

## *Abraham Lincoln—Principle and Pragmatism in Politics: A Review Article*

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Four of the great American statesmen have had satisfactory collections of their works published or placed in process of publication. Washington's works have already appeared, Jefferson's and Theodore Roosevelt's are appearing volume by volume. In February of this year the first critical edition of Lincoln's works, nine magnificent volumes, was published under the sponsorship of the Abraham Lincoln Association.<sup>1</sup> By any standards this is a great publishing event and an event of great national importance. It is something to have at last an almost definitive edition of the writings of the man who is certainly our national hero and who is accepted as the ablest spokesman of the American democratic tradition.

Some description of the volumes in this set and some statistical comparison between them and earlier editions of Lincoln's works are first in order. Each volume contains upwards of 550 pages. The trimmed size of the page is  $6\frac{1}{8}$  by  $9\frac{1}{4}$ . The body of text is set in 10 point, leaded 2 points, which makes for a readable page. The books are bound in buckram and have a blue and gray format with the title in gold on the spine. They were designed by P. J. Conkright, who also designed the Princeton *Jefferson*, and are the handsomest volumes to appear in many a year. The time periods allotted to each volume are as follows: I, 1824-1848; II, 1848-1858; III, 1858-1860; IV, 1860-1861; V, 1861-1862; VI, 1862-1863; VII, 1863-1864; VIII, 1864-1865. Thus, almost five eighths of the *Collected Works* is devoted to the presidential and war years. The ninth volume, the index, was delayed in publication and had not arrived at the time this article went to the editor. It is under-

<sup>1</sup> *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. 8 volumes and index. Roy P. Basler, editor, Marion Dolores Pratt and Lloyd A. Dunlap, assistant editors. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953. Illustrations and sources. \$115.)

stood that it will contain listings of subjects as well as of proper names and that it has a "syntopican" or check list of topics to guide the person looking for Lincoln's statements on particular subjects.

The best previous edition of Lincoln's writings was the twelve-volume set, the so-called *Complete Works*, edited by John G. Nicolay and John Hay, published in 1905, and usually referred to, from the name of the publisher, as the Tandy Edition. In addition there was an eight-volume set edited by A. B. Lapsley which was smaller by one third than the Tandy collection. (Both these editions now should become almost worthless in the secondhand book market.) After the appearance of the obviously misnamed *Complete Works* (an error which Dr. Basler has cannily avoided), additional Lincoln items came to light periodically. From time to time a collector or editor would arrange each new batch of documents in a book. The single volume compilations that appeared to supplement Nicolay and Hay were, designated by the names of their compilers, Ida M. Tarbell (1900); Gilbert Tracy (1917); Brown University (1927); Paul M. Angle (1930); and Emanuel Hertz (1931). A statistical comparison of the *Collected Works* with the earlier publications shows how superior in quantity the new edition is. The *Collected Works* contains 6,870 items as compared with 2,254 items in the Tandy Edition, and 3,312 new items never before published in any of the previous collections. The total number of items in the *Collected Works* is about twice as many as in the Tandy Edition and the single-volume compilations combined. In quantity or lineage, the contrast is not so impressive. The new items make the *Collected Works* about 30 per cent larger in bulk than all the previous compilations. This is the place, while on the subject of items, to mention one of the most valuable features of the *Collected Works*. The eighth volume has an appendix listing chronologically writings of Lincoln for which no text has been found, forgeries and spurious texts (several hundred), dubious items attributed to Lincoln, and certain routine communications. These items, not included in the *Collected Works*, number almost three thousand!

For a quarter of a century the leaders of the Abraham Lincoln Association nourished the idea of publishing Lincoln's collected works. The Association's first president, Logan Hay, conceived the project and instilled his tremendous enthusiasm and energy into it.

A series of able executive secretaries devoted their best efforts to collecting at Springfield Lincoln's unpublished writings, in manuscript or photostat form. Not until 1945 did the Association feel prepared to move beyond the collecting stage into a phase where it could consider such matters as the number of volumes in the proposed collection and the cost of publication. In 1947 Dr. Basler became executive secretary and proceeded to circularize all libraries, repositories, archives, and private collectors known or believed to have Lincoln materials. The fruits of his efforts are apparent in the list of location symbols at the beginning of each volume; in addition to items from private collectors material was secured from approximately one hundred repositories and collections. In this connection it is heartening to record that many dealers in autographs generously supplied photostats of their manuscripts. Some, for reasons that may be conjectured, refused to cooperate. The circularizing was completed in 1947. Then began the awful task of collecting and cataloging the documents, of deciphering and annotating them, of planning the arrangement so as to secure a uniform length for each published volume. It was a task that took five years of hard work. It also required a large sum of money to carry it through. The expense of preparing the documents for publication has been estimated at close to \$100,000. Of this the Association and individual members supplied over \$40,000, and the Rockefeller Foundation voluntarily and generously contributed \$54,000. The \$100,000 does not include the costs of publication, which are being borne by the Rutgers Press. Regrettably the Association, which had made many fine contributions to scholarship with its collecting and publishing of other historical materials, strained its resources in preparing the *Collected Works* and will have to give up its existence.

As an example of some of the problems which the editors encountered, the sudden appearance of new Lincoln items at a late date in the progress of the work may be cited. At one time Dr. Basler was certain that he had located all but one per cent of Lincoln's writings. Then something happened that made him not so sure. Before the National Archives were created, people in the various departments of government filched a large number of Lincoln documents from the files. They did this for years, up to 1935. It is estimated that several thousand items were stolen and later

sold. Early in 1952 about three hundred endorsements and letters from the War Department suddenly appeared on the market. The Illinois State Historical Society acquired many of them, and the editors were able to include them in the *Collected Works*. How many hundred more may still be in the hands of the filchers is unknown. Also in 1952 the William H. Seward Papers, which contained several communications from Lincoln to his secretary of state and which were restricted to researchers, passed from the Seward family to the Fred L. Emerson Foundation and unexpectedly became available to the editors. It has been stated on good authority that the new materials appearing in 1952 necessitated the resetting of one volume. Many of the letters to Lincoln printed in the footnotes of the present edition are from collections like the Robert Todd Lincoln Papers and have never before been published. While discussing sources, it is pertinent to note that approximately 75 per cent of the items in the *Collected Works* have been edited from original manuscripts, and the remaining 25, for which manuscripts were not available, from the best copy or printed source. The editors deserve great commendation for their zeal in seeking out the most accurate newspaper accounts of some of Lincoln's speeches.

In evaluating the *Collected Works*, the quality as well as the quantity of the new items included has to be considered. Dr. Basler admits that he and his staff did not turn up anything that is the equal of the Gettysburg Address or the Second Inaugural. This is true enough; nevertheless, the character of many of the new items is extremely important. Some of the letters, memoranda, and endorsements are of great significance; so also are a number of speeches reported in newspapers and hitherto unknown. The bulk of the new material is from the period of the presidency. Among the new items which the editors rate as most valuable (and their judgment deserves respect) are the letters to William Butler in 1839, which stopped a duel between two of Lincoln's friends; the letter to William S. Wait in 1839, one of Lincoln's few statements on taxation, which concludes with the realistic observation that if the wealthy few complain, "regardless of the justness of the complaint it is still to be remembered that *they* are not sufficiently numerous to carry the elections"; the several revisions of the First Inaugural and the Message to Congress of July 4, 1861, which

illustrate the care with which our greatest political stylist prepared state papers; and the reprimand to Captain James Madison Cutts in 1863, when a weary president took time out from his burdensome duties to advise sympathetically an obstreperous young officer: "Quarrel not at all. No man resolved to make the most of himself, can spare time for personal contention." In nature as well as numbers, the new items enlarge our knowledge of Lincoln and enable us to study him more completely than before.

The scope of the *Collected Works* is defined in accord with sound editorial principles. For this the editorial advisers of the work, Paul M. Angle, Benjamin P. Thomas, and the late J. G. Randall, probably deserve some credit. Manuscripts in Lincoln's handwriting are included with two exceptions: copies which Lincoln made of the writings of others and law cases and documents. The Association hopes to publish Lincoln's law cases at a future date. Manuscripts not in Lincoln's writing but signed by him or by his authority are included with certain exceptions. The exceptions (there are some subexceptions to these) are such documents as acts of Congress, commissions, land grants, checks, appointments, and routine letters and endorsements of transmittal. Wisely the editors have excluded utterances recorded only in memoirs, diaries, and reminiscences. Any description of the scope of the work should note that the frontispiece of each volume contains a magnificent photograph of Lincoln from the Meserve Collection and that twenty pages of his sum book and several pages of his surveying exercises are reproduced in collotype facsimile.

Dr. Basler and his assistants have performed an editorial feat that can be described only in terms of superlatives. One way to illustrate the fine quality of their work is to show how they handle an average item. At the beginning of each volume is a table describing the sources and identifying their locations. AD is Autograph Document, DS is Document Signed; DLC means Library of Congress. In Volume I, pages 353-55, is a letter from Lincoln to Benjamin F. James written in 1846. The first footnote contains the symbols ALS, MH — Autograph Letter Signed, in the Harvard University Library. There are twelve other footnotes identifying people or topics referred to in the letter. This critical annotating of documents was something which Nicolay and Hay never did. The secretaries rarely felt that it was necessary to place a Lincoln

document in its complete historical setting. All the items in the *Collected Works* are properly placed. An example of the difference between the two editions is afforded in a telegram which Lincoln sent General William T. Sherman in Georgia on September 17, 1864. It reads: "I feel great interest in the subject of your despatch mentioning corn and Sorghum, & a contemplated visit to you." Corn and sorghum! What did they have to do with a visit of anybody to Sherman? What was Lincoln talking about? Nicolay and Hay printed this document without one line of annotation or explanation. The background of Lincoln's telegram was this: Sherman had told Governor Joe Brown to disband the Georgia militia or the Union army would devastate the state. Sherman reported to General Henry W. Halleck that the militia was home gathering corn and sorghum and that he had invited Brown and Vice-President Alexander H. Stephens to visit him. Lincoln saw Sherman's dispatch and was naturally intrigued by the hint that Georgia might be persuaded to get out of the war. In the *Collected Works*, as part of the annotation, Sherman's telegram to Halleck of September 15 and his reply to Lincoln of September 17 are reproduced.

The text of the above telegram to Sherman in Nicolay and Hay reads: "I feel great interest in the subject of your dispatch, mentioning corn and sorghum, and the contemplated visit to you." Here we have another example of the difference between the *Complete* and the *Collected Works* and of the superiority of the latter. The secretaries were obviously shocked by some of Lincoln's language habits. So they edited him to give his writings a formal correctness. They corrected his misspellings, supplied capital letters when he omitted them, altered his punctuation marks, and changed his line and paragraph arrangements. Without violating his meaning, they prettied him up to satisfy Victorian tastes. Dr. Basler and his associates, using mostly manuscripts for their text, have endeavored to reproduce the original "in so far as reasonably possible." They have retained incorrect and variant spellings, and placed their emendations of punctuation, spelling, and diction in brackets. In short, they have observed the exacting standards of modern scholarship. The old and new styles in editing may be observed by comparing in parallel columns a letter which Lincoln wrote to John T. Stuart.

*Nicolay and Hay text*

Springfield, December 23, 1839.

*Dear Stuart:* Dr. Henry will write you all the political news. I write this about some little matters of business. You recollect you told me you had drawn the Chicago Masack money, and sent it to the claimants. A — hawk-billed Yankee is here besetting me at every turn I take, saying that Robert Kinzie never received the eighty dollars to which he was entitled. Can you tell me anything about the matter? Again, old Mr. Wright, who lives up South Fork somewhere, is teasing me continually about some deeds which he says he left with you, but which I can find nothing of. Can you tell where they are? The legislature is in session, and has suffered the bank to forfeit its charter without benefit of clergy. There seems to be little disposition to resuscitate it.

Whenever a letter comes from you to Mrs. —, I carry it to her, and then I see Betty; she is a tolerable nice “fellow” now. Maybe I will write again when I get more time.

Your friend, as ever,

A. LINCOLN.

*Basler text*

Dear Stuart    Springfield, Dec:  
23rd. 1839-

Dr. Henry will write you all the political news. I write this about some little matters of business. You recollect you told me me [*sic*] you had drawn the Chicago Musick money & sent it to the claimants. A d — d hawk billed yankee is here, besetting me at every turn I take, saying that Robt Kinzie never received the \$80.00 to which he was entitled. Can you tell me any thing about the matter?

Again old Mr. Wright who lives up South Fork some where, is teasing me continually about some deeds which he says he left with you, but which I can find nothing of. Can you tell where they are?

The legislature is in session, and has suffered the Bank to forfeit it's charter without *Benefit of Clergy*. There seems to be but very little disposition to resuscitate it. Whenever a letter comes from you to Mrs. Stuart, I carry it to her, and then I see Betty. She is a tolerably nice fellow now. May be I will write again when I get more time. Your friend as ever

A. LINCOLN.

A final word on the superior editorial standards of Dr. Basler and his assistants should note that through careful research they have been able to supply correct dates for a number of items misdated in Nicolay and Hay and that they have provided variant readings for several important items where the secretaries supplied but one. In the latter category, for example, the *Collected Works* contains two texts of the First Inaugural and six of the Gettysburg Address.

The publication of this nearly definitive edition makes it possible to evaluate more accurately than before the significance of

Lincoln as a democratic leader and a spiritual force in America. We can now study more completely at first hand this man, who, despite all that has been written about him, remains largely an enigma to his countrymen. Our most written-of public figure is also our most clichés-encrusted one. Modern Americans, obsessed with modern ideology, have tried to fit Lincoln into some neat niche of present-day thought. Every politician, every February 12 orator, every party from the extreme right to the extreme left has claimed Lincoln for his or their own. Even the scholars, the Lincoln experts, have daubed some clichés on Father Abraham. In a spirit of objectivity but influenced by the notion that a man must have an ideology, they have looked for one in Lincoln. Most of them concluded that he was a liberal in the contemporary meaning of the word, which translated into politics means following the Roosevelt-Truman line. They have presented Lincoln as a kind of early New Dealer.

Lincoln would not have been able to comprehend the attempts of modern writers to classify his ideas into an ideology. Indeed, he would not have known what an ideology was. Although he believed deeply in certain principles which might be called his philosophy of politics, those principles were at the opposite pole of what is termed ideology today. If Lincoln were confronted by a group like the professional thinkers of the New Deal with their doctrinaire tendencies, he would have been amazed and amused. At the same time he would have considered them dangerous, as he believed the abolitionists of his own time were dangerous, because they had a logical plan based on a preconceived abstract theory about human nature or society and because they proposed to put their plan into effect regardless of consequences. To the "ideologues" of the New Deal or to those of other contemporary groups, Lincoln would have seemed theoretically backward, which is the way the abolitionists considered him. Lincoln distrusted deep theoretical thinkers and their slick assurance that they knew what the world needed. He was too conscious of the realities in every situation to be an ideologue. One of the keys to his thinking is his statement that few things in this world were wholly good or wholly evil. Consequently the position he took on specific political issues was always a pragmatic one. His personal or inner opinions were based on principle; his public or outer opinions were tempered by empiricism. As



somebody has remarked, Lincoln was not the kind of man who is ready to do what God would do if God had all the facts.

There were four fundamental principles in Lincoln's thought. These principles were the common beliefs of most Americans in the middle period of our history. Lincoln, who was not a primary thinker, did not originate any of them. He found them already in existence; he thought about them; he extended the interpretation of them; and he spoke of them in words that men could remember and quote. The first principle was a conviction that a Guiding Providence or some supernatural force largely directed the affairs of men. A corollary to this belief was that God had created a moral law for the government of men and that men should seek to approximate human law to the Divine law. The second principle was a concept of human nature. The men of Lincoln's time believed that man had a higher nature. He possessed a mind and a conscience, and consequently he was capable of governing himself through democratic government. He could also achieve a more and more perfect society. The third principle dealt with the economic activities of man and the relationship of those activities to the general welfare. The economic thought of the men of the middle period was capitalistic. They believed in an economic system in which most people would own property and in which all had equal opportunities to acquire it. The way to property must be open to all; no group should enjoy special privileges which gave it an artificial advantage over others. The fourth principle was an exaltation of the idea of the American Union. In the United States man would create a society that would be the best and the happiest in the world. The United States was the supreme demonstration of democracy. But the Union did not exist just to make men free in America. It had an even greater mission — to make them free everywhere. By the mere force of its example America would bring democracy to an undemocratic world.

Lincoln subscribed to every one of these four articles of belief, and during the course of his political career he gave expression to all of them. They stand out all over the pages of the *Collected Works*, both in his letters and his speeches. The notion that a Guiding Providence largely directed the activities of men was basic with Lincoln. Even in his early years, when he inclined to be critical of organized religion, he felt that some supernatural force,

which he sometimes referred to as history, controlled men. As he grew older, he came to call this force God. There can be no doubt that as Lincoln matured he became increasingly mystic and religious. His sense of fatalism, both personal and public, was at its fullest in the crisis of the Civil War. The great event which history associates with his name, the destruction of slavery, was, he believed, an act of Divine power of which he was but the instrument. In a letter to a Kentucky friend in 1864 he discussed the impact of the war upon slavery. The nation's condition after three years of war, he said, was not what either party or any man "devised or expected" in 1861. No one had then thought that as a result of war slavery would be destroyed; yet now it was approaching the point of extinction. "God alone can claim it," he said. "Whither it is tending seems plain. If God now wills the removal of a great wrong, and wills also that we of the North as well as you of the South, shall pay fairly for our complicity in that wrong, impartial history will find therein new cause to attest and revere the justice and goodness of God." He returned to this theme in the Second Inaugural when he said that the war was God's way of removing the evil of slavery as a punishment to the North and the South for having condoned it. He knew that some people would object to this mechanistic interpretation of history. "Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference between the Almighty and them," he remarked. "To deny it, however, in this case, is to deny that there is a God governing the world."

Lincoln also accepted the corollary to the principle of a Guiding Providence, the existence of a supernatural law which human law should seek to approximate. His state papers are filled with references to this concept. In the First Inaugural he said: "I hold, that in contemplation of universal law, and of the Constitution, the Union of these States is perpetual." Without being a document-worshipper, Lincoln revered the two great documents which the men of his time revered, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. He believed they were animated with the spirit of Divine law, and he respected them because they had been proved good by the test of experience. The American federal system, he believed, embodied the best experience of man in government. Lincoln faced up to the central problem of government when he asked, with his own government in mind: "Must a government, of neces-

sity, be too strong for the liberties of its own people, or too weak to maintain its own existence?" He answered the question in his description of the working of the principle of majority rule under the Constitution: "A majority, held in restraint by constitutional checks, and limitations, and always changing easily, with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments, is the only true sovereign of a free people. Whoever rejects it, does of necessity, fly to anarchy or to despotism." Lincoln sensed that the great merit of the American system was in the balance it established between the government and the individual and between the nation and the states. Carl Sandburg has said that Lincoln understood the mystery of democracy because he had a sort of occult sense of the necessary balance in a democracy between freedom and responsibility.

Lincoln's belief in the principle that man possessed a higher nature and was competent to govern himself is implicit in almost everything he wrote. Surprisingly enough he made few specific references to the goodness or the wisdom of the people. Obviously he took this proposition so much for granted that he thought it did not need frequent stating. Nevertheless, on occasion Lincoln did state notably his belief in the ability of the people to exercise the art of government; certainly he acted on this belief in his political activities. Nowhere in the *Collected Works* is there any evidence that Lincoln feared the tyranny of numbers or the reign of the mob. "Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people?" he asked in the First Inaugural. "Is there any better, or equal hope, in the world?" Lincoln believed that the American political system so operated as constantly to increase the political wisdom of men because it had been founded on the principle of equal rights for all. Some governments had been based on the denial of equal rights because it was believed some men were too ignorant to share in government; ours began by affirming those rights. The difference was fundamental, Lincoln said. "We proposed to give *all* a chance, and we expected the weak to grow stronger, the ignorant wiser; and all better, and happier together." The promise of American life had been fulfilled, he thought.

Lincoln's economic views have been labeled by later students as both liberal and conservative. Probably most academic writers have classified him as a liberal, because he said human rights were above property rights and because he spoke friendly words about

labor. Apparently one of the assumptions of the academicians is that a conservative puts property above people. Another school, more to the left than the first group and proceeding on another assumption, have concluded that Lincoln was a conservative or, at best, a confused liberal. They have believed that modern industrial capitalism, which developed in and after the Civil War, has been exploitative, illiberal, and possibly antidemocratic. Because Lincoln said that men, given equality of opportunity, could rise in the economic scale by working hard and because he justified economic individualism, they have written him down as a kind of economic simpleton who did not understand the economic trends of his time or as a folksy front for the robber barons of business, who talked liberal and acted, knowingly or not, conservative.

Actually Lincoln's economic thought cannot be called either liberal or conservative in the contemporary sense of the words. He belongs to no party or ideology today and certainly not to the New Deal. His ideas about economics were peculiarly a product of the economic system in which he lived and have little application to the present system. In the system that Lincoln knew, an extraordinarily large number of people owned property, in the form of farms, plantations, factories, shops, and operated their property to make a living. In simple terms, this was a capitalistic system in which most of the people were capitalists. Unlike the present system, relatively few people worked for other people in return for wages or salaries. Big business, in the shape that came after the Civil War, did not exist. This was the preindustrial age in which many owners of property were also laborers.

Lincoln's ideas about economics were those of the average man of his time, which means they were the ideas of a small capitalist. He desired a system in which all men would have an equal opportunity to acquire property; equal opportunity would mean a system in which most men would own property. Lincoln respected and admired labor because labor was necessary to create and secure capital. By labor a man could become an owner, an employer, as Lincoln himself had become one. Lincoln's tributes to labor, often misunderstood and misapplied today, were not delivered to labor as a rival power to capital but to labor as a means of creating capital. He always denied that American society was divided into two classes, employers and workers, or that in America there was a per-

manent class of hired laborers. The majority of men, he said, neither worked for others nor hired others to work for them. Most men worked for themselves, most were both capitalists and laborers. "What is the true condition of the laborer?" he asked in a speech at New Haven in 1860 in which he gave full expression to his economic philosophy. "I take it that it is best for all to leave each man free to acquire property as fast as he can. Some will get wealthy. I don't believe in a law to prevent a man from getting rich; it would do more harm than good. . . . When one starts poor, as most do in the race of life, free society is such that he knows he can better his condition; he knows that there is no fixed condition of labor, for his whole life." It is because of statements like this, apparently glorifying unbridled individualism, and because his economic vision of America was an optimistic one that some writers have concluded Lincoln was a conservative or economically naïve. These critics have been oppressed with the predatory quality of capitalism in the period between 1865-1900. Perhaps they would change their opinion if, as Frederick Lewis Allen has recently suggested in *The Big Change*, they would look beyond 1900.

Of all the principles which Lincoln held to, the one that stirred him most deeply was the exaltation of the American Union and the mission of America to bring democracy to the world. This concept provoked his most eloquent passages; to it he made in words and action his most original contribution as a political thinker. Three ideas are apparent in Lincoln's thinking about the Union. One, he believed that the nation was an organic whole, an entity that could never be artificially separated. As he said to the South in the First Inaugural: "Physically speaking, we cannot separate. We cannot remove our respective sections from each other, nor build an impassable wall between them." The "mystic chords of memory" might snap, but the physical realities of the oneness of the nation would still exist. In his message to Congress in December, 1862, one of his best but least known state papers, he gave a moving description of the United States as a physical entity dominated by the great interior heartland. Feelingly he referred to the nation as "our national homestead." Our national strife, he said, does not spring from any sectional division of the country or from a natural line between the North and the South, but from ourselves, "the passing generations of men." The national homestead, he said, "in

all its adaptations and aptitudes . . . demands union, and abhors separation." Second, Lincoln believed that the strongest bond binding the Union was the idea of equal opportunity for all, embedded in the Declaration of Independence and the structure of the government and permeating the minds of the people. And this made America uniquely different from all other nations, whose bonds of unity were culture, tradition, or race. On his way to Washington in 1861 to become the president of a divided nation, Lincoln made a brief address at Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Deeply moved by the historical associations of his surroundings, he uttered a classic expression of the meaning of America's great idea: "I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of separation from the motherland, but that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights would be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that *all* should have an equal chance." Third, he regarded the Union with a sacred reverence because it made men free in America and eventually would make them free everywhere. Lincoln's finest and most frequent references to the mission of America were made, of course, in the Civil War, when the world's greatest demonstration in democracy was threatened with division. The "great republic . . . the principles it lives by, and keeps alive" represented "man's vast future." In the concluding paragraph of his message to Congress in December, 1862, one of the best things he ever wrote, he said: "We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last, best hope of earth." Because the Union was the great guardian of the idea of equal opportunity, Lincoln was always ready to sacrifice anything to preserve it. For if the Union was destroyed the idea it represented was also destroyed. And that idea was too precious to be lost.

The great specific issue to which Lincoln applied the four principles of his philosophy was slavery. All of the principles, in varying degree, influenced his position in regard to the institution. He defined his views at an early date and never modified them in any essential way. He was opposed to slavery. He was opposed to it on moral, democratic, and economic grounds. He believed that

slavery and the aristocratic philosophy of its advocates threatened to subvert the idea of equal opportunity. He thought that a vigorous and expanding slavery gave the lie to the American ideal of democracy and weakened the influence of America as the supreme example of successful democracy upon the rest of the world. He shivered to pieces in one sentence the whole pretentious proslavery argument when he said: "although volume upon volume is written to prove slavery a very good thing, we never hear of the man who wishes to take the good of it, *by being a slave himself.*"

Yet Lincoln also opposed the abolitionists, before 1860, and plans of emancipation aimed at the South. His views were eminently practical and pragmatic. To him it was tremendously important that slavery existed and was believed in by millions of people. The presence of slavery, the physical presence, was a fact that must be considered by the opponents of slavery. "Because we think it wrong, we propose a course of policy that shall deal with it as a wrong," he said. It should be dealt with as any other wrong: it should be prevented from growing (by expanding into the territories) and placed in a state of ultimate extinction. But, he added, "We have a due regard to the actual presence of it amongst us and the difficulties of getting rid of it in any satisfactory way and all the constitutional obligations thrown about it." Lincoln voiced no criticism of the southern people for supporting slavery. "They are just what we would be in their situation," he observed in a speech in 1854. "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." In this 1854 speech Lincoln admitted, as he did on other occasions, that he did not know any absolutely satisfactory way of dealing with slavery. If all earthly power were given him, he said, he would not know what to do. His first impulse would be to free all the slaves and send them to Liberia, but he realized this was impractical. What of freeing the slaves and making them the equals of the whites? The mass of the white people would not concede this, and hence immediate emancipation was impossible. Whether the feelings of the whites were just or sound was no part of the question, Lincoln said, because "A universal feeling, whether well or ill-founded, can not be safely disregarded."

Lincoln disliked the abolitionists, those nineteenth-century ide-

ologues who were certain they had an absolutely satisfactory way of dealing with slavery and who if they could not have their way, were willing to break up the Union. He disliked their fanatical assumption that they were doing God's work, their readiness to impose their inner opinions upon society, and their eagerness to ram abolition down southern throats. He distrusted their abstract impracticality and their refusal to consider the complex problems involved in sudden emancipation. Above all, he was disturbed by their lack of feeling for the Union, their willingness to destroy it if they could not reform it. To him the preservation of the Union and the idea it stood for was infinitely more precious than the immediate striking down of slavery. "Much as I hate slavery," he said, "I would consent to the extension of it rather than to see the Union dissolved, just as I would consent to any great evil, to avoid a greater one."

Lincoln's opposition to the abolitionists, his entire position on the slavery issue, was in the best American pragmatic tradition. He was opposed to abolition because it would disrupt the Union, because it was not sound in the light of national experience or the realities of the moment. He was convinced that if slavery was penned up in the South and not permitted to expand it would eventually die a natural death. He wanted to make a needed change, right a wrong, but at the right time; while he was waiting he wanted to keep the machine of the Union running. He was against destroying the machine or getting a new one or adding a new part at the wrong time. The coming of the Civil War, the result of many men in the North and the South insisting that they were going to impose their inner opinions on other people, ended Lincoln's hopes for a kind of patient emancipation.

Some writers have criticized Lincoln's qualities as war leader of the North because he opposed the wartime destruction of slavery. According to this view, Lincoln, because he tried to check the anti-slavery impulses generated by the war, opposed a logical social revolution, the nature of which he did not understand. So many people, from Salmon P. Chase to contemporary authors, have thought that Lincoln was simple! Actually Lincoln understood clearly the dynamics in the war situation. He was well aware that slavery was the provoking cause of the war. It was, he said, "the disturbing element" in the national house; it would always stimu-



late national strife until it was removed. Lincoln dealt with slavery during the war in the same pragmatic spirit with which he had treated it before. To Lincoln the preservation of the Union was the paramount object of the war. The Union dwarfed all other issues, including slavery. He intended to save the Union at any cost and by whatever methods seemed most likely to succeed. This war was important, he believed. It was for keeps, it went all the way. It was a war to preserve democratic government in America and to preserve the democratic ideal in the world, "a people's contest" to maintain "in the world, that form and substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men." It was also a war "to teach that there can be no successful appeal from a fair election but to the next election."

Lincoln proposed that the restoration of the Union should be the sole objective of the war for two reasons. One was that in the opening days of the struggle he sought to rally all parties and factions in the North to support the war. This necessitated a statement of war aims so broad and national that men of every shade of opinion could unite behind them. Lincoln supplied the formula with his war for the Union alone policy. His second reason was that he did not desire to make emancipation one of the results of the war. He did not want to see slavery destroyed suddenly and angrily in the fury of civil conflict, to see the war become, as he told Congress, "a violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle." To destroy slavery as a part of the war process would, he feared, so derange race relations as to bring more evil than good.

Lincoln finally did adopt an antislavery policy; he did make emancipation a second aim of the war. He changed his position when he decided that the new situation created by the war had altered the status of slavery and that a new policy was demanded. Pragmatic as always, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation in the light of the nation's war experience — but his motive for issuing it was to save a fundamental principle, the American Union. The very facts of the war, the sacrifice and the bloodshed, inevitably made the northern people more and more hostile to slavery. The longer the war continued the more hostile they became. By the middle of 1862 it was abundantly evident that they wanted slavery destroyed as a result of the war. Lincoln then faced this problem: if he opposed the popular will — if he insisted on preserv-

ing the Union with slavery intact — he would divide northern opinion and defeat his larger objective of saving the Union. Now, if he wanted to keep the machine running, he had to make a change, add a new part; if he did not, the machine would break down. Put another way, Lincoln's problem about slavery in the war was reversed from what it had been before. Then he had fought abolition because it would destroy the Union. Now he had to champion it to save the Union. He opposed an unneeded and unwise change and supported a necessary and sound one. In both cases he was completely moral.

It is easy to pick out shortcomings in Lincoln's philosophy, as well as contradictions and errors. The same thing can be done to the other great American political leaders. Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, the two Roosevelts were not doctrinaire, systematic thinkers. Sometimes they were governed in their actions by a wise expediency, and often when confronted by demands for change they improvised. For this they have been scorned by the abstract thinkers of their own time and those of later ages. It would also be possible to point out mistakes and faults in the *Collected Works*. But it would be wrong to cavil in either case. What we deal with in both is too vast for malice.