Lincoln Lore

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F. D. R. and Lincoln: A Democratic President Shapes the Story of a Republican President's Life

"I think it is time for us Democrats to claim Lincoln as one of our own. The Republican Party has certainly repudiated, first and last, everything that he stood for."

So wrote the Democratic Governor of New York, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, on April 3, 1929. In truth, Franklin Roosevelt did not have a profound knowledge of the American past. But he did know the potency of historical figures as symbols. When, as President of the United States, he came to be seen by his enemies as a bearer of unprecedented innovations, he would use these historical symbols to legitimize — to "Americanize," one might say — his policies. Ironically, he tried on such occasions to make the "New" Deal seem like old hat. Historians probably did not literally follow the leads provided by President Roosevelt's fairly numerous references to Lincoln in various political addresses. Nevertheless, Roosevelt put his stamp on the whole intellectual and ideological life of the age, and there is a sense in which the historical view of Lincoln changed profoundly with the Roosevelt years.

Alfred Haworth Jones has brought this subject to the fore in a recent book entitled *Roosevelt's Image Brokers: Poets, Playwrights, and the Use of the Lincoln Symbol* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1974). One does not have to be in complete or even substantial agreement with the manner of the book's execution to say that Jones is to be commended for a bright idea.

The book has several obvious faults. One suspects that the publishers, perhaps desirous of cashing in on the popularity of *The Selling of the President* and of the generally repellant but fascinating theme of "grooming" a man for the Presidency (as Robert Redford was groomed in *The Candidate*), forced the title on Mr. Jones. As a dissertation, it bore the title, "Roosevelt and Lincoln: The Political Uses of a Literary

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FIGURE 1. ***Roosevelt's Image Brokers*** **states that a pilgrimage to Abraham Lincoln's birthplace was "an unthinkable gesture for a Democratic executive" before President Franklin D. Roosevelt's visit in the spring of 1936. However, President Woodrow Wilson had visited the Kentucky cabin in 1916, when it was taken over by the National Park Service. President Roosevelt also made regular appearances at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington for Lincoln's birthday. This photograph shows the President, his naval aide Captain Walter B. Woodson, and Mrs. Roosevelt in front of the Lincoln Memorial on February 12, 1938. The photograph was furnished by the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park and is reprinted by permission of UPI.**

Image." Whatever the case, the book is not about Roosevelt's political managers and "image" manipulators, but about Roosevelt himself and, more particularly, about men like Carl Sandburg and Robert Sherwood who admired his politics and who also wrote about Abraham Lincoln.

Had his editors paid more attention to the real subject of Mr. Jones's essays, perhaps they would have urged him to improve upon his theme. A "Lincoln symbol" is a mythical Lincoln; the author should suggest some ways in which it is only a partial truth. Mr. Jones, surprisingly, seems to have almost no interest in the real Abraham Lincoln at all. He never tells us whether Roosevelt, Sandburg, and Sherwood's Lincoln is the real Lincoln, the Lincoln most historians had limned to date, a Lincoln different in some particular and profound ways from Herbert Hoover's Lincoln, or a Lincoln that had not been devised by that Democratic President with a deeper acquaintance with the American past, Woodrow Wilson. Although there is a chapter on "The Lincoln of Sandburg and His Admirers," we learn only that Sandburg's Lincoln was Whitmanesque and what the reviewers said about it. There is almost no attention to the details of Sandburg's portrait itself. As a result, the book sometimes boils down to saying that these men uttered Lincoln's and Roosevelt's names together frequently in the hope that the secure fame of the one would dilute the controversial reputation of the other.

An example of the feeling of vague dissatisfaction Jones's approach imparts will make my meaning clearer. He says that Sandburg's Lincoln was a "reaffirmation of faith in the people," that his character "was rooted in the Heartland," and that therefore Franklin Delano Roosevelt (a Hudson River squire who used cigarette holders, he might have added) invoked Sandburg's Lincoln symbol in order to cuddle up with the common man. It would be much more effective if Jones cared more about Lincoln and pointed out briefly that Sandburg's is not the only Lincoln and in what respects. Did Lincoln's "Heartland" oppose the Mexican War? Albert Beveridge, who wrote at the same time Sandburg did, did not think so. Did all the sons of the middle border marry women who spoke French, claim that they learned grammar at the age of twenty-three only *after* leaving their father and the log cabin behind, and send their sons to Exeter and Harvard? In the 1930's, historians linked the spirit of the frontier West with Jacksonian Democracy; why, then, was Lincoln a Whig for the entire life of that party? It would have been more convincing that this was a symbolic Lincoln if Jones had occasionally mentioned the competing images or Sandburg's "competitors," notably Albert Beveridge. With all its faults, it is a useful book and one that suggests a theme in Lincoln historiography that needs further explanation.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt knew history as a squire knows history, that is, as a smattering learned from a few courses at Harvard and as a collector. His college preparatory school, Endicott Peabody's Groton, aped British ways so slavishly that it taught almost no American history whatever. Young Franklin wanted to go to Annapolis; his primary acquaintance with American history, not surprisingly, came from *Sailor Boys of '61* and *The Boys of 1812*. America's infatuation with naval power was reflected in his teenage Christmas and birthday gifts, Alfred Thayer Mahan's *Influence of Sea Power upon History* and *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future*. His family prevailed upon him to attend Harvard, where he took four American history courses: a survey to 1783, one from 1783-1865, one from 1865-present, and a course on the West from visiting Professor Frederick Jackson Turner. He attended law school and became a collector of naval Americana, books, manuscripts, pamphlets, and prints.

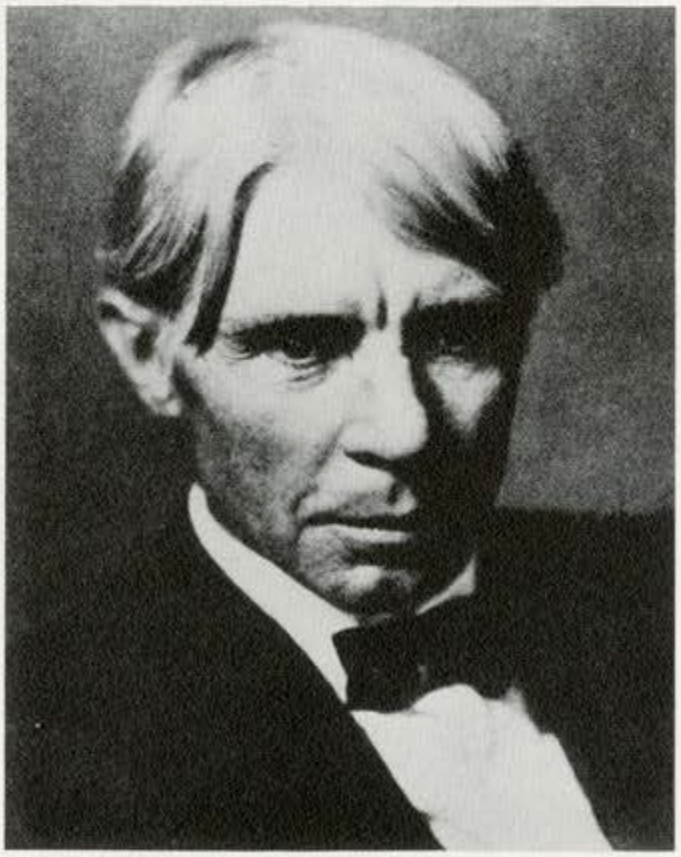
In the 1920's and in the early years of his Presidency, Roosevelt's touchstone of historical greatness was Thomas Jefferson. Jones explains, against a backdrop of American culture in general, how Lincoln's image became important to the 1930's and to the image of this Democratic admirer of Thomas Jefferson. In the 1920's, most biographies of American historical figures partook of the debunking spirit. Paxton Hibben made Henry Ward Beecher a hypocrite, Edgar Lee Masters re-assassinated Abraham Lincoln, and Van Wyck Brooks said that Mark Twain surrendered his talent to the philistines. In the 1930's, by contrast, Grover Cleveland, John D. Rockefeller, Robert E. Lee, and Benjamin Franklin were among those who now received a favorable treatment at biographers' hands, but the major beneficiaries of the new affection for the American past were Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Walt Whitman, and Abraham Lincoln.

Stephen Vincent Benét and Carl Sandburg began the Lincoln revival in the late 1920's. By the late 1930's, they had created a new Lincoln landslide. Robert Sherwood's play, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, played 472 times on Broadway and became a successful film in 1940. Sandburg's *War Years* appeared in 1939 to rave reviews by historians and laymen alike.

Roosevelt, according to Jones, ditched Jefferson for Lincoln when Jefferson became the historical darling of the Liberty League and other such conservative organizations which wanted the government to leave them alone. Actually, this is an exaggeration, for the index to the *Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* reveals a roughly equal number of references to Jefferson and Lincoln in every period of the New Deal and World War II. Frequently, Roosevelt said the same thing about Jefferson and Lincoln and in the same speech. Lincoln and Jefferson spent money on the capitol despite critics, Lincoln and Jefferson "packed" the Court, etc.

Nevertheless, it is true that Roosevelt invoked Lincoln's image for two reasons: he saw a parallel between the enormity of the crises of the Depression and of the Civil War, and he sought to identify with the common man. It should also be mentioned that Roosevelt's aides, as George E. Mowry has said, were diligent in producing historical precedents, and scrupulous and reasonably accurate in their quotations and attributions.

Roosevelt utilized Lincoln's image as a symbol of national unity in the face of crisis. In an address at a Jefferson Day Dinner in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1932, he used Lincoln to urge that Democrats end their rural/urban (frequently, dry/wet) split. Jefferson had preached "the interdependence of town and country," he said, and Lincoln did too in his First Inaugural Address ("physically speaking we cannot separate . . . ."). At Gettysburg in 1934, he broadened Lincoln's nationalist appeal by saying that he (along with Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Wilson) "worked



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

FIGURE 2. Carl Sandburg

for a consolidated nation." He used Lincoln's image as a champion of the common man in a 1939 address which pictured the Illinois Central Railroad's sometime counsel as almost a practitioner of what we have come to call "legal aid":

> Lincoln, too, was a many-sided man. Pioneer of the wilderness, counsel for the underprivileged, soldier in an Indian war, master of the English tongue, rallying point for a torn nation, emancipator — not of slaves alone, but of those of heavy heart everywhere — foe of malice, and teacher of good-will.

He also used Lincoln for some special pleading for the New Deal, as in the Second Fireside Chat of 1934:

> The course we have followed fits the American practice of Government, a practice of taking action step by step, of regulating only to meet concrete needs, a practice of courageous recognition of change. I believe with Abraham Lincoln, that "The legitimate object of government, is to do for a community of people, whatever they need to have done, but can not do, *at all*, or can not, *so well do*, for themselves — in their separate, and individual capacities."

Jones credits independent Republican William Allen White with making Lincoln into a figure urging an interventionist foreign policy — mainly by stressing Lincoln's sentiment that things could not exist half slave and half free. Roosevelt adopted the internationalist Lincoln sufficiently to accuse the leader of the isolationists, Charles Lindbergh, of being a Vallandigham; "appeasers" of the Fascists were analogous to Copperheads in Lincoln's day. Sandburg equated the isolationists with the nativist Know-Nothing party and stressed Lincoln's opposition to it; he also criticized "famous ex-flyers" who were really Copperhead Vallandighams.

One always pays an historical price for using a man as a symbol, and Jones's lack of interest in the man causes him to ignore a significant aspect of Roosevelt's Abraham Lincoln. The price that Roosevelt paid was to forget about Lincoln's traditional image as the friend of the Negro and to drain his image of content that was unacceptable to the South. One can see this perfectly in Roosevelt's address to a Jackson Day Dinner in 1938:

> He [Lincoln] faced opposition far behind his battle lines from those who thought first and last of their own selfish aims — gold speculators in Wall Street who cheered defeats of their own armies because thereby the price of their gold would rise; army contractors who founded fortunes at the expense of the boys at the front — a minority unwilling to support their people and their government unless the government would leave them free to pursue their private gains.
>
> Lincoln, too, fought for the morals of democracy — and had he lived the south would have been allowed to rehabilitate itself on the basis of those morals instead of being "reconstructed" by martial law and carpetbaggers.

Here is F. D. R.'s Lincoln in a nutshell — the Jefferson-ized Lincoln as champion of the common man against Wall Street coupled with the friend of the South who would have let them alone instead of reconstructing them.

To be sure, Roosevelt was espousing his generation's view of Reconstruction. He had read Claude Bowers's book on Reconstruction, *The Tragic Era*, and it may have shaped his views of Lincoln and Johnson as much as Bowers's books on Jefferson and Jackson had shaped his views of those presidents. Nevertheless, Jonathan Daniels asserts in *Three Presidents and Their Books* that "Roosevelt thought [Bowers's *Tragic Era*] should be specifically useful in bringing back Southern Democrats who had been frightened off to Hoover by Al Smith and the bogy of the Pope." He understood its political usefulness.

Roosevelt depended for support of his legislative programs on certain key Southern legislators who held committee positions of power because of their long tenure in Congress. Walter White, the secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, wanted President Roosevelt to back a bill which would make lynching a federal crime. He never got Roosevelt's support, and he had trouble even gaining an audience with the President until Mrs. Roosevelt took up his cause. "I did not choose the tools with which I must work," Roosevelt told White evasively. When White changed his tactics and tried to bypass Congress by getting the executive department to prosecute lynchers who crossed state lines under the recently and hastily passed Lindbergh anti-kidnaping law, Roosevelt again turned him down. Seen in this light, Roosevelt's Lincoln as symbol of national unity also meant quietism on the race question.

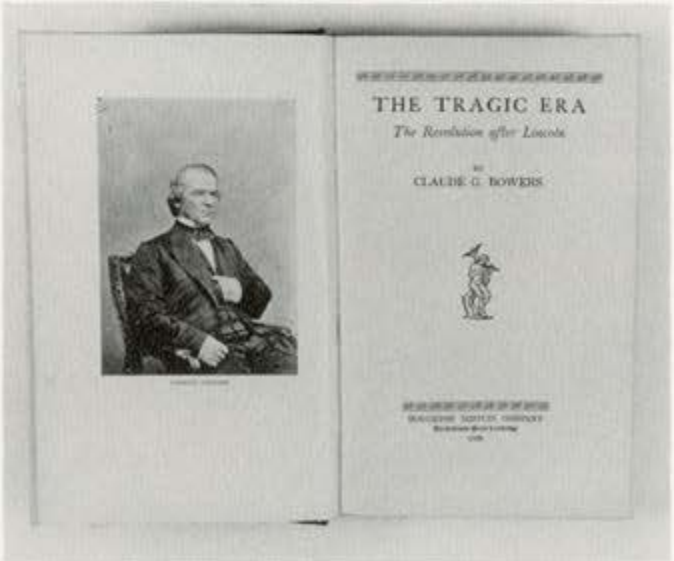
Roosevelt's Lincoln had its effect on the historians' Lincoln, if for no other reason than that so many historians were supporters of the New Deal. The power of this influence can be seen in James Harvey Young's appraisal of the friendship between the two most outstanding writers on Lincoln of their generation, poet Carl Sandburg and academic historian James G. Randall of the University of Illinois:

> The Sandburg-Randall friendship is really a beautiful one. Oddly enough, S hasn't done much research from MSS. He is naive on this score, knows it, and profoundly respects R. R equally respects S's style of writing and talking, his human perception. They both agree as to world issues, respect for Lincoln and F D R.

A force powerful enough to make friends of the academic historian who lived with manuscript materials and the popular poet who was "naive" about them, was powerful enough to influence the way anyone treated historical events.

James G. Randall might have delivered the same batch of lectures on "Lincoln and the South" at Louisiana State University in 1945 had Franklin Roosevelt never lived, but a parallel is worth noting. Randall's contention was that Lincoln's plan of reconstruction was generous and that the cruel Republican plan instrumented after his death betrayed Lincoln's ideals. He tried to prove his point by arguing that Lincoln's friends who lived on after his assassination opposed Reconstruction and, for the most part, eventually left the Republican party for the Democratic party. "One does not need to belabor the point that the postwar Republican party was no longer a Lincoln party," said Randall. "The fact is well known." On this point he agreed with Franklin Roosevelt's Southern strategy. In fact, Roosevelt had said in 1939, "Does anyone maintain that the Republican Party from 1868 to 1938 (with the possible exception of a few years under Theodore Roosevelt) was the party of Abraham Lincoln? To claim that is . . . absurd."

The result of such a view was a sort of liberal Democratic myth of American history. It celebrated Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson as the champions of the common man, ignored the Democratic party later (especially during the Civil War, when it was doing anything but championing the common black man), focused on Abraham Lincoln and his factional enemies in the Republican party during the Civil War (rather than their common enemies, the Democrats), and then very quickly pictured the Republican party as the party of big business, the rich, and the conservatives once Lincoln was gone from the scene. Randall was the most eloquent forger of this myth in the Lincoln field. "If one looks for the complete



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

FIGURE 3. Reconstruction for Roosevelt.

opposite of Lincoln's policy and program," Randall urged in the "Lincoln and the South" lectures, "he finds it not among the Democrats, but among the Jacobins [the radical faction in the Republican party]."

Another example of the workings of the myth can be found in Arthur Schlesinger, Junior's influential Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Age of Jackson*, written in 1945. An admirer of the New Deal, to say the least, Schlesinger would go on to write a famous multi-volume history of Franklin Roosevelt's administration. In the *Age of Jackson*, he helped map out the Democratic myth. "Whatever remained of the live Jacksonian tradition had in the main, by 1858, entered the Republican party," wrote the youthful Harvard historian, probably only unconsciously echoing President Roosevelt's willingness to sweep the post-Jackson Democrats under the rug. "Does anyone maintain," Roosevelt had said in 1939, "that the Democratic Party from 1840 to 1876 was by any wild stretch of the imagination the party of Thomas Jefferson or of Andrew Jackson? To claim that is absurd." And in another passage, Schlesinger came very close to Roosevelt's periodization: "The fact was that by the fifties both the old parties had disappeared. The election of 1844, as Gideon Welles observed many years later, was 'the final struggle between the two opposing elements known as democrats and whigs' which had sprung into life over the great economic questions of the thirties."

In an even more startling passage, Schlesinger suggested probably the strangest Lincoln progenitor in the literature, Democrat Silas Wright of New York, who died in 1847.

> The psychological necessities of the day had transmuted Silas Wright into a symbol. It was inevitable that the North create a leader to voice its moral sentiments against slavery: a man of the people, humble in origin, modest in circumstance, plain in manner, given to hard physical labor himself, digging on a farm in New York (or splitting rails in the shadowed backwoods of Illinois), so that his very life might embody a challenge to the values of the slaveholder. Still the leader could be no extremist, no fanatic, but a man who would give the South every latitude until principle was clearly threatened, and even then would place the Union above everything else; yet whose steady awakening to danger would express the awakening of the free states, and whose stern loyalty to principle would prevent the compromise of conscience.... As no other political leader, Silas Wright filled these specifications.... His essential conservatism reflected the reluctance of the North to tear away the bonds of peace, but his firmness expressed the profounder reluctance to share the guilt of slavery.... The words could apply to another and greater man. Indeed, Silas Wright was a preliminary sketch for Abraham Lincoln.

Yet history stubbornly resists myth. More recent historians, probably many of them themselves Democrats in politics, suggest that the Democratic party was founded on the New York-Virginia alliance, that it was thoroughly committed to a conspiracy of silence in regard to slavery, and that the Whig party contained many more volatile elements of moral reform, especially anti-slavery, than the Democrats. Abraham Lincoln's Whig years are no longer considered an embarrassing Neanderthalism, and some historians, notably Cornell's Joel Silbey, are finally studying the party that was swept under the rug even by the Democrats themselves, the Democratic party in the Civil War era. We live with a very different Lincoln today from the one President Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave us.

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FIGURE 4. President Roosevelt appeared at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington for a Lincoln birthday observance in 1944. With him is Major General Edwin M. Watson. By this time, Roosevelt identified with Lincoln as a wartime President. When he died, Mrs. Roosevelt wrote a newspaper column comparing the deaths of Presidents Lincoln, Wilson, and Roosevelt, all of whom died or suffered from debilitating illnesses near the end of a war before they could complete their humanitarian work. This photograph was provided by the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park and is reprinted by permission of UPI.