“Centre’s Lincoln”
Centre College Founders Day Address, January 22, 2014

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On this day when we celebrate the founders of Centre College, I judged this might be a time to learn about and celebrate one who helped to found a new nation, if you will; one where all citizens would be permitted to enjoy the privileges of a country where all men and women “are created equal … endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, [and] that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

In August of 2012, we welcomed to our campus a 12-foot, larger-than-life sculpture of Abraham Lincoln, our nation’s 16th president. It was our expectation that the statue would become a signature piece of the campus; a campus element that educates and inspires. This expectation has been exceeded—thanks in large part to you students. So, on this Founders Day, it seems completely right for me to share with you a report on President Lincoln as an American hero and founder of a new nation. My hope is that my remarks will give all of us greater reason to be educated and inspired by this younger Abraham Lincoln who greets us as we move about campus in all directions. With this, I begin.

What is it we know about this man, Lincoln, widely regarded as our country’s most beloved and admired Commander in Chief? We know he was a son of Kentucky born in February of 1809, ten years before Centre was founded, in Hodgenville, Kentucky, to Thomas and Nancy Lincoln. We know he lost his birth mother at age nine, but Sarah Bush Johnston, a widow with two girls and a boy of her own, became his stepmother the following year and, almost instantly, became a force for good in young Abraham’s life.

We can guess that his mother and stepmother doubtless encouraged Lincoln’s taste for reading, but the original source of his desire to learn remains a mystery. According to Lincoln’s own statement, his early surroundings provided “absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education. Of course, when I came of age I did not know much. Still, somehow, I could read, write, and cipher to the rule of three; but that was all.” We know, but only sort of, that the young Lincoln did not read a large number of books, but seemingly absorbed the few that he did read. From his earliest days, he must have read and been familiar with the Bible, for it doubtless was the only book his family owned. We know that his struggling, rural, middle-class farming family was forced to move from Kentucky to Indiana and, then, Illinois before he reached the age of twenty-one.

What do we know of Lincoln’s raw talent? We know he was a man of immense physical proportions for his day. At 6’4” and over 200 pounds as a young adult, Abraham would have stood out in any crowd. Was he a person of brilliance? His early years would suggest not. His work later in life would suggest yes. Might we have guessed in grades K-3, arguably the most important and formative educational years and ones that were not a part of any formal education he encountered, that Lincoln was destined for greatness and adoration? Probably not. Did he come from a family of privilege? No. He stands as the first “commoner” elected to our nation’s highest office. Did he have a warm, caring, supportive relationship with his parents? No, at least
we know that he and his father did not have such a relationship, though his mothers clearly saw in young Abraham some chance for greatness, as did some of his friends and mentors, including John Todd Stuart, an 1826 Centre College alumnus and the man who is credited with encouraging Lincoln to give up blacksmithing and become an attorney. We know, too, that his early life and, sadly, much of his adult life was one of struggle and sadness and accomplishment and brilliance all at once.

Simply put, Abraham Lincoln was an extraordinary success in life almost in spite of it all. His modest upbringing and his early, unsuccessful start in politics became assets to him as he fashioned a set of core values and a leadership style that was ideal—approaching perfection—for the one who would be responsible for preserving the Union and beginning the removal of the national curse of slavery. Part of Lincoln’s genius was that he understood—and this is my judgment—that he had no genius. His array of more simple leadership gifts were the genius—an array of leadership qualities that allowed him, later in life (while still living as a person suffering from self-doubt and depression) to save the Union and provide leadership to our nation during one of its most desperate moments.

What do we know of Lincoln as leader? We can be sure, no doubt, that his leadership was judged to be most peculiar in the early-1860s, though now in the 21st Century, I would argue that his “style” is a model of sorts for those called to serve in formal organizations requiring modern, participative, inclusive leadership. What might we learn from this son of Kentucky? With thanks to insights by Donald T. Phillips in his book Lincoln on Leadership, permit me to call off several leadership traits to be studied, admired, and emulated.

**Persistence.** Lincoln’s rise to become the Commander-in-Chief was most certainly not a sure bet. Starting from the humblest of beginnings, he became a self-educated lawyer by sheer will power and desire to succeed. Later, he failed in two attempts to win election to the United States Senate, but then succeeded in becoming the 16th President. As Commander-in-Chief, he fired a succession of ineffective generals until he finally appointed Ulysses S. Grant to head the Union Army during the Civil War. In both his personal life and his political life, persistence was a key to his success, his leadership.

**Get out from behind the desk.** Lincoln mastered the art of walking around, getting the facts, taking a hands-on, personal approach way before Peters and Waterman suggested in 1982 that this leadership approach was crucial, representing best practice as a leader in the modern organization. His record for being out of the White House seeing and talking with people has never been equaled. His absence from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue was and is the stuff of legends, though one can guess that many of his advisors and closest colleagues thought this habit was most peculiar; unbecoming of a president, even.

**Persuade.** At 41 years of age in 1850 he wrote “Discourage litigation. Persuade your neighbors to compromise whenever you can.” The letters and telegrams he wrote to subordinates are filled with suggestions, views, and recommendations; rarely was there a direct order. Lincoln was the master of persuasion. He gave others the permission to lead, to succeed, even to fail.
**Honesty is the only policy.** The nickname “Honest Abe” was earned. Lincoln’s reputation for honesty and integrity, even though challenged over the years, has remained unblemished. Those who questioned his upbringing and education, or even his political affiliations, did not doubt his integrity. Truth is a common denominator for all interactions involving other people. Lincoln always led with truth. How curious it is that telling the truth among today’s leaders is almost met with surprise?

**No place for vengeance, no grudges allowed.** Most scholars agree that Lincoln seemed to have virtually no feelings of hate, vindictiveness, or malice. Many people of his day, in fact, thought his tendency toward leniency was overdone. He granted more pardons than any president before or since. His Second Inaugural Address, sometimes referred to as Lincoln’s “sermon on the mount,” revealed in most eloquent terms the depth of his conviction:

> 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.

Lincoln, again and again, elected not to hold a grudge.

**Courage.** “Grace under pressure” was Hemingway’s definition of courage. Lincoln’s last seven years of life were all about this kind of courage. Never has America had a president criticized, slandered, “abused” like Lincoln was during his years as commander in chief. What patience, what confidence, what courage it took to stand tall in the face of such criticism. While various politicians opposed his policies and personally ridiculed him, Lincoln summoned the courage to do what was necessary to keep the nation together and end slavery. The respect and adoration for our 16th President only arrived well after his assassination in 1865. We can be nearly certain that on the night he was shot and killed he never thought himself a hero.

**Flexibility is a key.** Lincoln worked hard to be known as a model of consistency, but he was also uncommonly flexible. He would always leave opportunity for a change of mind. Lincoln understood that he needed to be “that person,” the leader who kept open the chance to change course on a moment’s notice. Even in war, he was able to maintain proper course, while allowing for change at all times. His direct involvement in the selection of Grant was thought to be altogether inappropriate, though his willingness to engage in this sort of decisive decision-making, going against the grain, proved to be essential to win the Civil War. The men and women who lead today should take a lesson.

**Letting them lead.** Lincoln worked to surround himself with great people and great minds. He worked to have these men work together, succeed together, mold together into some semblance of “team.” Doris Kearns Goodwin’s *Team of Rivals* describes how Lincoln did this, while other presidents, before and since, have mostly only talked about doing it. When he had to build a team, he built one in spite of initial personal animosity rather than because of close relationship. From this group of competing and, in some cases, openly antagonistic people, he built a team that helped him to hold the Union together.
Set goals and be results-oriented. With the war, and with his ultimate goal to set the stage for a peaceful and smooth restoration of the Union, Lincoln frequently preached the concept of setting goals to his subordinates. His commitment to this principle went way beyond common sense. He was intentional about setting goals, being result-oriented each and every day. He understood that leadership was for the longer pull, but understood even more so that attainable goals set and accomplished would inspire those around him to stay focused on the greater prize.

Encourage innovation. Genuine leaders are not only instruments of change; they are catalysts for change. Lincoln is the only United States president to secure a patent, and he remained curious and creative throughout his presidency. Leaders must stay current, remain open to change, believe that others will bring new, inspired ideas to the organization that command action. Always Lincoln looked toward the end game, the final destination, and the big-picture goals of the nation.

Work on public performance; be a storyteller. Ronald Reagan of the 1980s was labeled the great communicator. Reagan is dwarfed by Lincoln—end of story. President Lincoln understood the value of this skill, and he worked tirelessly to use his speeches as a foundation piece for his leadership, for his ideas, for the healing of our nation. He was/is the standard by which all other leaders are judged as it pertains to public speaking. Command of the spoken word in this era of sound bytes hasn’t been lost entirely, but we are close.

And, though Lincoln was an outstanding writer and public speaker, he was even more skilled in the art of conversation. He was comfortable and adept speaking with anyone—brilliant scientist, wily politician, visiting head of state, or simple backwoods farmer. Though we will never know if what I am about to say is true, my belief is that Lincoln took his work seriously, but did not take himself too seriously. My guess is that he never forgot from whence he came; that he was a country boy who worked hard, got lucky, was blessed.

In all of his speeches and writings, Lincoln identified the vision of his work as president, inviting those who worked with him to understand it, repeat it, make it their “code,” too. His Gettysburg Address stands as the primary example of this attribute, but, in truth, that address is one of many such speeches that articulated a vision for our nation and inspired others to follow it.

In sum, Lincoln knew that true leadership is often realized by exerting quiet and subtle influence on a day-to-day basis, by frequently seeing followers and other people face-to-face. He treated everyone with the same courtesy and respect, whether they were kings or merchants and farmers from his native Kentucky. He lifted people out of their everyday selves and to a higher level of performance, achievement, and awareness. He obtained extraordinary results from people by instilling purpose in their endeavors. He was open, civil, tolerant, and fair, and he maintained respect for the dignity of all people at all times. His core values of honesty and integrity were a part of all he did, all he said. He was intentional about his work every day, all day. He approached each day as the most important day of his presidency. He no doubt wondered if his leadership would work, but his behavior would suggest he never wondered if it was worth it.
So, you ask, what impact do I expect Centre’s Lincoln to have on our students’ experience as they pass by this American hero several times each day? And, what of our faculty and staff? And, what of our alums and visitors, younger and older? Does it matter? I answer—loudly and clearly—“yes.” Centre’s Lincoln signals for all of us that there is a greater good demanding the best of us each day; that each of us—with our limits and imperfections—are capable of doing great things; that what matters more is not where one starts, but where one finishes; that our America, with its many frailties, remains a place of immense goodness and generosity and promise; that in America the impossible is possible.

Indeed, I imagine that many of us, as we make our way in and around Crounse Hall, will pass closely to Lincoln at least once each day and, maybe, choose to reach out and touch his boot toe—as I do—to remind me of my duty; inspiring me for sure. And, make no mistake, those of us who are touched, inspired by Mr. Lincoln, will increase our chances of providing spark to new ideas, new solutions, new outcomes, a brighter future.

This is what Centre’s Lincoln signals to all who pass by him on any given day. How splendid for our College. How splendid for the Commonwealth of Kentucky. How splendid for these United States of America. How splendid for all nations.