

Lincoln's word choice in his inaugural speech

1. Lincoln was a simple country lawyer.

This durable legend, personified by laconic Henry Fonda in John Ford's film "[Young Mr. Lincoln](#)," dies hard. Lincoln's law partner William H. Herndon, looking to boost his own reputation, introduced the canard that Lincoln cared little about his legal practice, did scant research, joked around with juries and judges, and sometimes failed to collect fees. Lincoln himself may have compromised his legal reputation with his oft-quoted admonition "Discourage litigation."

True, politics became lawyer Lincoln's chief ambition. Still, in the 1850s he ably (and profitably) represented the Illinois Central Railroad and the Rock Island Bridge Co. - the company that built the first railroad bridge over the Mississippi River - and earned a solid reputation as one of his home state's top appeals lawyers.

[Lincoln's legal papers](#) testify to a diverse and profitable practice. Had he not been "aroused," as he put it, to speak out in 1854 against the pro-slavery Kansas-Nebraska Act before seeking a Senate seat, he likely would have remained a full-time lawyer and earned fame and fortune at the bar.

2. Lincoln was gay.

Gay rights activist Larry Kramer has long speculated that Lincoln was gay, claiming in 1999 that he'd [discovered Lincoln's love letters](#) to onetime roommate Joshua Speed. The claim is reportedly featured in Kramer's forthcoming history of homosexuality, "[The American People](#)," but historian Gabor Boritt called Kramer's assertion "almost certainly . . . a hoax."

Still, the idea persists. In 2005, "[The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln](#)," written by queer theory professor C. A. Tripp - a colleague of sex researcher Alfred Kinsey - purported to prove that Lincoln was an active homosexual who married only to conform to 19th-century convention and continued flirting and sleeping with young men throughout his presidency. Tripp went so far as to suggest that Lincoln's sexual indifference is what contributed to his wife's mental illness.

Is it true? And if it is, does it matter? According to Herndon, Lincoln exhibited a "powerful" attraction to women and was a regular customer in prairie brothels before his marriage at age 33. His first son was born just nine months after his marriage, which suggests enthusiasm if not experience. Then again, proving that a man loves

women isn't the same as proving that he doesn't love men. Maybe it's best to throw up our hands - and remember that Lincoln's sexual orientation is but a small part of his historical legacy.

3. Lincoln was depressed.

Four generations of biographers attest that Lincoln was often morose, but Washington College's Joshua Wolf Shenk made the case in his recent book, "[Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled his Greatness](#)," that the 16th president was clinically depressed. Lincoln certainly had moments of what he called the "hypo," most notably when his first serious crush, Ann Rutledge, died in 1835, and again when he broke up with fiancée Mary Todd on the eve of their nuptials in 1841. (They reconciled the next year.)

Though I co-edited a collection of Lincoln papers with Shenk, we disagree on this point. Genuine depression was untreatable in the 19th century, and its victims often descended into madness or took their own lives. It is impossible to reconcile this debilitating disease with the Lincoln who labored tirelessly and effectively during his demanding presidency. Clinically depressed people often can't get out of bed, let alone command an army.

Was Lincoln sad? Sure - his son Willie died of fever in the White House in 1862, while the president himself led a war that would take the lives of 600,000 other young men. It would be far more remarkable had Lincoln remained perennially jolly.

4. Lincoln was too compassionate.

Much has been made by poet and Lincoln biographer [Carl Sandburg](#) and other historians over the notion that Lincoln was a serial pardoner. This is untrue - Lincoln not only approved the execution of deserters, but [38 alleged Indian raiders were hanged by his order](#) in Mankato, Minn. on Dec. 26, 1862, still the largest mass execution on U.S. soil.

Meanwhile, Lincoln conducted the bloodiest war in American history to preserve the Union, authorized the deployment of deadly new weaponry such as mines, ironclad warships and niter (a 19th-century version of napalm), and accepted unprecedented casualties for his chosen cause.

The [recent scandal](#) over an altered National Archives pardon - a document allegedly changed by historian Thomas P. Lowry in 1998 to make it appear that Lincoln spent

his final hours pardoning a soldier for desertion - gives us the opportunity to reconsider the chronic oversimplification of Lincoln's soft touch. In light of the Archives melee, historians should re-examine the thousands of pardons Lincoln issued to weigh their authenticity and balance them against the death sentences he did allow.

5. Lincoln was mortally ill.

No shortage of armchair physicians are ready to diagnose Lincoln 150 years after his death. He had cardiovascular disease, some say. Or he had the rare genetic disorder Marfan's Syndrome. Or he had the fatal cancer MEN2B. Had Lincoln not been assassinated on April 14, 1865, medical historians like [John Sotos](#) imply, he would have died soon enough without John Wilkes Booth's help.

If any of these illnesses wracked Lincoln's body during his presidency, how do we explain his inexhaustible physical constitution? Or the rarity of his wartime illnesses, limited to a mild bout of smallpox which killed his valet? How do we explain the ease with which the 56-year-old demonstrated his favorite frontier feat of strength - holding a heavy ax at arm's length between his fingers - just a few days before his death?

Like many presidents, Lincoln grew visibly haggard during his presidency. He also lost weight. But the physicians who attended him on his deathbed marveled at his muscular arms and chest. A weaker man, they concluded, would have died the minute he was shot. Lincoln fought off death for nine hours - hardly within the ability of a man with a pre-existing condition.

[Harold Holzer](#), the senior vice president for external relations at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was co-chairman of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission and is author of "[Lincoln President-Elect: Abraham Lincoln and the Great Secession Winter, 1860-1861.](#)"

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