

Lehrman: The danger of underestimating Lincoln

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Abraham Lincoln "saw through other men who thought all the while they were instructing or enlightening him, with a sort of dry, amused patience," wrote Harriet Beecher Stowe, the novelist who wrote "Uncle Tom's Cabin." "He allowed the most tedious talker to (belabor) to him, the most shallow and inflated to advise him, reserving only to himself the right to a quiet chuckle far down in the depths of his private consciousness."

Law partner William H. Herndon had studied Lincoln at close range for years. "He was modest, quiet and unobtrusive in manner, sympathetic and cordial in social contact," Herndon later wrote. "He was commonplace and winsome, yet dignified . . . : no person could feel any restraint or backwardness in his presence: the latch-string to his sympathy was always out, and, when not handicapped with melancholy, the door to his genial, hearty and sunshiny nature was always wide open."

Contemporaries underestimated the lean and lanky man at their peril. From the time that young Lincoln defeated neighborhood bullies in wrestling matches to the time that he outmaneuvered Republican and Democratic opponents to win reelection in 1864, he was a force to be reckoned with -- even feared.

Lincoln had honed his rhetorical skills by debating the formidable Stephen A. Douglas over a two-decade period in Illinois. Douglas spent most of the 1850s as the Democratic heir-apparent to the presidency. When the Democratic Party broke apart in 1860, Douglas' ambitions were doomed and Lincoln's were realized. Douglas did run an exhausting race for president in 1860, but Lincoln won without campaigning.

Unschooling in a formal sense, Lincoln educated himself in law, literature, geometry, American history, and the preeminent economic and political issues of his day. As a young, impoverished postmaster, he diligently read all the newspapers that passed through his hands on the way to the ultimate subscriber. As a more prosperous attorney, he subscribed to the important periodicals in Illinois -- while his law partner made sure he saw national publications.

For Lincoln's important speeches such as the Peoria Speech of 1854 and the Cooper Union Speech of 1860, he used the State Library across the street from his Springfield law office to do his research. Lincoln constructed arguments the way he had wrestled -- by analyzing the weakness of the opponent and using the compelling force of his own logic.

German-American journalist Henry Villard wrote of president-elect Lincoln: "Having closely observed him since the election . . . I dare say that there are dormant qualities in 'Old Abe' which occasion will draw forth . . . and remind people to a certain degree of the characteristics of 'Old Hickory.'" The secession crisis Lincoln faced and the Civil War he would win dwarfed those difficulties President Andrew Jackson had encountered.

Even as president, Lincoln's appearance sometimes lulled opponents into a false sense of superiority. "There is no describing his lengthy awkwardness, nor the uncouthness of his movement, and yet it seemed as if I had been in the habit of seeing him daily, and had shaken hands with him a thousand times in some village street; so true was he to the aspect of the pattern American, though with a certain extravagance which, possibly, I exaggerated still further by the delighted eagerness with which I took it in," wrote Massachusetts writer Nathaniel Hawthorne after joining several journalists for a meeting with President Lincoln in 1862.

"If put to guess his calling and livelihood, I should have taken him for a country schoolmaster as soon as anything else. He was dressed in a rusty black frock-coat and pantaloons, unbrushed, and worn so faithfully that the suit had adapted itself to the curves and angularities of his figure, and had grown to be an outer skin of the man," the sophisticated Hawthorne recalled.

After more derisive commentary about Lincoln's appearance, Hawthorne wrote: "He is evidently a man of keen faculties, and, what is still more to the purpose, of powerful character. As to his integrity, the people have that intuition of it which is never deceived." He concluded that "the President is teachable by events, and has now spent a year in a very arduous course of education; he has a flexible mind, capable of much expansion, and convertible towards far loftier studies and activities than those of his early life; and if he came to Washington a back-woods humorist, he has already transformed himself into as good a statesman (to speak moderately) as his prime-minister." Lincoln's strength derived in part from his understanding of America's heritage and the character of the American people.

Even Lincoln's friends and contemporaries did not understand that there was so much more to him than they could see. Josiah Holland, one of Lincoln's first biographers, "conversed with multitudes of men who claimed to know Mr. Lincoln intimately; yet there are not two of the whole number who agree in their estimate of him. The fact was that he rarely showed more than one aspect of himself to one man. He opened himself to men in different directions." Holland added: "A great deal of his best, deepest, largest life he kept almost constantly from view, because he would not expose it to the eyes and apprehension of the careless multitude."

Lincoln's law partner of 14 years, Herndon, wrote that Mr. Lincoln was "the most shut-mouthed man who ever lived."

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