all. Abraham Lincoln delivered this acceptance speech for the Illinois Republican Party nomination for the 1858 Senate race on June 16th 1858. Lincoln had carefully curated several drafts of the speech. By the time it was finally delivered, he was able to deliver it from memory, without needing to refer to his manuscript.⁶ The speech would subsequently become one of his best known addresses. It was and is referred to by its primary metaphor: the biblical image of a “house divided” from the Mark 3:25.⁷ The speech consists of 135 sentences.

The speech evidences Lincoln’s rationalism both through what it says and does not say. Most of the sentences are short, devoid of the flowery ornamentation that characterized much of 19th-century American political discourse. 13 of these sentences -- nearly 10% -- are conditional statements. Lincoln incorporates the language of mathematicians and logicians into his political discourse. For example, take the final portion of the speech. Lincoln declares, “The result is not doubtful. We shall not fail -- if we stand firm, we shall not fail. Wise councils may accelerate or mistakes delay it, but, sooner or later the victory is sure to come.”⁸ Here Lincoln predicts that the institution of slavery will eventually become extinct as long as those opposed to it “stand firm.” To be fair, one might make the case that Lincoln was simply telling the crowd what they wanted to hear or was being hyperbolic. Despite the fact that Lincoln’s audience in this case is unabashedly partisan, it is remarkable that Lincoln would make such a declaration. In spite of all

⁶ David Herbert Donald. *Lincoln*. 206.

⁷ cite

⁸ *Selected Speeches*. Page 139.

the fickle and unpredictable aspects of political life, Lincoln believes so powerfully in the power of reason to unravel even the most tangled political issue of the 19th century.

In an early speech, the *Address to a Young Men's Lyceum*, Lincoln explicitly outlines his trust in reason, while also demonstrating an appeal to reverence and passion. In the final portion of the speech, Lincoln restates his central thesis. He argues, “Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defense.”⁹ This reason stands in stark contrast to emotional-inspired examples of mob law that served as the inspiration for Lincoln’s remarks. At the same time, Lincoln does display a fair amount of passion himself. Lincoln calls for “a *reverence* for the constitution and laws” and ends the speech by claiming that in the future “no hostile foot [will] pass over or desecrate [Washington’s] resting place.”¹⁰ Considering this speech in more detail highlights the centrality of reason (and the way in which balances that reason with what is still a considerable amount of passion) in Lincoln’s early thought, which would continue to serve as a foundational element throughout Lincoln’s entire life.

Lincoln begins the speech with a clear announcement of his subject: “As a subject for the remarks of the evening, *the perpetuation of our political institutions*, is selected.”¹¹ Lincoln will discuss “political institutions,” and these political institutions are “our’s.” In order to understand what this speech is getting at, one must fully understand Lincoln’s use of these terms. To a reader reared in the modern United States, intuition would suggest that Lincoln is commenting

⁹ *Id.* 21.

¹⁰ *Id.* Emphasis added

¹¹ Page 108. *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, edited by Roy P. Basler et al. Volume I. Emphasis in original.

on national institutions like Congress or the Presidency. To Lincoln's contemporaries, living in a young nation still struggling to fully grasp the balance between state and federal power, Lincoln's subject would probably seem far more vague. During the first half of the 19th-century, local governments were relatively strong, and the Federal government was likewise relatively weak.¹² What is the scope the antecedent for "our?" To those in the audience at Springfield, it would seem reasonable that the speech's subject matter would parallel the speech's audience and remain strictly local. If the speech were not to remain strictly local to the town of Springfield or the state of Illinois, it might conceivably restrict itself to regional matters. After all, it was an act of mob violence in a neighboring state that catalyzed the speech in the first place. Perhaps to the surprise of some in his audience, Lincoln decided not to restrict his remarks to the local, state, or regional. In the sentence immediately following the announcement of his subject, he remarks, "In the great journal of things happening under the sun, *we, the American People*, find our account running, under date of the nineteenth century of the Christian era."¹³ Lincoln clears up the potential ambiguity of his scope swiftly, clarifying that he is addressing a wide national audience and also confirming his awareness of the potential for confusion.

Lincoln will speak on American political institutions, but what about them will he remark on? The political institutions will be remarked on within the context of their "perpetuation." Lincoln's use of this word is powerful and nuanced. Lincoln uses this word in a precise manner. It is a word that evokes the passage of time in three dimensions: for something to exist in

¹² I make this claim based on my own long-established historical understanding, but I gesture towards Tocqueville's concern over centralized power at the *state* level (as opposed to the Federal level) to back-up my point.

¹³ *Id.* Emphasis added.

“perpetuation,” it must have been existing in the past, currently exist, and will continue to exist into the future. In brilliant and subtle literary style, the first paragraph of the speech utilizes this tripartite character of Lincoln’s subject to accentuate its importance.

Lincoln begins with a string of three sentences in the present tense. Though it might be hard to notice on a first reading because of the intricate subordinate clauses, all three sentences have the exact same subject and verb: “We [the American people] find.”¹⁴ In the fourth sentence, Lincoln switches to the past tense but keeps the same subject and verb, stating, “We, when mounting the stage of existence, *found* ourselves the legal inheritors of these fundamental blessings.”¹⁵ This sentence connects the past and present tenses with a repetitive use of subject and predicate. It similarly connects Lincoln’s audience, his fellow citizens, with the Founders of the United States, a group Lincoln was subtextually evoking with his repetition of “find.” Lincoln defines this relationship through the lens of “legal inheritance.” These two words work together brilliantly because they reinforce the aforementioned sense of three-pronged temporal analysis. The act of inheritance evokes memories of the past, action in the present, and prudential forethought for the future. Lincoln’s subtle addition of “legal” prefigures his forthcoming thesis on the need to redirect the passions of the revolution towards passion for the law.

The fifth and sixth sentences remain in the past tense before enabling a shift into the future with an intermediary stop in the present. Lincoln speaks of the founding generation of the past in relation to the American generation of the present. Lincoln comments that the founding generation were “*once* hardy, brave, and patriotic, but *now* [are a] lamented and departed race of

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

ancestors.”¹⁶ From there, Lincoln completes his temporal analysis and extends his context to the distant future. He speaks of the need to “transmit [a political edifice of liberty and equal rights], the former, unprofaned by the foot of an invader; the latter, undecayed by the lapse of time, and untorn by usurpation -- to the *latest generation that fate shall permit the world to know*.”¹⁷ The final sentence of the opening paragraph asserts the importance of this task by contextualizing it within the past, present, and future: “This task of gratitude to our fathers, justice to ourselves, duty to posterity, and love for our species in general, all imperatively require us faithfully to perform.”¹⁸ Lincoln understands this work as a *transmission* of the work of the past, by men existing in the present, for the sake of the future. *Outside* of this temporal context, the work is also justified by a “love for our species in general” that transcends temporal boundaries. When Lincoln speaks of “perpetuation,” he means to invoke all of these ideas -- relating to the past, present, future, and atemporal -- simultaneously.

Having laid out his subject and defined the task at hand, Lincoln turns towards outlining his plan to implement said task. He begins by taking stock of those obstacles which might hinder the transmission of liberty to posterity. He asks quite bluntly, “at what point shall we expect the approach of danger?”¹⁹ Lincoln responds to his own inquiry in two parts, addressing foreign and domestic threats separately. In a subtle and elegantly executed rhetorical maneuver, the style of these parts corresponds to a forthcoming critical distinction in the speech: passion and reason. He dismisses foreign threats with a grandiose rhetorical flourish of hyperbolic imagery: “All of

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.* Emphasis added.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.* 109.

the armies of Europe, Asia and Africa combined, with all the treasure on earth (our own excepted) in their military chest; with a Buonaparte for the commander, could not by force, take a drink from the the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years.”²⁰

This highly patriotic sentiment comes without any premises to logically support it; the only support for Lincoln’s claim comes from its impassioned delivery. Lincoln does not attempt to hide this lack of support, but he also does not make this potential weakness abundantly apparent. The sentence’s ornate structure goes a long way to distract a listener from really taking in the fantastic magnitude of the image Lincoln presents. In this way, the remark fails to engage the audience’s logical capacities and mirrors the “passions” of the revolution that Lincoln will soon turn towards. The sentence exemplifies Lincoln’s tactful capabilities at weaving passion into his expression.

In contrast, Lincoln delivers his evaluation of domestic threats in short, easily understood sentences: “If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.”²¹ As the sentences describing foreign dangers were delivered in a manner evoking the passions, these sentences evoke rationality. They are both conditional sentences, working in the traditional argumentative mode of “if A, then B.” The second sentence is particularly notable because it appears to make a universal claim, the definitional hallmark of a logical paradigm. Lincoln could conceivably be referring specifically to the United States as a particular nation that happens to be “of free men,” but it makes far more sense -- given the trajectory of Lincoln’s later political thought and his ambition

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.* It is worth noting that the final sentence becomes chillingly poetic when viewed in the larger context of Lincoln’s later career and the Civil War.

to universalize the principles of the Declaration²² -- to read Lincoln's statement as a universal truth stating; if nations of freemen are to die, they must die by their own doing. As for premises to support this claim, Lincoln spends the remainder of his speech elaborating on the idea of danger to liberty from within (in stark contrast to the unfounded evaluation of foreign dangers).

Pivoting from the general theoretical belief that free societies are destroyed from the inside, Lincoln provides a specific example of this occurrence within the United States. Recent incidents involving "worse than savage mobs" indicate a cultural disposition marked by "increasing disregard for law... and to substitute the wild and furious passions, in lieu of the sober judgement of Courts."²³ After introducing this idea -- the central thesis of his speech -- Lincoln immediately attempts to universalize it towards the entire United States. These incidences are not bound by geographical region, but rather extend "from New England to Louisiana."²⁴ Both slave states and non-slave states have this problem. Folks representing various regional natures, from the "pleasure hunting masters of Southern slaves" to the "order loving citizens of the land of steady habits,"²⁵ all share the problem. This is why Lincoln went to such pains earlier in the speak to establish a the national "we." The tyranny of passion at the cost of reason affects all Americans. It is an American problem that forces the young nation to confront its American principles. Viewed within this context, the fact that this speech was delivered by a state assemblymen before a small crowd of his local peers becomes quite astonishing.

²² The *Gettysburg Address* is probably the best example of this. I am specifically thinking of Lincoln's remark that "**we are... testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.**"

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.* Notice the unsavory characterization of slave holders, who prefer pleasure to order.

Lincoln then moves on to describe specific incidents of the “mob rule” he decries. He says he will not endeavor to create a comprehensive list because such an attempt would be “tedious, as well as useless.”²⁶ Instead, Lincoln opts to describe the two cases that are “most dangerous in example, and revolting to humanity.”²⁷ He first describes a horrifying scene from Mississippi where the illegal communal murder of gamblers led to a frenzy that catalyzed the further murder of blacks, black sympathizers, and strangers from other states. The rampage continued such that hanging went “from gamblers to negroes, from negroes to white citizens, and from these to strangers; till, dead men were seen literally dangling from the boughs of trees upon every road side.”²⁸ Lincoln uses this story to illustrate the way that the mentality of mob law spreads from one demographic to another such that no group is ultimately exempted. In this sense, his message achieves an urgency for the entirety of his national audience. No one can logically remain undisturbed by these events. Lincoln’s second example hits geographically closer to home. It involves a St. Louis man who was “seized in the street, dragged to the suburbs of the city, chained to a tree, and actually burned to death; and all within a single hour from the time he had been a freeman.”²⁹ Lincoln’s compelling retelling of these two examples is strong and most likely would have evoked sympathy within his Springfield audience. However, as is often the case with fine argumentation, the examples Lincoln chooses to omit also give us insight into his thought. As Roy Basler points out, Lincoln neglects to ruminate on the lynching of

²⁶*Id.* Lincoln often uses these kinds of rhetorical dyads to create a link between an idea’s relationship to an individual (“our intelligence” and “tedious”) and the (presumably universal) truth (“Truth” and “useless”). An earlier example from the same paragraph: “[Mob law] would be a violation of truth, and an insult to our intelligence to deny.”

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.* 110.

²⁹ *Id.*

abolitionist editor that happened less than two months prior in Alton, Illinois. Basler contends that this omission results not from a lack of knowledge on Lincoln's part, but contrarily from Lincoln's tactful prudence in selecting "a subtler way of pricking the conscience of his audience."³⁰

After laying out his two primary examples of mob law, Lincoln relates them to his primary subject, proposing the question, "What has this to do with the perpetuation of our political institutions?"³¹ Lincoln answers this question in three parts, dividing the consequences of mob law into the categories of individual, group, and society. This tactic of providing multiple answers to a single question constitutes a frequently recurring motif in Lincolnian argumentation. These answers usually present several (usually three) perspectives in order from least important to most important. Often, this triad also operates chronologically, thus relating to the discussion of three-dimensional temporality above.³² In this example, Lincoln traces the unity of ostensibly just killings of the past (those outlined above) to mistakenly unjust killings possible in the present to blatantly unjust killings in the future. Lincoln first treats the "direct consequences" of killing the men described above. Lincoln strongly expresses -- arguably to the point of hyperbole -- that he does not believe the death of these men, on its own, presents any real danger or misfortune. He explains that they "constitute a portion of population, that is worse than useless... If they were annually swept, from the stage of existence, by the plague or small pox, honest men would, perhaps, be much profited, by the operation."³³ Lincoln then outlines the

³⁰ *Id.* 111, Footnote 3.

³¹ *Id.* 110

³² I will provide many examples throughout this work, but one need only to think about the structure of the *Gettysburg Address* as a clarifying example.

³³ *Id.*

second level of consequence. This level exists in the near future and involves the capacity for the seemingly justified murders by mob law of the present to allow for unjust killings in the future. Unlike a well maintained legal system, mob law is highly susceptible to making mistakes. Consequently, it is likely that “the innocent, those who have ever set their faces against violations of law in every shape, alike with the guilty, fall victims to the ravages of mob law.”³⁴ At this point, people (i.e., the mob) still believes its actions are justified, but a just government does not actually exist. Mob law will effectively continue to erode liberty “till all the walls erected for the defense of the persons and property of individuals, are trodden down, and disregarded.”³⁵ Lincoln sees such a terrible end as the impending, albeit unintentional, consequence of mob law.

As terrible as the unintentional injustice outlined above may be, Lincoln warns that it “is not the full extent of the evil.”³⁶ The third and worst consequence of mob law involves intentional injustice inspired by the previous consequence of unintentional injustice. Lincoln argues that when “the lawless in spirit” witness the mob punishing innocent people without any repercussions, they will become “the lawless in practice.”³⁷ Specifically, they will turn towards government, which they have regarded as their “deadliest bane” and “pray for nothing so much, as its total annihilation.”³⁸ At the same time, noble men who would die defending government lack motivation to do so as they witness “their property destroyed; their families insulted, and their lives endangered; [and] their persons injured.”³⁹ With lawless folk seeing to destroy the

³⁴ *Id.* 111.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.*

government and “the attachment of the people” (which Lincoln describes as “the bulwark of any Government”⁴⁰) broken down, government crumbles, and the ultimate and most fearsome consequence of mob law reveals itself. What starts as seemingly innocuous lynchings of immoral men conceivably leads towards the decline of the “fondest hope, of the lovers of freedom, throughout the world.”⁴¹ This is the true danger Lincoln addresses in his speech. He is arguing that mob law, the characteristic activity of un-reason, not only poses a danger to individuals, it also threatens the very essence of democratic government: the affections of its citizens.

The loss of this affection makes room for ambitious men that seek to achieve greatness on the scale of the Founders. Lincoln is convinced that men of this sort will continue to appear. He cites history as a source that insists “men of ambition and talents will... continue to spring up.”⁴² These men express a “natural” desire to achieve greatness on a scale that contain be met within their present regime. While many men may be satisfied with “nothing beyond a seat in Congress [or] a gubernatorial or a presidential chair,”⁴³ there will inevitably be some great men who cannot be satisfied that way. This is because “[t]owering genius disdains a beaten path.”⁴⁴ This type of genius is not satisfied merely expanding the territory of an already established nation or adding to a list of great deeds of an already established nation. As Lincoln puts it, these men “thirst and burn for distinction; and, if possible, [they] will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves, or enslaving freemen.”⁴⁵ One ought to pause here to highlight both the irony that Lincoln would actually become known as the “Great Emancipator” and the fact that

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.* 112.

⁴² *Selected Speeches*. Page 19.

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*

Lincoln actually misdiagnosed what causes the Union to eventually split. It was not a *single* “towering genius” that would launch the country into bloody struggle; it was a *regional* divide over a policy that ultimately revolved around a moral question.

By potentially catalyzing the rise of the towering genius, even the relatively minor instances of mob law that Lincoln presents pose a fundamental threat to the perpetuation of American political institutions. Reason, taking the form of devotion for law, is the only adequate cure for the potentially deadly ailment of mob law, but passion is still present in Lincoln’s thinking and must be taken account of. At the conclusion of his speech, Lincoln declares, “Passion has helped us; but it can do so no more. It will in future be our enemy.”⁴⁶ This seems to fit within the basic thesis of Lincoln’s speech: the American people ought to turn to reason as a cure for the potentially deadly threat of mob rule. Yet Lincoln himself uses ample hyperbole and rhetorical flourishes -- some of which were analysed above -- throughout his writings and even in this speech, an address ostensibly devoted to reason alone. There is good reason, therefore, to doubt at least somewhat that Lincoln is less than completely serious when he advocates for a totalizing devotion to reason. He knows that reverence will never totally be absent from the American ethos. He demonstrated this decades later in the *Gettysburg Address*, the first line of which displays at least a hint of reverence for the moment of the Founding.

Reason and passion (or reverence) therefore *both* play an important role in Lincoln’s thought. Lincoln utilizes the latter to make truly compelling arguments and identify himself with a tradition in which he locates his values and ultimately holds in the highest esteem. He utilizes

⁴⁶ *Selected Speeches. Page 21.*

the reason as a fundamental analytic tool by which he formulates the essence of his political philosophy and his conception of the United States. He also presents reason a cure to the immediate and increasing danger of mob rule in the United States. Of the pair, reason is the dominant mode of thought in Lincoln's political philosophy, but passion and reverence play a critical role. Both are required to achieve a full understanding of Lincoln's method and thought.

Lincoln and the Declaration of Independence

In a brief impromptu speech at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Lincoln said, "I have never had a feeling politically which did not spring from the Declaration of Independence."⁴⁷ If one could accurately accuse Lincoln of being hyperbolic here, it cannot be by much. Lincoln referred to the document in an authoritative sense regularly throughout his life. He saw it as a universal truth, a statement that ultimately applies to all people in all lands. In the speech at Independence Hall, he went on to speak of this universal applicability. He says that the Declaration of Independence involved more than "the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land." Rather, he recognized "something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time."⁴⁸ To understand Lincoln's political philosophy, one must understand Lincoln's theoretical relationship with the Declaration of Independence. Two examples will serve to illustrate this relationship: Lincoln's use of the Declaration to rebut Stephen Douglas and the Declaration's influence on the Gettysburg Address.

⁴⁷ *Selected Speeches*. Page 283.

⁴⁸ *Id.*

Lincoln was motivated to return to politics in wake of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise in 1854. He immediately took aim at Stephen Douglas and his Kansas-Nebraska Act, which instituted the repeal. At first, he found some success in evincing public opinion, but it was not until Lincoln criticized “the interpretation [Chief Justice] Taney and Douglas offered of the Declaration of Independence [that] his words [took] wings.”⁴⁹ Douglas and Lincoln disagreed as to whether the statement in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal” was intended to apply only to white men. Lincoln rightly points out that Douglas “admits that the language of the Declaration is broad enough to include the whole human family, but he... argue[s] that the authors of that instrument did not intend to include negroes, by the fact that they did not at once, actually place them on an equality with the whites.”⁵⁰ Lincoln goes on to state that this argument is defunct because the authors of the Declaration never did “place all white people on an equality with one or another.”⁵¹ If there can be inequalities between white people, especially inequalities regarding political rights, then race alone fails as a sufficient condition to understand the equality spoken of in the Declaration.

Lincoln continues on to give his interpretation of the Declaration’s meaning of “equal.” Speaking of what he characterizes as “plain, unmistakable language,” Lincoln argues, “the authors of that notable instrument intended to include all men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal *in all respects*.”⁵² When it comes to physical differences like height, all men are obviously not equal. Similarly, all men are not equal in intellectual ability or “moral

⁴⁹ Donald. 201.

⁵⁰ *Selected Speeches*. 120.

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² *Id.*

developments, or social capacity.”⁵³ For Lincoln, the scope of those faculties in which men are “equal” is precisely defined in the Declaration. Men are created equal in “certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”⁵⁴ Crucially, it is not the case that all men were *actually* living in this state of equality at the time of the Founding or at the time Lincoln is speaking. Lincoln contends that the Founders “meant simply to declare the *right*, so that the *enforcement* of it might follow as fast as circumstances might permit.”⁵⁵ The talk of rights in the Declaration was an exercise in political philosophy, rather than a practical means of drafting legislation. Lincoln supports this position by clarifying, “the assertion that ‘all men are created equal’ was of no practical use in effecting our separation from Great Britain; and it was placed in the Declaration, not for that, but for future use.”⁵⁶

Lincoln sees himself living in that future. Many of the same concerns he felt decades earlier in his *Lyceum Address* still lingered as Lincoln’s attention turned to the issue of slavery and rebuking Douglas’ doctrine of popular sovereignty. One major difference does exist between the two moments in Lincoln’s thinking. Lincoln’s prescription in the *Lyceum Address* was “cold” reason, a reason which so devoid of any passionate affection that it does not necessarily carry what many would consider a properly “moral” component. In contrast, Lincoln’s appeal to the Declaration of Independence to argue against the *Dred Scott* decision and the Kansas-Nebraska Act makes an unmistakably moral claim. In an 1858 speech in Chicago, Lincoln declares that the unifying characteristic of the American people is not an ethnic one, but instead a belief in the

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.* emphasis in original.

⁵⁶ *Id.* 121.

principle that all men are created equal. When Americans look back to that idea, “they feel that the moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to [the Founders], that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were the blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration... and so they are.”⁵⁷ Lincoln therefore identifies a unifying thread for all Americans. Ingeniously, he has explicated a principle which combines the rationalistic impulses exemplified in his youth with a rousing moral imperative. In fact, the principle is so strong to Lincoln’s mind that it is not limited to one nation. He describes as potentially eternal and universal. That all men are created equal is “the electric cord... that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the *world*.”⁵⁸ As it is the result of human reason, which is universally applicable, the sentiment of the Declaration that all men are endowed with inalienable rights is similarly universal.

Beyond Lincoln’s refutation of Douglas’ argument that the equality of the Declaration only applies to white men, Lincoln’s most notable use of the Declaration of Independence can be found in his most well known speech, the *Gettysburg Address*. As Eva Brann rightly characterized it, this speech is “a distillation of Lincoln’s political philosophy, which he, on this occasion as on many others, attempted to infuse into the nation at large.”⁵⁹ In light then of the quote above about Lincoln’s political sentiments all flowing back to the Declaration of Independence, one might expect to find the document lingering behind every word of the speech.

⁵⁷ *Id.* 145.

⁵⁸ *Id.* 145-146.

⁵⁹ Eva Brann. *Homage to Americans*. Page 143.

This is accurate: The speech divides up into three distinct parts, and each part evokes the Declaration of Independence in its own ways.

The first part of the speech reads, “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”⁶⁰ Lincoln asserts immediately that the Founding of the United States began 87 years prior to 1863, in 1776. He neglects to identify the nation’s birth with the ratification of the Constitution in 1788 or the beginning of its operation in 1789. These dates might seem at first glance to have a more legally binding or concrete status than the writing and signing of the Declaration, but Lincoln sees something in the latter that is more fundamental to the United States. The second half of the sentence reveals what Lincoln finds as the distinguishing characteristic of the Founding (and therefore the United States). Instead of a legalistic document like the Constitution, it is an abstract, philosophical document like the Declaration of Independence which marks the conception of the United States. The use of the key term “liberty” and the direct quote of “all men are created equal” leaves no room for doubt that Lincoln is evoking the Declaration. Though this is the most direct instance of Lincoln asserted the potentially controversial view that the nation was born with the Declaration, it was not a new view for him. He had held the view, at least to some extent, for several decades, and he had privately expressed this opinion eight years earlier, in a 1855 letter to Joshua Speed. He marked the beginning of the United States with the Declaration by stating, “As a nation, we

⁶⁰ *Selected Speeches*. Page 405.

began by declaring that ‘all men are created equal.’”⁶¹ The first section of the *Gettysburg Address* clearly evokes the Declaration by tying it to the moment of America’s birth.

Associating the Founding moment of the United States with the Declaration of Independence also provides a link to Lincoln’s views on secession and Union. In his “First Inaugural,” Lincoln laid out this argument against secession. He explained his belief that “the Union of these States is perpetual.”⁶² This is “confirmed by the history of the Union itself.”⁶³ Lincoln then points out the specific historical moments he is referring to, citing that the Union “was formed in fact, by the Articles of Association in 1774. It was matured by the Declaration of Independence in 1776. It was further matured... by the Articles of Confederation in 1778. And finally in 1787, one of the declared objects for ordaining and establishing the Constitution, was ‘to form a more perfect union.’”⁶⁴ The beginning of the Gettysburg Address therefore evokes Lincoln’s argument against secession by reaffirming his view that the Founding moment of the United States was a unified action by all thirteen colonies.

The second part of the speech reads:

“Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for

⁶¹ *Selected Speeches*. 105.

⁶² *Selected Speeches*. 286

⁶³ *Selected Speeches*. *id.*

⁶⁴ *Id.* 287.

those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.”⁶⁵

Lincoln now turns from the past to the present, but he describes the present in terms of the past. The war in which “we *are* engaged” is really about determining whether a nation which *was* “so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.” In other words, Lincoln is framing the entire Civil War around the question of whether the principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence can last into the future in a tangible, national form. This test will determine the legitimacy not just of a single nation dedicated to those principles (the United States), but of *all* such nations. Just as the conception of the United States was associated not with legalistic formality and the Constitution, those who fought and died for its survival ultimately died on behalf of the principle that the nation represents, rather than merely the legally recognized entity that is the United States.

The most relevant portion of the final third of the speech turns towards the future. It reads:

“It is for us the living... to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under

⁶⁵ *Id.* 405

God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”⁶⁶

Lincoln thus describes the task of the future as issuing a “new birth of freedom.” It is important to recognize the ways in which this birth will be (and will not be) “new.” Lincoln is obviously referring here to the end of slavery in the United States. At this point in the war, the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation earlier in 1863, which freed the slaves held under Confederate rule, made it clear that slavery was sure to go extinct soon after the war’s conclusion. This freedom would not, however, be totally new in a theoretical sense. As mentioned earlier, Lincoln’s view was that the Declaration of Independence was inherently an anti-slavery document. In this sense, the “new birth” can be properly understood as the actualization in *fact* of what had always been in *principle*. For Lincoln, the past, present, and future of the United States is bound up in the Declaration of Independence; its ethos and the core of that document are one and the same.

Lincoln’s Conception of the United States

In light of the previous two sections, Lincoln’s overall conception of the United States should be becoming clearer, but it still remains somewhat elusive. The question lingers: what precisely constitutes Lincoln’s understanding of what the United States *is*? Whatever it is, it must be capable of being understood and expressed rationally, as Lincoln showed extreme devotion to rationality as a young man and never showed significant signs of doubt in reason’s capacity to interpret the highest ideas and solve the most significant problems of his day. It also surely must

⁶⁶ *Id.*

be fundamentally connected with the Declaration of Independence and the principles in that document which Lincoln found to be such an inspiration.

To help with this quandary, it is worthwhile to look to another commentator on the United States who is often called extraordinary, Alexis de Tocqueville. His book *Democracy in America* covers many aspects of the American political regime, but his main thesis involves an examination of the balance between two central themes: equality and freedom. Consider this quote:

“I think that democratic communities have a natural taste for freedom; left to themselves, they will seek it, cherish it, and view any privation of it with regret. But for equality their passion is ardent, insatiable, incessant, invincible; they call for equality in freedom; and if they cannot obtain that, they still call for equality in slavery. They will endure poverty, servitude, barbarism, but they will not endure aristocracy [which is to say a certain lack of equality] .”⁶⁷

Tocqueville’s dueling themes, equality and freedom, provide an excellent basis for pinning down Lincoln’s fundamental conception of the United States. Here are the number of times. Here is the number of times the word “equal” or “equality” -- in the political sense that Tocqueville uses -- appears in eight of Lincoln’s important speeches:⁶⁸

Early Life	Pre- Presidential	Early Presidency	Late Presidency
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⁶⁷ *Democracy in America*. Page 506.

⁶⁸ These speeches were selected for study before there was any intent for this data to be collected. In that sense, they are “random” selections.

Lyceum Address - 1	House Divided - 0	First Inaugural - 0	Gettysburg Address - 1*
Temperance Address - 0	Cooper Union Address - 0	Special Message to Congress - 1*	Second Inaugural - 0

As this figure shows, Lincoln didn't spend very much time talking about equality, at least by name. Of the 3 instances spread across 8 speeches, two are in reference to the Declaration of Independence, quoting the "self evident truth" that "all men are created equal."⁶⁹ The question of Lincoln's thought surrounding equality therefore transforms into a question about Lincoln's views towards the Declaration of Independence, as was covered above. Equality is therefore very important to Lincoln's conception of America; it is merely not the *central* element. In order to arrive at a complete answer, one must consider the other central theme that Tocqueville presented in his analysis: freedom.

Early Life	Pre-Presidential	Early Presidency	Late Presidency
Lyceum Address - 9	House Divided - 3	First Inaugural - 1	Gettysburg Address - 2
Temperance Address - 6	Cooper Union Address - 3	Special Message to Congress - 2	Second Inaugural - 0

⁶⁹ These are the speeches denoted by asterisks.

This study shows that Lincoln mentioned freedom and liberty substantially more than he did equality. In the 8 speeches in question, Lincoln mentions freedom an average of 3 times per speech. There is only one speech, the Second Inaugural, where the word doesn't appear at all. Freedom therefore most likely takes a central place in Lincoln's formulation, but, at the same time, one should not forget equality and its place in the Declaration of Independence.

Lincoln synthesised his views on freedom and equality in an 1861 fragmentary note, where he outlines the central principle behind American government. He says:

“The assertion of that principle [“liberty for all”], at that time, was the word, “fitly spoken” which has proved an “apple of gold” to us. The Union, and the Constitution, are the picture of silver, subsequently framed around it. The picture was made, not to conceal, or destroy the apple; but to adorn, and preserve it. The picture was made for the apple --- not the apple for the picture.”⁷⁰

In this rendering, the checks and balances of the Constitution and the legal protections in the Bill of Rights all aim towards protecting and preserving the principle of “liberty for all.” In light of all the evidence, it seems that *this* is the thought at the heart of Lincoln's understanding of American government. “Liberty” is the central principle of the American ethos, but only when it is complemented by equality. This “liberty” isn't complete without the modifier “for all.”

The concept of “liberty for all” is, then, the central idea in Lincoln's understanding of the American experiment, but there exist a few caveats that complicate this conception and better reflect the sophisticated and nuanced understanding that Lincoln offers. The first of these caveats

⁷⁰ Basler. *Collected Works*. Page 169.

is that “liberty for all” must be obtained through a consistent legal system, and respect for that legal system must be the primary, daily duty of its citizens. In the “Lyceum Address,” Lincoln proclaims, “Upon these [the laws and reverence for those laws] let the proud fabric of freedom rest, as the rock of its basis; and as truly as has been said of the only greater institution, “*the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*”⁷¹ Lincoln believed that freedom outside of law is, at best, a fickle, fragile freedom that will fall to despotism at the hands of mobocratic madness.

At the same time as he held his reverent view towards law, Lincoln believed that the very existence of American government meant that it was inevitable free government would continue on towards realizing its principle. As long as the United States continued to exist *in fact*, it would become more like itself *in principle*. Several quotations provided above from the “Gettysburg Address” and the Chicago speech evidence this fact.

Lincoln ultimately combines his view that free government will eventually become more truly *free* (as long as free institutions endure) with his emphasis on reverence for the law. These parallel Lincolnian postulates are employed harmoniously in Lincoln’s argument for preserving the Union. In his First Inaugural he said, “I hold, that in contemplation of universal law, and of the Constitution, the Union of these States is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments. It is safe to assert that no government proper, ever had a provision in its organic law for its own termination. Continue to execute all the express provisions of our national Constitution, and the Union will endure forever -- it being impossible to destroy it, except by some action not provided for in the instrument itself.”⁷² It is

⁷¹ *Selected Speeches*. 21.

⁷² *Id.*286.

notable that Lincoln refers to “all national governments” here, not just democratic ones devoted to “liberty for all.” We find here Lincoln’s political theory involving *all* nations, but of course all nations would include democratic ones, and, as Tocqueville postulated and the history of the past 150 years appears to confirm, there is a great trend toward democratization among all nations of the world.

In summation, Lincoln’s conception of the United States -- and of all free governments -- ultimately reduces to the fundamental principle of “liberty for all,” which he takes to be the precise meaning of the Declaration of Independence. In Lincoln’s mind, the task of the American experiment is nothing less to continue on into a *future* that is more properly aligned with the *eternal* American principles espoused in the *past*.

Annotated Bibliography

Brann, Eva T. H. "On the Second Founding." *Homage to Americans: Mile-high Meditations, Close Readings, and Time-spanning Speculations*. Philadelphia: Paul Dry, 2010. N. pag. Print.

In this essay, Eva Brann explicates the “Gettysburg Address.” She begins with an in-depth discussion of Edward Everett’s speech that immediately preceded Lincoln’s, comments on the speech as a whole, and then goes through the speech paragraph by paragraph. I was greatly impressed by Brann’s insights and her ability to weave seemingly unrelated aspects

of Classical literature and philosophy into her explication. I found both her substantive thoughts and her model of explication very helpful.

Donald, David Herbert. *Lincoln*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995. Print.

This book is an biography covering all of Lincoln's life. After sampling a few different sections from various biographies, I found this one to be the most readable and thorough without reaching the point of excessive detail. Donald wove primary sources in masterfully alongside his own commentary. There was a particular emphasis on Lincoln's psychological state without an improper use of speculation. I would say that this was definitely the most helpful secondary source I read, on the whole.

Farber, Daniel A. *Lincoln's Constitution*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 2004. Print.

In this book, Daniel Farber leads the reader through an in-depth analysis of Lincoln's Constitutional thought, especially in wake of the secession crisis inherent in the Civil War. As I didn't end up covering Lincoln's constitutionalism in my paper, I found Farber's most useful attribute to be his vivid historical sketches. There were many sections of the book that read more as a biography rather than a work of political science.

Jaffa, Harry V. *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War*.

Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000. Print.

This book is a tour-de-force commentary on Lincoln's later political thought. I admit that I did not thoroughly read the entire work, as it was by far the most demanding book I came across in my studies, but I must say of what I did read that I was incredibly impressed by

the depth of Jaffa's analysis. The only thing I would fault the book for would be Jaffa's tendency to often go on what were sometimes distracting, albeit always impressive, tangents.

Lincoln, Abraham, and Roy P. Basler. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1953. Print.

This collection presents the most comprehensive accumulation of all of Lincoln's writings and transcribed speeches. It consists of 8 volumes and a 9th index volume. It is incredibly well-indexed. Few footnotes are provided on the whole, but they are almost always very useful when they are provided. On the whole, it's a well organized collection, and much of what it contains can rightfully be considered some of the finest writing of all time.

Lincoln, Abraham. *Selected Speeches and Writings*. New York: Vintage, 1992. Print.

This is a one volume collection of selected speeches and writings by Abraham Lincoln. I have cited it when it overlaps with the Basler collection to make accessing references easier.

Tocqueville, Alexis De, J. P. Mayer, and George Lawrence. *Democracy in America*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006. Print.

This book is a commentary on American democracy. To paraphrase Harvey Mansfield, it is the greatest book on both America and on democracy in general. I don't know if I would make that same claim, but I will say that I have yet to come across anything better.

