

LINCOLN LORE

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A REFLECTION ON LINCOLN'S INTEGRITY

The works of the late W. E. Woodward will be remembered, primarily, for his use of striking satire in which he was most proficient. In the preface of his last book *Years of Madness* his wife acknowledges that irony was "a part of his character." His publishers, G. P. Putnam's Sons emphasize the "trenchant" quality of his literary style. Admirers of Abraham Lincoln were brought to their feet by the following typical Woodward thrust which appears in the above mentioned book:

"Much of his (Lincoln's) writing is deceptive. When we analyze it carefully we find that we are charmed by its manner and style rather than by its content—that he often contradicted himself. . . . Lincoln was full of contradictions and they flowed from him as water flows over a dam, but he did not seem to mind." (p. 69)

This statement strikes at the very foundation of Lincoln's reputation for clarity of meaning and freedom from double interpretation. Woodward does not approach the subject apologetically, admitting Lincoln may have made occasional misstatements, but aggressively alleges that *much* of what Lincoln wrote was deceptive. Woodward further stresses by use of a well known figure of speech that it was not just, now and then, when a contradiction appeared but they literally *flowed* from Lincoln "as water flows over a dam." Possibly this conclusion should not be taken too seriously but called just another Woodward hyperbole. There are many critics of Lincoln, however, who will refer to this loose statement as factual, hoping to bolster up what they term the humanizing of Abraham Lincoln.

We would suppose that a historian who was bold enough to attack two of the basic elements in Lincoln's character, sincerity and integrity, would be well supplied with case examples to illustrate the deceptive and contradictory nature of Lincoln's writings especially if they permeated so much of what he wrote. Woodward however relied on two or three of the old thread worn stand-bys of Lincoln critics—his attitude towards freeing the slaves and racial equality—as examples of contradictions.

An oft quoted excerpt from Lincoln's famous letter to Horace Greeley written on Aug. 22, 1862, is first lifted out of its context: "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that." Woodward makes no comment however on the concluding phrase of the letter in which Lincoln states: "I have here stated my purpose according to my view of *official* duty; and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed *personal* wish that all men everywhere could be free." (The italics are Lincoln's).

The issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation a few months later did have the effect of "freeing some and leaving others alone," which Lincoln felt he had the constitutional right to do as a war measure. Over against this letter to Greeley, Woodward places what seems to be his own worded version of the house divided statement made by Lincoln in 1858 and repeated verbatim several times during the debates. The authentic version of the excerpt follows:

"A house divided against itself cannot stand".

"I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*."

"I do not expect the Union to be *dissolved*—I do not expect the house to *fall*—but I *do* expect it will cease to be divided."

"It will become *all* one thing, or *all* the other."

These two statements were made by Lincoln, four years apart, one as a private citizen expressing his own personal views and the other as an official in the act of fulfilling his oath. These reactions caused Woodward to point out the assumed contradiction in these words:

"If the Union could be saved by freeing some of the slaves, but not all, then what becomes of the assertion that 'a house divided against itself cannot stand?'"

It is difficult to comprehend how a war measure of a temporary character issued in a national emergency to save the Union from being dissolved, bears any relation whatever to the long range view that the same government "cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free." If this is a good illustration of the great number of contradictions which Woodward claims to have found in Lincoln's writings we need not be greatly disturbed.

Possibly Woodward might have been spared his dilemma in this instance if he had read another quotation from a letter written by Lincoln to Hall, Fullenwider and Correll on February 14, 1860. With reference to a question about what he meant in his "house divided" statement already presented in part. Lincoln replied: "That is the whole paragraph; and it puzzles me to make my meaning plainer. Look over it carefully, and conclude I meant all I said and did not mean anything I did not say, and you will have my meaning."

We will recall that Lincoln as a youth was greatly disturbed by conversation that was not precise and meticulous and he acknowledged that his own manner of expression had been greatly influenced by it. When the young men at Cooper Union, New York wished to edit and reprint his address he wrote to Chas. C. Nott, "I do not wish the sense changed, or modified, to a hair's breadth."

During one of the debates with Douglas, Lincoln remarked, "I have always wanted to deal with everyone I meet candidly and honestly," yet Woodward states Lincoln's writings abounded in deception and contradictions. On the page opposite to the one where the author makes these affirmations there appears this comment, "Certain unwavering qualities of Lincoln's character stand out quietly and never change in the kaleidoscope of events."

Over a hundred years ago another Mr. Woodward of Henry County, Illinois submitted a printed criticism of Mr. Lincoln and on August 11, 1846 Lincoln wrote to the editor of the *Illinois Gazette* in part as follows:

"If Mr. Woodward has given such assurance of my character as your correspondent asserts, I can still suppose him to be a worthy man; he may have believed what he said; but there is, even in that charitable view of his case, one lesson in morals which he might, not without profit, learn of even me—and that is, never to add the weight of his character to a charge against his fellow man, without *knowing* it to be true."