

Strategy Research Project

Rising above the Fray: Abraham Lincoln's Wartime Presidential Leadership

by

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The unique convergence of personal qualities and leadership style made President Abraham Lincoln exactly the right man to lead the Nation through civil war and preserve the Union. Lincoln's strategic leadership is assessed using the frameworks of presidential historians Fred Greenstein and Richard Neustadt. Greenstein identifies the attributes of public communication, organization, political skill, vision, cognitive ability and emotional intelligence as qualities that distinguish presidential performance. Studying Lincoln through these attributes highlights his uniqueness and extraordinary skill as a wartime president. More than any other one attribute, his emotional intelligence, characterized by his charity, empathy and magnanimity, separate him from his contemporaries and from other presidents. Neustadt uses a four-question framework to assess a president and the power he brings to the office in terms of personal influence and political leadership. Lincoln's purpose, his use of his presidential power, how he handled the pressure of the office, and his legacy are all analyzed to assess the presidency of the sixteenth president. The same president who author Eliot Cohen has called, "the greatest of American war presidents."

Rising above the Fray: Abraham Lincoln's Wartime Presidential Leadership

Our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.

—Abraham Lincoln¹

Abraham Lincoln faced the harrowing landscape of a nation at war with itself and steadfastly led a country through this tumultuous period of American history. Was Abraham Lincoln able to save the Union and the idea of the republic established in the Declaration of Independence because he simply had the available resources in men and materials to do so, or did a unique convergence of personal qualities and leadership style make him exactly the right person, and perhaps the only one, to perform this overwhelming task? By studying Lincoln through a typology of presidential leadership qualities and assessing the effectiveness of his presidential power, Lincoln clearly emerges as a heroic and noble wartime leader with the personal qualities and leadership style required to lead the United States through one of the tragic periods of its history.

A useful typology to view presidential leadership qualities was developed by political scientist Fred Greenstein using six criteria: public communication, organizational capacity, political skill, vision, cognitive style and emotional intelligence.² The first attribute, communication, seems an obvious requirement for the chief executive, although the office has been surprisingly lacking in effective public communicators. Professional communication is essential to convey direction, instill confidence and give hope. A president's organizational capacity includes both forging a team and attaining optimal performance from its members, and also how presidents deal with a vast amount of information and advice they receive. Political skill refers to

how a president can mold the frequently stalemated American political system to achieve his objectives through bi-partisan and public support. As to the quality of vision, Greenstein defines it as both the capacity to inspire, as well as the narrower political context of possessing overarching goals and the feasibility of policy. The quality of vision also encompasses consistency of viewpoint. Cognitive style and emotional intelligence are the last two qualities Greenstein uses to judge presidential performance and leadership. The manner in which the president processes and remembers information plays an essential role in the strategic intelligence he can utilize in complex situations. Lastly, emotional intelligence refers to a person's ability to perceive, control and evaluate his feelings and emotions and those of others and use that information to guide actions and decisions. The ability to understand and manage one's own emotions as well as perceiving and empathizing with the emotions of others is a critical leadership skill. Greenstein places special emphasis on emotional intelligence, noting that without it, "all else may turn to ashes."³

Presidential leadership can be evaluated, studied and analyzed in many different ways and presidents have long been evaluated on the quality of their performance. Historically, what made a man a great president in the view of scholars and the public? Richard Neustadt advanced the term "presidential power" to describe the personal influence and political leadership of modern presidents⁴ and his concept is helpful in considering Lincoln as well. Separate from the formal powers given to a president by the Constitution or by statute, presidential power refers to how individual characteristics and leadership traits can influence and accomplish governmental actions. Neustadt's framework of assessing presidential performance and the effectiveness of presidential

power will be used to assess Lincoln's wartime presidency. Neustadt uses four questions as a framework to examine a president's accomplishments retrospectively. First, what were his purposes and how relevant were they to the time of his tenure? Second, what was his "'feel,' his human understanding," for the nature of presidential power in the circumstances he confronted? Third, what sustained him as a person under the pressures of the office and how did his "peacemaking with himself" affect the style and content of his decision-making? And finally, what was his legacy? What imprint did he leave on the office, his political party, and on the nation's position in the world?⁵

Both Greenstein's typology and Neustadt's assessment methodology provide a rigorous framework to assess Abraham Lincoln's presidency. By analyzing Lincoln's leadership and assessing his performance through these modern lenses, one can determine if his reputation as one of the greatest presidents of all time and a truly magnanimous wartime leader is warranted. Additionally, the paper will determine if Lincoln's strategic leadership capabilities highlight the competencies still required by today's strategic leaders.

Abraham Lincoln's Presidential Qualities

Fred Greenstein, in his book *The Presidential Difference*, focuses his analysis on the qualities that influence a president's leadership capacities. Although the United States is said to have a government of laws and institutions rather than individuals, Greenstein asserts that the person who occupies the highest office and his competencies matter. The president himself formulates the nation's grand strategy, and he has a significant bearing on policymaking. Greenstein stresses that there is an era, which he terms the "modern presidency and which he defines as the post-World War I

period, whereby events such as the New Deal, World War II and the emergence of the United States as a nuclear power, established the primacy of presidential power. He also argues that these fundamental changes increased the likelihood that personal attributes that distinguish one president from another shape political outcomes.⁶ While Greenstein focuses his attention on the modern presidency, his claim is equally relevant to presidents who served before World War I and the typology can be applied to presidents of the early American Republic, as he has recently done.⁷

Public Communicator

Professional communication is intended to give direction, instill confidence and provide hope. Abraham Lincoln accomplishes all these outcomes through his ability to personalize the subject under discussion for his listeners and readers. As a writer and speaker, Lincoln cannot be pinned down to one specific style, but rather he utilizes the style best suited for the occasion. He is remembered by contemporaries as a solemn, melancholy figure, as well as a man with a multitude of stories and quips. Lincoln biographer and poet Carl Sandburg, who had a keen understanding of how language is used, noted, "Perhaps no other American held so definitely in himself both those elements – the genius of the Tragic – the spirit of the Comic."⁸ Additionally, Lincoln is well regarded by scholars for the precision of language, simplicity and clarity in his speeches, but he also expertly employed cadenced prose with Biblical and Shakespearean influences. Repetition of sound as well as repetition of words was one of Lincoln's trademarks. Roy Basler, the widely acknowledged expert on Lincoln's speeches and writings and the historian who compiled *The Collective Works of Abraham Lincoln*, points out that Lincoln was consciously deliberate with his attention to

sound, but even more than sound, his choice of words was calculated. He chose concrete words over abstract, current expressions over rigid, formal niceties.⁹

More than the mechanics of his speeches, it is Lincoln's expertise at delivering them, which endears him to admirer and critic alike. Basler notes that Lincoln's stylistic traits of public speaking did not vary much from his earlier experiences, except in their beauty, likely derived from experience. Basler states, "...it is not in technical command of style so much as it is in power of feeling and imagination that the addresses of the last period [1861-1865] surpass by all odds those of his middle period."¹⁰ Even though it was a common observation among Lincoln's friends that he was cold and unemotional, he used his art of communication to evoke emotion. Although Basler agrees that no other orator of his time was more coldly logical or utilized self-imposed restraint than Lincoln did from 1854-1861, he began to use illustration in his prose to evoke emotions during his wartime presidency. Basler contends that Lincoln "...considered his prose chiefly as a means to an end, recognizing that in an emotional crisis of national scope the truest appeal could not be made to the intellect alone."¹¹ While there are many examples of Abraham Lincoln's talents as an orator and author, three are sterling examples of his strategic communication abilities: the Emancipation Proclamation, the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address.

No other single document had such a profound affect on Lincoln's presidency and his impact on the nation as did the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln carried the idea of emancipation through numerous debates before and during his presidency, and waited for the country to be ready before he issued it on January 1, 1863. Lincoln considered this document his most seminal work. "I never, in my life, felt more certain

that I was doing right, than I do in signing this paper. If my name ever goes into history it will be for this act, and my whole soul is in it.”¹² The document forever changed the relationship of the national government to slavery. Where slavery had been protected before the proclamation, it was now under its ban. The *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* predicted, “Whatever partial reverses may attend its progress, slavery from this hour ceases to be a political power in the country...such a righteous revolution as it inaugurates never goes backward.”¹³ The proclamation freed all slaves in the states in rebellion and literally made history overnight. Moreover, as the closing of the proclamation emphasizes, it is also a document underscoring the moral leadership of President Lincoln: “And upon this act sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God.”¹⁴

After more than two years of civil war, the Battle at Gettysburg in July 1863 would prove to be the bloodiest engagement of the war with tens of thousands of casualties.¹⁵ Although considered a victory for the Union, Lincoln was not consoled. The massive death toll as well as missed opportunities for the Union Army to destroy Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, disappointed Lincoln regarding this campaign execution. In an effort to contend with the mass carnage in the small town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and to honor the Union dead, the Soldiers National Cemetery at Gettysburg was created and subsequently consecrated on November 19, 1863. Former Secretary of State and Harvard College president Edward Everett delivered the two-hour oration for this event. Lincoln was invited to attend and make a few remarks of dedication. Roy Basler commented that the Gettysburg Address so links

the private theme of sorrow with the public theme of freedom, that the speech becomes an emblem of a national ideal.¹⁶ Using this opportunity to advance his supreme task, that is, the preservation of the Union, Lincoln metaphorically uses the birth, death and rebirth of both man and the Union in his remarks to signify this task, using words that have resounded through the decades: "...that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that the government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."¹⁷ In his book, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, scholar Garry Wills eloquently expressed the impact of Lincoln's address this way, "It would have been hard to predict that Gettysburg, out of all this muddle, these missed chances, all the senseless deaths, would become a symbol of national purpose, pride, and ideals. Abraham Lincoln transformed the ugly reality into something rich and strange – and he did it with 272 words. The power of words has rarely been given a more compelling demonstration."¹⁸

The final example of Lincoln's skill as a public communicator is his Second Inaugural Address. Yale University professor Harry Stout views this address as an example of Abraham Lincoln as a moral leader, terming it, "America's Sermon to the World," a conclusion with which most of Lincoln's contemporaries and today's scholars would agree.¹⁹ It's the cadences, phraseology, biblical allusions and moral stirring that give this the sound and feel of a sermon, which Lincoln felt the nation needed to hear. By 1865 the war was more about slavery than secession, and although Lincoln did not know when the war would end, he knew he had preserved the Union. His address not only calls on the country to "finish the work we are in," but also recognizes the obligation

of the United States to the world as he ends his speech with a plea for peace “with all nations.” Stout and historian Ronald White conclude that the Second Inaugural is Lincoln’s greatest speech. He provided future generations with the context that not only explained the United States to itself, but also to the rest of the world. In both literal and symbolic ways, the Second Inaugural captured the deepest burdens of the nation’s transformation.²⁰

There are many more examples to complement these famous three of Lincoln’s ability to speak and to instill confidence, give direction, and most of all, provide hope to a nation at war. His expertise as a communicator is aptly summarized by Roy Basler.

The study of Lincoln’s works reveals the dignity of a great mind and heart that seeks for rightness in principle, fairness in act, and beauty in utterance. He is a creative consciousness in whom the reality of nineteenth century America yet lives and breathes. As this reality is in Lincoln intrinsic, and his communication of it inimitable, so his words endure, representative and symbolic with singular completeness of the epoch which nurtured him. And so it is that he becomes as we study him, like the classic literary figures of the past, something more than a man. Time may dissipate the factual significance of his deeds, both as private citizen and as President, but we must always know and acknowledge the shining spirit that illuminates his words.²¹

Organizational Capacity

In addition to being a skilled public communicator, Lincoln’s ability to build a remarkable group of advisors and confidants is a significant aspect of his powerful and effective strategic leadership style. According to Greenstein, the quality of organizational capacity concerns a president’s capacity to build a productive team as well as the manner in which the chief executive handles the large amount of information and advice presented to him daily by his cabinet and staff.

As a result of his magnanimous and empathetic personality, Abraham Lincoln was able to combine the best people to assist him with the task of governance, no

matter the personal history he had with them. As scholar Eliot Cohen notes, “It is an easy thing for a politician to find docile, second-rate subordinates who will serve him loyally; it is a far more impressive achievement to mold fractious, ambitious, even disloyal but first-rate subordinates into a winning team.”²² Lincoln decided on his cabinet in Springfield, Illinois, on the night he was elected president. From his rivals for the 1860 Republican presidential nomination, he chose William Seward for Secretary of State, Salmon P. Chase for Secretary of the Treasury, and Edward Bates for Attorney General.²³ His original Secretary of War was Simon Cameron but Edward M. Stanton would replace him in 1862. Stanton was a Democrat, and Lincoln also appointed two former Democrats to his cabinet. Gideon Welles, who served as the Secretary of the Navy, and Montgomery Blair as Postmaster General. Although every man was better educated and more experienced in political life than Lincoln, anyone who thought Lincoln would be overshadowed by this talented group would have been mistaken.

In her book, *Team of Rivals*, Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote, “That Lincoln, after winning the presidency, made the unprecedented decision to incorporate his eminent rivals into his political family, the cabinet, was evidence of a profound self-confidence and a first indication of what would prove to others a most unexpected greatness.”²⁴ Lincoln’s personal secretaries John G. Nicolay and John Hay made a similar observation in their study of Abraham Lincoln, highlighting that critics were quick to point out the seeds of discord, jealousy and disaster this grouping could bring to the new administration. They contended those critics underestimated both the man who was to lead them and the “storms of state” they would have to outlive. According to these two men, “He [Lincoln] needed advisors, helpers, executive eyes and hands, not

alone in department routine, but in the higher qualities of leadership and influence; above all, his principal motive seems to have been representative character, varied talent – in a word, combination.”²⁵ Lincoln not only had a vast amount of information to organize, assimilate and take action on, but he also had to navigate the convoluted landscape of the American political system.

Political Skill

Richard Neustadt, in his work *Presidential Power*, illuminates the centrality of political skill to presidential performance. Neustadt’s prescription for a president is to use the powers of the office assertively, build and maintain public support, and establish a reputation among fellow policymakers as a skilled and determined political leader.²⁶ Abraham Lincoln does not fit that mold in all aspects, but he is acknowledged by historians for his political intelligence. The political landscape of the mid-nineteenth century was complex. With the turmoil of seceding states and radical political platforms, the legitimacy of the presidency was challenged routinely, and Lincoln found himself guarding against his own political party as much as opposing ones.

In addressing the first of Neustadt’s prescriptions for a great political leader, Lincoln clearly used the powers of his office assertively. Some contemporaries thought much too assertively. For example, the Democratic Party ran on a platform that portrayed Lincoln as an abolitionist dictator and war criminal during the mid-term elections of 1862, a platform that overturned the Republican majority in five of the most populous states and changed the governorship in two of them.²⁷ Some of the more controversial actions Lincoln adopted during the war included the suspending of *habeas corpus*, overturning decisions of general officers in the field, and the aforementioned Emancipation Proclamation. However, Lincoln believed he had a constitutional

obligation to uphold the Union, and with the advice and counsel of his lawyers and cabinet, he was determined to push the boundaries of his presidential authority to the limit in order to achieve that end.

Lincoln does not conform to Neustadt's second and third indicators of political skill as easily. Most Americans today see Lincoln in a highly favorable light and as one of the most influential presidents of all time who enjoyed vast public support. The actual election returns during his tenure indicate otherwise. He received a minority of the popular vote for president in 1861. His name did not even appear on the ballot in many southern states, and his election essentially initiated the process of secession because of his stance on slavery. His party lost control of crucial states in the off-year elections of 1862, and in the 1864 presidential election, forty-five percent of the voters cast their ballots against Lincoln in favor of a Democratic platform that characterized both his administration and his management of the war as failures. A change in only two percent, about eighty-three thousand votes, would have meant defeat for Lincoln.²⁸

Even more shocking than his lack of substantial public support, is the disdain he received from fellow political leaders, even those of his own party. Republican critics openly announced that Lincoln was "unfit," "timid and ignorant," and "too slow."²⁹ The Republican Party did not even demonstrate support for Lincoln in the run-up to the 1864 election. Lincoln was actually re-elected on the National Union Party ticket. This party was an offshoot of the Republican Party, but it allowed Republicans and Democrats who were committed to a constitutional amendment to abolish slavery to support Lincoln. Consequently, it is with hindsight that most people have come to realize the political acumen of the sixteenth president. It is hard to find someone of note who

acknowledged his skill in overcoming the numerous political hurdles he confronted during his tenure in office. Nonetheless, Lincoln's political competencies are evident. He was able to dominate his party, secure a re-nomination, and win re-election, all while prosecuting the war.

Even though Lincoln failed to win over many politicians or obtain support from an overwhelming majority of the public, historian David Donald asserts he was a successful politician. "The secret of Lincoln's success is simple: he was an astute and dexterous operator of the political machine."³⁰ In that respect, Donald represents Lincoln as a regular party man. "Long before he became President, Lincoln said that 'the man who is of neither party is not, and cannot be, of any consequence' in American life."³¹ Furthermore, as Eliot Cohen has concluded, "It was Lincoln's understanding of the interplay of war and politics, no less than his ability to absorb military detail and to read human character, that made him the greatest of American war presidents."³² Part of that political skill can be contributed to his vision as a war president.

Vision

The quality of vision includes both the ability to inspire as well as to maintain a consistent viewpoint. One of the important attributes of strategic leaders is to envision the future and build consensus among important stakeholders to move towards that future. President Lincoln's vision was clear. His first and foremost duty was to preserve the United States and its constitutional government. James McPherson used the word "hedgehog" to describe Lincoln's vision. The idea for this unlikely description comes from a Greek poem comparing the fox and the hedgehog and can be most readily explained by British philosopher Isaiah Berlin: "The hedgehog is a thinker or leader who relates everything to a single central vision...a single, universal, organizing principle,

while the fox pursues many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory.”³³ McPherson takes this concept and applies it to Lincoln by asserting that his cabinet was a group of “foxes” that thought they were smarter than him, but lacked his depth of vision. Sometimes they were pursuing unrelated or unproductive avenues that did not complement his single vision of restoring the Union. Lincoln was a profound nationalist. His belief in representative democracy was rooted in his understanding of the Declaration of Independence and the ideas of liberty and equality. Preserving the constitutional fabric that wove the nation together was his single vision. There were northerners that pleaded with Lincoln to let the Southern states secede. That attitude is what McPherson calls the language of the fox. “Lincoln the hedgehog knew better. Once the principle of secession was recognized, the Union could never be restored. The United States would cease to exist. Monarchists and reactionaries throughout the world would rejoice in the fulfillment of their prediction that this upstart democracy in North America could not last.”³⁴ As the war went on, Lincoln realized that other objectives would also have to be met to secure lasting unification, but the primary objective always remained to preserve the “experiment in democracy” the founders had started. Hopeful that the war would soon be over, the Lincolns went to see General Ulysses S. Grant and his family in March of 1865. During that visit, General Grant asked Lincoln, “Mr. President, did you at any time doubt the final success of the cause?” “Never for a moment,” Lincoln replied.³⁵ Part of Lincoln’s skill in managing the war to its victorious conclusion resulted from his clear vision that the most important war aim was to preserve the union and the tenacity to see his vision realized.

Cognitive Style

Cognitive style describes how an individual acquires knowledge and processes information. This is a psychological element, related to how someone perceives, learns, and reasons and how those processes inform the decisions he makes and the way he interacts with other people. Abraham Lincoln's cognitive style was exploratory and methodical, which was sometimes mistaken for unintelligent and ignorant. Even those who thought they knew him well were unclear regarding his way of thinking. Secretary of State William Seward questioned whether the President was attentive to the accusations against Secretary of War Simon Cameron for incompetent administration of his department. But in January 1862, Lincoln revealed the results of his observation and systematic consideration of Cameron's ineffectiveness. Seward noted, he "abruptly started talking about the condition of the War Department. He soon made it apparent that he had all along observed and known as much about it as any of us...his mind was now settled, and he had come to consult me about a successor to Mr. Cameron."³⁶

Lincoln was mostly self-taught. He estimated that he received no more than one year of formal schooling.³⁷ His self-study and training and experience as a lawyer clearly reflect his cognitive style. Lincoln would study documents and ask multiple questions about an issue. His cross-examination style was apparent in every major decision of the war. When faced with impossible choices, he postponed action by requesting more information. For example, he was especially deliberate on one particular critical decision early in his presidency—whether or not to resupply Fort Sumter, South Carolina, in view of mounting tensions and resistance on the part of South Carolina. As historian David Herbert Donald wrote, "He did not come to conclusions quickly, and he was temperamentally averse to making bold moves."³⁸ Lincoln labored extensively over what

actions to take with respect to Fort Sumter, requesting his cabinet officers submit their advice to him in writing. He was torn over whether to resupply the federal installation or to evacuate the troops and let the fortress fall into control of the rebellious states. He had promised during his first inaugural address not to start the war and to “hold, occupy, and possess the property and places belonging to the government.”³⁹ He faced a gut wrenching decision with the resupply of Fort Sumter in trying to uphold those two promises, and he struggled over the decision. Donald continues, “The strain under which Lincoln labored in arriving at this decision was immense. All the troubles and anxieties of his life...did not equal those he felt in these tense days.”⁴⁰

Greenstein depicts Lincoln as having “strategic intelligence,” the ability to think holistically.⁴¹ In decision-making, Lincoln was described by most contemporaries as very pragmatic and unemotional. However, it was actually his highly developed emotional intelligence that enabled him to bring all of these leadership attributes to bear for powerful results.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence is the ability to manage one’s emotions and use them for constructive purposes. This attribute is what the German sociologist Max Weber called “the firm taming of the soul.”⁴² Greenstein holds the attribute of emotional intelligence as the most significant of the six characteristics that positively affect presidential performance. He warns against the presidential contender who lacks emotional intelligence because, “in its absence all else may turn to ashes.”⁴³ There are many aspects of Abraham Lincoln’s emotional intelligence worthy of mention. Doris Kearns Goodwin highlighted the traits of empathy, humor, magnanimity, generosity, perspective, self-control, and balance in an essay on the President’s emotional

strength.⁴⁴ Although the photographs of Lincoln capture his melancholy and the strain of the presidency, there are many written accounts of his humor, contagious laugh and flashing eyes. “The President was gifted by nature with a courtesy far excelling the conventionalities of an acquired politeness,” as his personal secretaries noted.⁴⁵

Lincoln’s empathy and magnanimity were prevalent and distinct, and they are also rare in political life. Political scientist Colleen Shogan emphasized the political utility of empathy in presidential leadership. “Empathy has the power to alter opinions, strengthen relationships, and foster an understanding of unshared circumstances or experiences. Lincoln is an example of a president who used his empathy to enhance his political leadership and decision making.”⁴⁶ Striking examples of the President’s empathy are seen in his attitudes concerning both the slave and the slave owner. Lincoln abhorred slavery and understood the hypocrisy of a country that declared “all men are created equal” in its founding document while still holding a certain class of men in bondage. The hard work he did as a young man, usually with no reward or benefit from his father, ingrained in Lincoln the inherent right that a man should earn a fair wage for his labors. But in contrast to most anti-slavery leaders of the day, Lincoln did not cast Southern slave owners as un-Christian or corrupt, but consistent with what any Northern businessman might do in a similar situation. He argued, “they are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist amongst them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us, we should not instantly give it up...When it is said that the institution exists, and that it is very difficult to get rid of it, in any satisfactory way, I can understand and appreciate the saying. I surely will not blame them for not doing what I should not know how to do myself.”⁴⁷

The relationship between Lincoln and Edward Stanton is probably the most revealing aspect of Lincoln's magnanimous and forgiving character. Stanton and Lincoln worked together on a trial several years earlier in Cincinnati, Ohio, where Stanton had humiliated Lincoln. Stanton would not speak to Lincoln as an equal, called him a "giraffe" and a "baboon," and even pulled him back by his coattails to let other lawyers examine evidence on display. According to the lead attorney on the case, George Harding, "he had never seen one man insult another so grossly, and that too without reason, than Stanton insulted Lincoln on that occasion."⁴⁸ Seven years later, Harding did not believe that Lincoln would consider his suggestion of Edwin Stanton for Secretary of War based on the "outrageous way he insulted you."⁴⁹ Lincoln replied that this was not a personal matter, but the best step for the country.⁵⁰ More than any other attribute, Lincoln's emotional strengths separate him from his contemporaries and from other presidents alike. His overwhelming capacity for forgiveness and empathy, added to his courtesy, humor, generosity and self-control, allow his exceptional abilities as a visionary, organizer of teams, political connoisseur, gifted public speaker, and holistic thinker to combine into an exceptional leader.

Appraising a President

Abraham Lincoln possessed many favorable attributes that served him well as President of the United States, but how effective was his presidency overall? Richard Neustadt seeks to describe the personal influence and political leadership of modern presidents. Presidential power refers to how the individual characteristics and leadership can influence and promote the betterment of the institution. President Lincoln's wartime presidency will be assessed through his four-question framework specified previously.

Purposes

Neustadt's initial question in assessing presidential performance is, "What were his purposes and did these run with or against the grain of history; how relevant were they to what would happen in his time?"⁵¹ Neustadt looks for clues in irreversible commitments to defined courses of action.⁵² Lincoln's initial and lasting purpose as president was to preserve the Union. As the Civil War progressed, it became apparent to Lincoln that the abolition of slavery was integral to preservation of the Union and it became another major purpose of the Lincoln presidency. As Neustadt mentions, "Lincoln certainly did not assume the Presidency to gain the title of 'Great Emancipator.'"⁵³ Lincoln knew that the slavery issue could not be brushed aside any longer in order for the Union to survive. The Compromise of 1820, the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act were all earlier pieces of legislation aimed at easing tensions between opposing sides on the issue of slavery. Slavery was much more than a moral issue in the mid-nineteenth century, it had evolved into an economic and political issue as well. Historian Drew Faust writes, "It [slavery] fundamentally shaped the national economy, which relied upon cotton as its largest export, and national politics, where slaveholding presidents governed for approximately two thirds of the years between the inaugurations of Washington and Lincoln."⁵⁴ As president, Lincoln received advice to compromise once again and let the seceded states alone. He went against the grain of history in this regard. He would not compromise any further and he pushed to abolish an institution that was economically flourishing. President Lincoln's reaction to the events of his time added to his purpose and his legacy. Moreover, these purposes were unquestionably relevant to his time. The Civil War affected the entire

country. Nothing could have been more relevant to Lincoln's time than his purposes of preserving the Union and the abolition of slavery.

Power

The second question Neustadt uses to appraise a president's performance considers the executive's understanding of the nature of his power. What was the president's "feel" for the office and was he in line with the realities around him?⁵⁵ As a lawyer, President Lincoln was very conscious of the law and held the Constitution of the United States in the highest regard. As president, Lincoln was sworn to "preserve, protect and defend" that constitution and he reminded others of that duty frequently, including in his first inaugural address.⁵⁶ This duty weighed heavily on him, but he was resolute in the power bestowed upon him. When a group from Baltimore asked the President not to send troops through Maryland and to recognize the Confederacy in April of 1861, Lincoln replied, "The rebels attack Fort Sumter, and your citizens attack troops sent to the defense of the Government, and the lives and property in Washington, and yet you would have me break my oath and surrender the Government without a blow. There is no Washington in that – no Jackson in that – no manhood nor honor in that."⁵⁷ Later that same month, Lincoln told one of the officers assigned to Washington D.C., who happened to be a Southerner, that "independently of all other reasons he felt it to be a constitutional obligation binding upon his conscience to put down secession" even though "he bore testimony to the honor, good faith, and high character of the Southern people, whom he 'knew well.'"⁵⁸

One of the most controversial decisions occurred when Lincoln used his presidential authority to suspend *habeas corpus*. The Constitution allows for the suspension of habeas corpus only "in Cases of Rebellion or Invasion the public Safety

may require it.”⁵⁹ Lincoln clearly had the situation of rebellion and public safety to justify his actions, but Chief Justice Roger B. Taney quickly ruled in favor of one of the detained citizens, criticizing the President and maintaining that only Congress could suspend the writ.⁶⁰ The Attorney General upheld Lincoln’s suspension arguing that it was the dangerous situation in the country that threatened the very existence of the nation and the President had the lawful discretionary power to arrest and hold anyone thought to be engaged in rebellion.⁶¹ Lincoln would later defend his decision in his first message to Congress noting that as chief executive “he was responsible for ensuring ‘that the laws be faithfully executed.’” An insurrection “in nearly one-third of the States” had subverted the “whole of the laws...are all the laws, *but one*, to go unexecuted and the government itself go to pieces, lest that one be violated?”⁶²

Another controversial decision came in the form of emancipation. Again, Lincoln was conscious of the states’ right to govern themselves and he was facing a Congress who wanted to pass legislation to govern slave issues. As David Donald characterizes Lincoln’s understanding of his power, “If power over slavery within the states existed anywhere in the federal government, it was to be found in the war powers, which he believed could only be exercised by the President as commander-in-chief.”⁶³ Lincoln took great pains to understand the power of the office and pushed the boundaries with extraordinary measures he felt to be paramount in exceptional times.

Pressure

The third question asks, what was the president’s stance under pressure? What sustained him through the frustrations of the office, and how did his peacemaking with himself affect the style and content of his own decision-making?⁶⁴ Lincoln’s melancholic nature was well documented by his contemporaries. Historians disagree as to whether

he simply had a melancholic temperament or suffered from severe clinical depression throughout his life. Whatever the case may be, his nature was solemn and despondent and this was the case from early childhood, not simply a reaction to the pressures and duties of the wartime presidency. Lincoln was remembered by his contemporaries as very fair and even-tempered and his empathy and consideration for others was quite overt. His personal secretary John G. Nicolay recorded that he witnessed daily for four years, "his bearing under the most trying circumstances, and during the whole time never saw him manifest any extraordinary excitement..., or indulge in any violence of speech or action beyond that of impressive emphasis."⁶⁵ The war weighed very heavily on him with its tremendous loss of life. To counter this heavy weight, Lincoln held that there was a higher purpose at work and there was unknown goodness to result from the war. This belief allowed him to live with himself and share some of the responsibility for all of the suffering. In a letter to a member of the Society of Friends, Lincoln wrote, "We hoped for a happy termination of this terrible war long before this; but God knows best, and has ruled otherwise...we must work earnestly in the best light He gives us, trusting that so working still conduces to the great ends He ordains. Surely He intends some great good to follow this mighty convulsion, which no mortal could make, and no mortal could stay."⁶⁶

Another distinct way Lincoln dealt with the pressures of the office was with humor. Again, his storytelling and wittiness started early in life and became part of his personality by the time he was president. He used his seemingly limitless stock of stories to defuse tensions and relax those around him. He had a remarkable sense of humor and often used it in a self-deprecatory way. He also tried to use stories to help

make a point being debated. “When he began one of them [stories], his “eyes would sparkle with fun,” one old-timer remembered, “and when he reached the point in his narrative which invariably evoked the laughter of the crowd, nobody’s enjoyment was greater than his.”⁶⁷ Yet the war took its toll, as it would any president with such grave matters in mind. John Hay observed that as Lincoln began his second term, “he was in mind, body, and nerves a very different man from the one who had taken the oath in 1861. He continued always the same kindly, genial, and cordial spirit he had been at first; but the boisterous laughter became less frequent year by year; the eye grew veiled by constant meditation on momentous subjects; the air of reserve and detachment from his surroundings increased.”⁶⁸

Legacy

The final question in Neustadt’s framework asks, what was the president’s legacy? What imprint did he leave on the office, its character and public standing; what remained by way of public policies adopted or in controversy?⁶⁹ An unquestionable part of Lincoln’s legacy is his emancipation of the slaves. Although this was not his intent when he began his presidency, he came to realize that the institution of slavery and the values of the United States could no longer exist together. The Emancipation Proclamation started the movement toward freedom for all Americans, and his successful efforts to get the Thirteenth Amendment passed in Congress are a substantial part of his legacy. Lincoln did not need the perspective of time to understand the significance of these efforts. During his annual message to Congress in December 1862, he said, “Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history. We of the Congress and this administration, will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance, or

insignificance, can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation.”⁷⁰

Historical rankings of presidents of the United States consistently rank Lincoln as one of the top two presidents of all time. The first notable scholarly survey of presidents was conducted by historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr. of Harvard University in 1948, and repeated by his son in 1962.⁷¹ Abraham Lincoln ranked first in both of those polls and second in a Gallup poll in 2011.⁷² In the opinion polls conducted by C-Span in 2000 and 2009, Lincoln was ranked first as the greatest American president.⁷³

The legacy of Abraham Lincoln is often best articulated by other well-known figures. After his death, General Grant said, “I have no doubt that Lincoln will be the conspicuous figure of the war. He was incontestably the greatest man I ever knew.”⁷⁴ The poet Walt Whitman wrote in 1888, “Abraham Lincoln seems to me the grandest figure yet, on all the crowded canvas of the Nineteenth Century.”⁷⁵ And in 1908, the Russian author Leo Tolstoy said, “We are still too near to his greatness, but after a few centuries more our posterity will find him considerably bigger than we do. His genius is still too strong and too powerful for the common understanding, just as the sun is too hot when its light beams directly on us.”⁷⁶

Concluding Thoughts

Abraham Lincoln’s larger-than-life persona lives up to the international image that surrounds him. By using the assessment frameworks of Fred Greenstein and Richard Neustadt, Lincoln remains a prominent figure and stands as one of the most admirable leader in modern world history. Circumstances gave him the opportunity to showcase his leadership, and he grabbed those times of adversity with a determination to save the country he loved. By assessing the presidential power of Abraham Lincoln through the

modern lenses, it becomes clear that the leadership and characteristics displayed by the sixteenth president are still applicable today. There is much for the strategic leader of the twenty-first century to learn from this strategic leader of the nineteenth century. After 150 years of studying, criticizing, and assessing his greatness, Abraham Lincoln's genius and charity shine brighter than ever.

Endnotes

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¹¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

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- ²⁴ Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, xvi.
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- ²⁶ Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to Clinton*, 197.
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- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 76.
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- ³³ James M. McPherson, "The Hedgehog and the Foxes," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 12, no. 1 (1991): 49.
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- ³⁵ Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, 710.
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⁵⁶ Basler, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, 588.

⁵⁷ Burlingame, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: The Observations of John G. Nicolay and John Hay*, 55.

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⁵⁹ U.S. Constitution, art. 1, sec. 9.

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