



# Lincoln Lore

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## LINCOLN GORED BY TELEVISION

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On March 28 and 29, 1988, NBC Television broadcast *Gore Vidal's Lincoln*, a four-hour program about the presidency of Abraham Lincoln, based on a long novel written by Vidal, an American novelist and essayist who lives in Italy. Most of the characters bore names from history, and they talked about famous events from the American Civil War like the Battles of Gettysburg and Fredericksburg. The actors wore period costumes and rode horses, and the buildings in the background looked fairly old. Otherwise, there was not much resemblance to history in those long, commercial-shattered four hours.

So many things went wrong in this miniseries that a critic hardly knows where to begin. Perhaps the unpardonable lapses of historical common sense deserve the first denunciation because they could have been so easily avoided. These productions, after all, customarily have an historical advisor. Such persons are not hired to get the history right (or, at least, they rarely do). Their job is to get the look and "feel" of the scenes correct and to prevent anachronisms so that the viewer's eye does not fall on some gadget invented well after the period depicted in the drama.

What, then, do I mean by the failure of historical common sense? Here are two examples. When Fort Sumter is shelled during the miniseries, the viewer sees close-up shots of cannons being fired. The camera focuses on the cannon muzzles rather than the fort because the film crew did not go to Charleston to film the fort, nor did they build a model. They hinted at the event only. Common sense failed them, however, when they chose to suggest the event with the same field artillery pieces used in later battle scenes. Fort Sumter was less a battle than a siege. And the knowledgeable men who shelled the fort into submission used siege artillery on heavy trucks rather than field artillery on light wheeled carriages.

It hardly requires an ordnance officer to figure this out. One little peek at any picture history of the Civil War or a glance at one of the illustrated newspapers from Lincoln's era would have made the visual error obvious. But we know

that no such research was done because, in the course of the drama, one of the actors refers to *Leslie's Magazine*. There was no such thing in Civil War America. What soldiers and civilians alike read was *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, published in New York City. Had any research been done for *Gore Vidal's Lincoln* in illustrated periodicals, this error, too, might have been avoided. As for the bombardment of Fort Sumter, common sense might have told the director that the little balls shot from field cannons would have bounced off the thick masonry of the fort like bb's.

The second example tells a similar story. The Battle of Fredericksburg was fought on December 13, 1862. It was cold, or so at least the pictures in *Harper's* and *Leslie's* suggest, and the comfortably equipped Union infantry wore their great-coats. The Battle of Fredericksburg in *Gore Vidal's Lincoln* is fought while there are leaves on the trees. The soldiers wear the same summer uniforms they wear in other battle scenes in the miniseries — no overcoats. Common sense or research would have told a dedicated director that a battle fought in December in Virginia's latitude probably did not take place in a leafy, tree-shaded arena.

Common sense and research probably failed because they came into conflict with the budget. This was a cheap production: no trip to South Carolina, no scale model forts, and no special ordnance or changes of uniform.

Maybe the producers spent a disproportionate share of money on actors, but if they did so, it was in vain. Sam Waterston and Mary Tyler Moore played Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln. Neither presented a satisfactory image. One could not see the muscular one-time railsplitter and farmhand in Mr. Waterston. This aging Yuppie may be fine as a Long Island bond salesman or a *New York Times* reporter, but he simply is not rugged enough for Lincoln. One of the persons with whom I viewed the shows exclaimed that Mr. Waterston made Lincoln seem like George Bush!

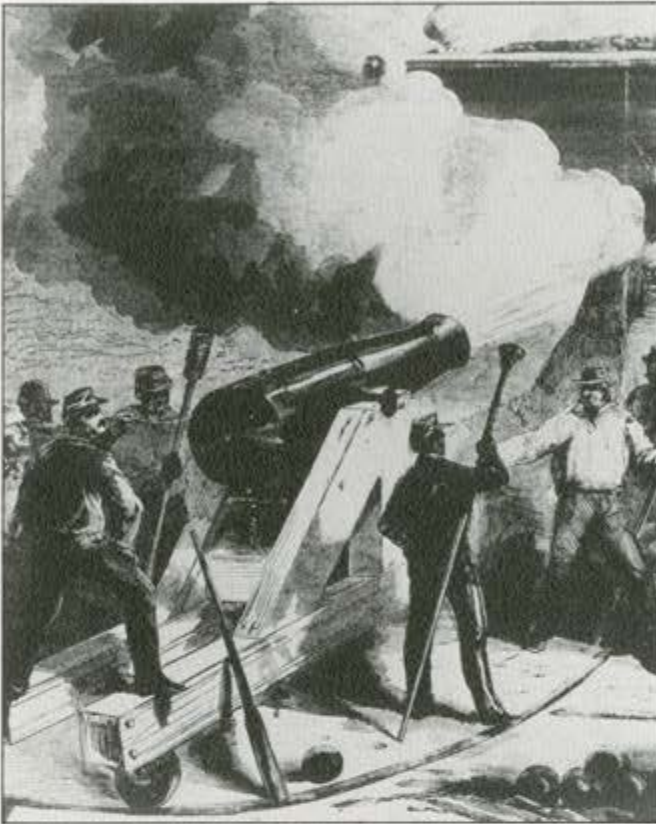
And Ms. Moore simply is not fleshy enough for Mrs. Lincoln. I realize that this criticism may



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FIGURE 1. Moore and Waterston.





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**FIGURE 2. Bombardment of Sumter in a contemporary illustration.**

seem petty or churlish, but the fact of the matter is that television is a literal medium. Plywood flats and even modern dress will work in the legitimate theater, but not on television. If it does not look right on the little box in the living room, it cannot be right. It cannot convince or deceive. It will not work.

*Gore Vidal's Lincoln* did not work, and that may ultimately prove a blessing for history. A skillful production, even one that was at least lavish, might have so seduced the audience as to leave them with precisely the image of Lincoln that Vidal wanted to get across in his book. This production certainly did not accomplish that, but it may nevertheless have left the viewer with some wrong impressions here and there. The remainder of this article will attempt to set some of those errors straight.

Rudimentary research in the first place or a fact-checker afterward might have prevented some silly mistakes. Robert Todd Lincoln, for example, complains about his neglected childhood to John Hay, saying that his father was usually away on the Seventh Judicial Circuit in those years. Abraham Lincoln, as an Illinois lawyer, travelled the Eighth Judicial Circuit, and Robert knew that. Mr. Vidal did not. Nor would any of the high-ranking members of the Lincoln administration have mispronounced the infamous name of the author of the Dred Scott decision and the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court during most of Lincoln's presidency, Roger B. Taney. For some reason, Marylanders — and Taney was one — call that "Tawny." Lincoln himself called his old political crony Ward Hill Lamon, "Hill" and not "Ward." William H. Seward delivered his famous "Irrepressible Conflict" speech in Rochester in 1858 and not at the Republican nominating convention in Chicago in 1860.

A telltale error that explains many of the problems with Vidal's *Lincoln* and the miniseries derived from it occurs in the scene where Mrs. Lincoln is handling her husband's first annual message to Congress (persistently called his "State of the Union address" in the television show — a gross anachronism, the new name being introduced in the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt). Mary complains that Mr. Lincoln does not write a "fair hand"; his writing is "scratchy and illegible." Mrs. Lincoln knew better. She knew

what any historian who has done serious research on Abraham Lincoln knows: that he had a neat and thoroughly readable handwriting.

This little slip is revealing indeed. It shows that Gore Vidal has never in his life looked at a letter written by Abraham Lincoln. Except by reading the signature at the bottom, he could not identify a Lincoln document if it were thrust into his hand — presumably the only way such a document would ever appear there, as Mr. Vidal seems not to have made exhaustive research trips to the major repositories of Lincoln research materials. He did no serious historical research on Abraham Lincoln, and neither did the bearers of his television message.

There are many other mistakes, large and small. Lincoln would never have referred to himself as "chief counsel for the Illinois Central Rail Road," because he never held such a position. He argued many cases for the Illinois Central Rail Road and was once requested by an "agent" and lawyer for the company *not* to take any cases *against* the railroad. Lincoln agreed, but he charged the company case by case and set the fees himself. He made a clear distinction in his difficult correspondence with the company (they were slow and reluctant to pay Lincoln what they owed him) between himself and "agents" of the company like Mason Brayman and James F. Joy. Preliminary to the important McLean County Tax Case, Lincoln first offered his services to the side of the counties opposed to the interests of the Illinois Central.

Although the term "true believer," used in *Gore Vidal's Lincoln* as a political pejorative, was available, as William Safire has shown, from the *Koran*, not many politicians in Lincoln's America were familiar with the *Koran*. Its use in the television show is surely an anachronism, the term having been made popular in the 1950's by working-class "philosopher" Eric Hoffer.

A mythical scene in *Gore Vidal's Lincoln* places the president before the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, pleading his wife's loyalty. This old chestnut — straight out of Carl Sandburg, who peddled the sort of myths Vidal professes to be exploding — was itself exploded at the time of the Watergate hearings over a decade ago.

More important, the whole characterization of Lincoln was hopelessly wrong. He was made to seem a passionate man, given to violent outbursts of exasperation, especially at the failures of his generals. This is not the Lincoln of history. Few people knew Lincoln intimately or could be privy to scenes that might have provoked him to private outbursts of temper, but those who were, say that Lincoln usually kept his cool. Nicolay and Hay reported him as "by nature and habit . . . calm, . . . equable, . . . undemonstrative." And Mrs. Lincoln testified, somewhat resignedly, that her husband was "not a demonstrative man." As for the scene in the White House after news of the Fredericksburg disaster arrived, it was hardly the tumultuous hat-throwing affair viewers saw on television. Reporter Henry Villard informed the president, in the company of Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts, of the extent of the defeat. This is how Villard described the scene:

We found Mr. Lincoln in the old reception-room on the second floor, opposite the landing. He greeted me with a hearty hand-shake, saying, "I am much obliged to you for coming, for we are very anxious and have heard very little." He then asked me to give him, as far as my personal knowledge permitted, a general outline of what had happened, which I did as fully as I could in a few minutes. He followed up my account with one question after another for over half an hour. He inquired regarding the defences of the rebels on our right front, their command of the town and river, the physical and moral condition of our troops before and after the fight, the chances of success of another attack from either of our wings, the extent of our losses, and the feeling among the general officers. He was very careful not to ask anything so as to imply criticism of anybody, although I ventured to mingle a good deal of censure with my statements of facts. But his questions and the expression of his face showed that he believed I was aiming to tell the truth, and that he felt growing anxiety. When he ended the interview by repeating his thanks, I made bold to say as earnestly as I could: "Mr. President, it is, of course, not for me to offer advice to you, but I hope my sincere loyalty may be accepted as my excuse for taking the liberty of telling you



what is not only my conviction but that of every general officer I saw during and after the fighting, that success is impossible, and that the worst disaster yet suffered by our forces will befall the Army of the Potomac if the attack is renewed, and unless the army is withdrawn at once to the north side. Pardon me, Mr. President, but I cannot help telling you further that you cannot render the country a greater service than by ordering General Burnside to withdraw from the south bank forthwith, if he has not already done so."

The President took no offence, but, with a melancholy smile, remarked, "I hope it is not so bad as all that," whereupon we took our leave.

What can I say about the nature of these mistakes? There are many, many others in *Gore Vidal's Lincoln*, but what do they add up to? In some ways, they are nothing more than the ludicrous badges of skimpy research, niggardly budgets, and low aspirations. Thus Lincoln's alleged appearance before the congressional committee is an anecdote beloved by champions of legislative power, as opposed to the imperial presidency: it suggests that America's greatest president would voluntarily submit to congressional examination. It is also beloved by sentimentalists: this shows Lincoln defending his wife from vicious political gossip. On the other hand, Mr. Vidal detests sentimentalizing "Mr. and Mrs. Mount Rushmore," and some of the distortions in *Gore Vidal's Lincoln* make the sixteenth president seem positively brutal, as, for example, when he says that if Baltimore resists Union occupation, he would "burn Baltimore to the ground." Such extreme language was used by men like Orville Hickman Browning, who said the city might be "laid in ruin" if Northern soldiers met resistance there, or Philadelphia's Andrew Reeder, who told the president: "If Baltimore was laid in ashes the North would rejoice over it." Lincoln himself used more circumspect language when he contemplated, as a fledgling president, the dreadful prospect of bombarding his own cities. Baltimore, thanks to his skillful management, never had to be bombarded, torched, or laid in

ruins.

These two distortions, the one in the direction of sentiment and circumspection, the other in the direction of callous muscle-flexing, are contradictory. They are born more of ignorance than of malice.

But one thread of erroneous distortion was clearly consistent with Vidal's purpose: to drain Lincoln of all idealism.

This is the point of having Lincoln say, when explaining Republican policy in 1861, that the party was pledged to keep slavery out of the territories but, when it came to abolishing slavery in the states where it already existed, that was "beyond my power." A long and truly pregnant pause follows and Mr. Waterston adds "or desire." The idea that Abraham Lincoln did not desire to end slavery in 1861 is infamous and absurd, and it will leave any believer in it at a loss to explain what happened in the Civil War. But this is the idea that Vidal and the television miniseries that appropriately bears his name wish to impart. This is clear in the ridiculous scene in which Mary Todd Lincoln tells her mulatto seamstress, Elizabeth Keckley, to remember: "I am the one who wants slavery destroyed."

There is no reason whatsoever to believe that Mrs. Lincoln's antislavery zeal exceeded her husband's. Indeed, there is documentary proof to the contrary. In 1856, when ardent antislavery men were supporting John C. Fremont as the first presidential candidate of the Republican party, Mrs. Lincoln was not. Her "weak woman's heart" was, in her own description, "too Southern in feeling, to sympathize with any but Fillmore," the candidate of the American or Know-Nothing party, embodying anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant prejudice. "If some of you Kentuckians," Mrs. Lincoln explained to her correspondent in 1856, "had to deal with the 'wild Irish,' as we housekeepers are sometimes called upon to do, the south would certainly elect Fillmore next time." It will not do to reprove Abraham Lincoln with his wife's absurd political views.

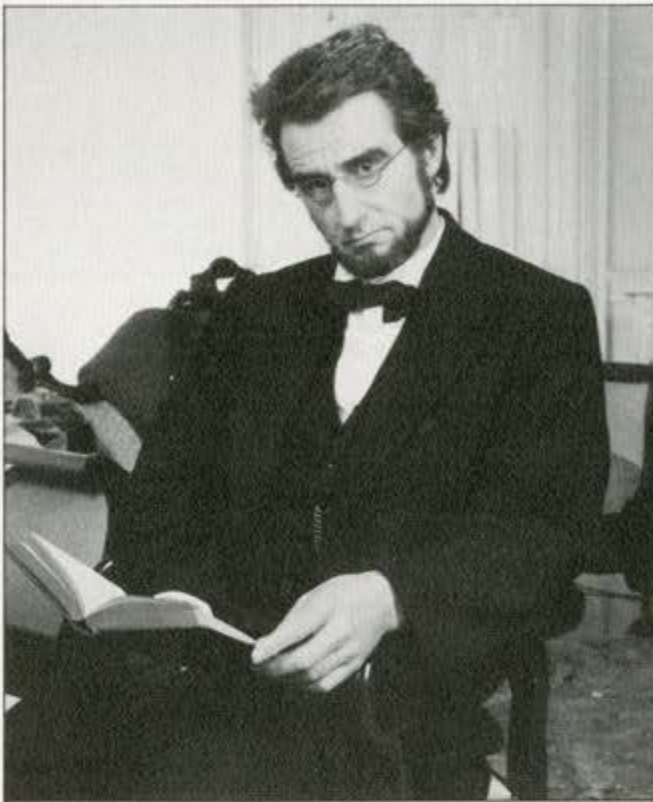
Why do it, then? Why drain Lincoln's image of all idealism? Why deny his well-documented and sincere antislavery



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FIGURE 3. The Battle of Fredericksburg.





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FIGURE 4. Waterston.

convictions?

My guess is that Vidal does that for an old-fashioned and obvious reason heretofore overlooked: because Vidal is at heart a Southerner. In a clever interview for the *New York Times*, Harold Holzer bearded the emigre writer in his den and Vidal said, "I am, after all, a Southerner." He comes from an old Southern political family, and he certainly retains an old Southern political outlook on Abraham Lincoln. Vidal is willing to grant Lincoln ambition, abundant political skill, shrewdness, and cunning. Most smart Southerners were willing to grant him those things. How could a region remember wistfully a cause lost to a buffoon?

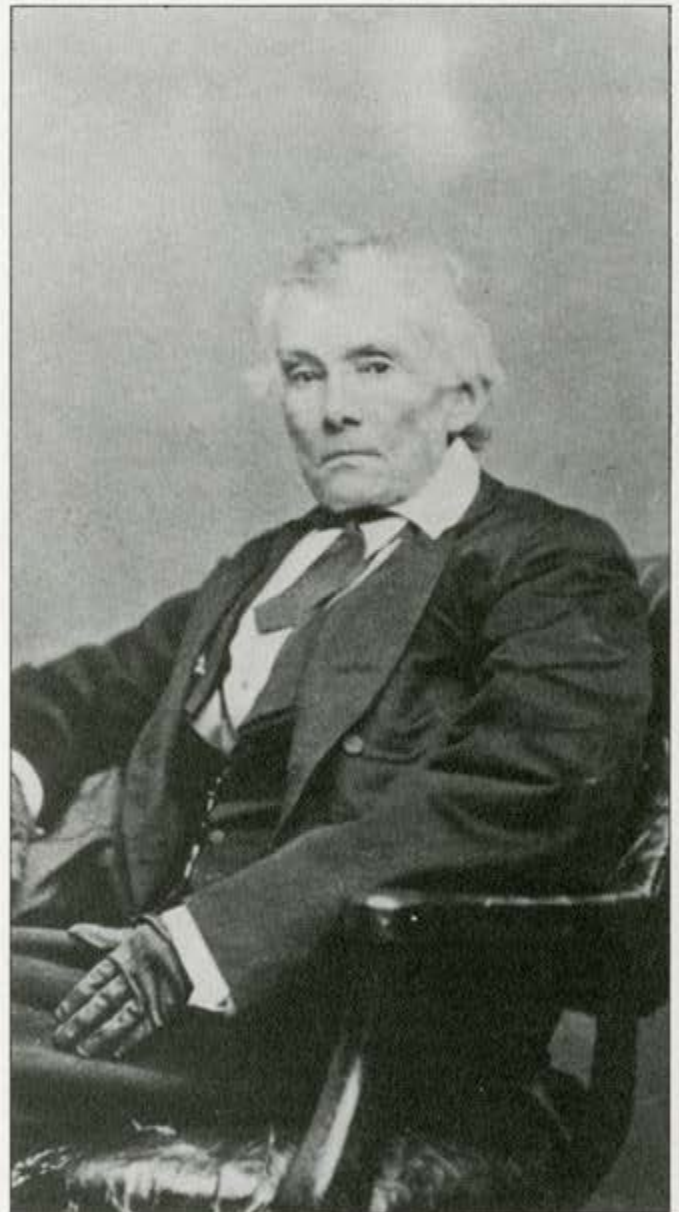
No, intelligent Southerners granted Lincoln much in ability, but they would never grant him a heart. Vidal has a completely cynical view of American politics, and his book depicts Lincoln as a vote-getting, power-grabbing machine, a politician drained of all idealism. The television miniseries, by focusing more attention on Mrs. Lincoln and their family life, somewhat muffled that message, but it was still there. The idea that the fuzzy-faced John Hay could instruct Lincoln on race relations, as though the president were some infant or protege, is patently absurd, as Mr. Holzer has pointed out, but one will fall into such silly traps if one does not recognize the fundamental bedrock of antislavery sentiment in Abraham Lincoln's political life. Lincoln without idealism simply is not Lincoln at all.

There is a familiar sound to the drone of Mr. Vidal's anti-Lincoln prose. After lashing out at his numerous critics in the *New York Review of Books* recently, the expatriate author said, "Now there is no single motive driving anyone but, yes, that is pretty much what I have come to believe, as Lincoln got more and more mystical about the Union, and less and less logical in his defense of it, and more and more appalled at all the blood and at those changes in his country, which, he confessed — with pride? — were 'fundamental and astounding.'" What Mr. Vidal was referring to as his belief here is of no interest or value,

but what he says in this statement is of genuine interest, because it shows where Vidal gets his political ideas.

I was reminded immediately of one of the most famous statements made about Lincoln: "The Union with him in sentiment rose to the sublimity of a religious mysticism; while his ideas of its structure and formation in logic rested upon nothing but the subtleties of a sophism!" Those were the words of Alexander H. Stephens, Vice-president of the Confederate States of America and embodiment of fustian political ideas and an antique, brittle constitutionalism that made Stephens a period-piece in his own day.

There is little of accuracy and no originality in *Gore Vidal's Lincoln*. The characterization comes straight out of Edmund Wilson's *Patriotic Gore*, a source Mr. Vidal does not often acknowledge. The ultimate political viewpoint, however, comes from the Confederate States of America. That antique view, so long ago exploded, has been seen so rarely in these better times as to seem almost novel again. But it is best forgotten, along with the forgettable miniseries, *Gore Vidal's Lincoln*.



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FIGURE 5. Gore Vidal's forerunner as Lincoln critic.