



Lincoln's View of Obama's Inauguration

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With the 20-foot statue of Abraham Lincoln gazing from the Lincoln Memorial across the National Mall, I wondered, what would the Civil War president think about Barack Obama being sworn in as America's 44th president? Lincoln is obviously Obama's favorite president. But would America's 16th president return the same sentiment?

There's no doubt these two presidents from Illinois share some similarities. As Australia's *Herald Sun* noted, "Both were derided as too young and inexperienced to be President; both wrote best-selling books before running for the White House; both were lawyers and extraordinarily gifted orators; both came to power during a national crisis; and both were tall, lanky, self-made men determined to maintain contact with the citizens they served."

But some retort by saying every president since the 16th president has felt some sense of his legacy. Lincoln scholar and historian Harold Holzer, who has written 31 books on the Great Emancipator, said: "They all feel it. Everyone finds something in him." And, I would add, everyone finds their contrasts, too. "I think it is time to claim Lincoln as one of our own," Franklin Roosevelt said in the spring of 1929. "I'm a Ford, not a Lincoln," Gerald Ford once said. Obama even recently confessed, "There's a genius to Lincoln that is not going to be matched."

Obama and Lincoln, however, do share one gigantic thing in common above all others: a rare and historic symmetry. One served as a catalyst to end slavery, and the other demonstrates just how far that freedom has advanced in almost 150 years. There cannot be enough said about the historical magnitude of this presidential moment -- a true fulfillment of the American experiment, spirit and dream (an achievement embedded long ago in the equality clauses of the Declaration of Independence).

In the end, our 16th and 44th presidents have not only some positives but also some negatives in common. The latter includes:

- They both believe imposing more taxes is the way to economic recovery. (Lincoln was dependent upon Southern taxes and initiated the first income taxes, which eventually would become law, in 1913, through our 16th Amendment.)
- They both believe in regarding the Constitution as a living document (allowing them more flexibility and power for preferred political decisions and presidential autonomy).
- They both believe in big government solutions. Lincoln once said, "The legitimate object of government is to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done but cannot do at all or cannot so well do for themselves, in their separate and individual capacities."

So where do these similarities and contrasts leave us in considering what Lincoln's view of Obama's inauguration might have been? About this we can be absolutely certain: Lincoln and his contemporaries couldn't even have imagined a day when America would elect a black man as president. Such an elevated position was simply out of sight from the social paradigm of their time.

Case in point: On the one hand, in August 1858, Abraham Lincoln affirmed the equality in humanity of blacks: "I have never said anything to the contrary, but I hold that notwithstanding all this, there is no reason in the world why the Negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I hold that he is as much entitled to these as the white man. I agree with Judge Douglas; he is not my equal in many respects -- certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment. But in the right to eat the bread, without leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas and the equal of every living man."

On the other hand, just one month later, Lincoln questioned blacks' social and political equality: "I will say then that I am not nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races -- that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes nor of qualifying them to hold office nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races, which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together, there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race. I say upon this occasion I do not perceive that because the white man is to have the superior position the Negro should be denied everything."

Of course, as some propose, Lincoln could have had a change of heart over the next seven years, after experiencing the Civil War and his presidency. Others say, however, that the Emancipation Proclamation was merely a wartime measure and political document with no personal reflection.

No matter what the final verdict of Lincoln's degree of prejudicial blood, blacks were freed. And 144 years later, Obama is president. And those bookends in social history happened despite the fact that Abraham Lincoln, like many of us, retained some biases and still had room to grow.

What's most important now is not how Obama's and Lincoln's lives connect but how all of ours do. Any way you look at it, triumph or travesty, Obama's presidency is a colossal and culminating event according to any historical criteria. And all Americans would do well momentarily to drop our partisan politics and rigor and follow the advice given by Lincoln in his second inaugural address, which also is etched on his memorial:

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."
