

.15. Class and Mr. Lincoln

[Monday, December 26, 2005]

9 a.m. Well Joseph – James? [I can't recall now what made me think that his name might be James] – I know it is vastly easier for me to bring through values and attitudes and opinions than fact. So, what would you like to talk about?

Mr. Lincoln.

I can't say that you folks appreciate Mr. Lincoln the way you ought to. There ain't any use in putting him on a pedestal as if he weren't just like you. He wasn't, but he was. He was a *man*. The kind of man that don't come twice in a thousand years. Perfectly placed, perfectly suited, perfectly willing – yet he didn't get all full of himself, so he served without diversion.

Now, you take Napoleon by comparison. Ability in many lines – a genius, really. He was used by destiny to bring the middle ages to an end, and he more or less did that. (He died just a year before I was born, like Hitler and you.)

But the man didn't have any moral dimension to him. He *knew* he was being used, but he couldn't help himself from falling into old patterns, feathering his nest, marrying into kings, just spitting on the people who supported him and relied on him to look out for them. He did [look out for them] – when it didn't cost him nothing.

But Mr. Lincoln, now, he was something different. He was like Napoleon in that he came up from nothing, but Mr. Lincoln didn't trample on people to get where he wound up. And he *believed* in self-government, where Napoleon never did. And he believed in the people. He really did. You can see it in his whole career.

We didn't throw up anybody to match Mr. Lincoln's character except Washington, but there's just all the difference in the world between being born rich, and marrying richer, and *having a place*, and being born poor, and if you married into someone richer, not getting her money but only her ideas on the subject, and not having a place and not even being exactly fitted in when you got *into* a place.

You see, what you don't always get about Mr. Lincoln is that he really was a man of the people. He was an extraordinary man – a deep thinker, a careful accurate calculator, a wonderful persuader – but he was

always *of the people*, and nobody who had the eyes could make any mistake about it. Of course the nobs looked down on him because of it. They *would!* They *had to!* Because he was living proof that breeding and inherited education, if you please, do not explain anything about people. It showed that you couldn't tell where you were going to find diamonds, and so you'd better take care of all the coal. That ain't a very good figure, but you do see what I mean.

Now here's the thing. *The Confederacy* was all *nobs!* Because of slavery, you had an aristocracy that compared itself to England when it wasn't pretending to be the successors to Rome and Greece. That's why they rammed through secession without asking the people damn-all. Can you imagine a northern state seceding just because the legislature said so? They'd have had a civil war *within* the state, because if the north was anything, it was a mixture of elements, and no one group running and owning the whole shooting match. It just couldn't have been done. And that's also why it took the north a while to organize itself in the face of the rebellion. It had to sort things out, it had to cipher out how it felt about it. In the south it would have been a few families – hot-heads, half of them – coming to an understanding.

I keep straying from the point. The point is the Civil War was about *class* more than it was about race, even. You can't see it so easy because of emancipation, but suppose there hadn't been any emancipation? Suppose old jug-headed McClellan had ended the war before it hardly began, as he could have done two, three times in 1862. There wouldn't have been any emancipation because the country wasn't ready for it. *And that ought to tell you something!*

The reason slavery was key is because it kept the south a sort of hot-house aristocracy, following the old way of doing things, pretending they was England. That's what was behind all the troubles in Congress – these “aristocrats” didn't make any bones about looking down on the “clerks” representing the north. (Not that the clerks were any great shakes; they were what the local machines threw up, and that meant they were mostly pretty sorry specimens. Yet they weren't all worms, either, there was good ones here and there, maybe more than we had a right to expect, our system being what it was.)

The north and the south only came to blows because of slavery, but if there hadn't been slavery and the south was like it was, they still never would have got along. The slave power wanted what it wanted, and all [the pattern of] its life told it that what it wanted, it had ought to get.

So they would be infuriated when in the union they couldn't get their way automatically, but had to bargain for it. They thought it was humiliating to have to ask; they just preferred to give orders.

Well, and *Abraham Lincoln* was going to be their President? Abraham Lincoln, who was nobody and came from nowhere and didn't even have anything much to speak of except a house? It was too humiliating. It was like a bad joke. They weren't going to bear it. They'd seen plenty of non-entities in there – they'd *put* them there, to be sure they didn't get King Stork instead of King Log – and now here was King Stork, and he looked like it too.

There isn't any way to tell, of course, but to look at other versions of history, but I'd say it would have been *a whole lot* easier for them if we'd elected Seward. They hated Seward, but at least he was eastern, and sort of polished, and you could treat him as a gentleman's lawyer, even if he weren't a gentleman. They might have waited to see, if we'd put in Seward. And chances are, Seward would have temporized and trimmed and compromised and given in, and we'd have had the whole work still to do. I expect it would have come sooner or later anyway. Maybe it would have come under Seward: If it had, I don't think he could have held it. I think we'd have been sunk. Kentucky would have gone out sooner or later, and that would have been the end of it. Then God knows what would have happened, with the rebs holding the mouth of the river. The way I see it, England would have come 'round playing one against the other, and what that would have meant for the age of the common man instead of the aristocrats is more than I can see.

Of course the common man didn't do too well anyway, with the size of the war we wound up in. Wars always give some people a chance to pile up fortunes, and that means they get to buy up governments, and you can be sure they don't use it as Mr. Lincoln would.

I do stray. It is difficult to keep to the point when everything reminds me of something. Let me try it again.

Abraham Lincoln in his body – by what he *was*, I mean – was a living day by day demonstration that the common people ain't necessarily all that common. In other words, that the uppity-ups wasn't so *un*-common, they just had money and a manner and a society of others like them that admired each others – themselves, in other words – and just gogged things as best they could.

So Mr. Lincoln, just by being exceptional *and* by not having society manners, *and* by being so obviously kindly and well-meaning while still being sharp as a carpet nail, *he, himself*, just by being what he was, *proved* who was right and who was wrong about aristocrats. Your history books don't tell it because it ain't ever in the interest of the people who have the say over buying textbooks to put it that plain. But *that* is the secret of Abraham Lincoln! He was a giant in every way, *and* he was a man of the people. And that's why we loved him. We loved him when we could just only see him, and read what he wrote, and see what he did. We loved him even more when the stories about him began to circulate, after he was murdered. Martyred. The stories about his youth, and about what happened in cabinet meetings, and him putting up with McClellan, and pardoning soldiers for sleeping on duty or deserting. It all gave us a clearer and more detailed picture – and the picture never blurred or contradicted itself, it just got more and more detail. And the more we heard, the better we loved him. It didn't hurt, either, that we could see that he'd brought us through. It was a terrible disaster, an awful blood-letting that seemed like it was going to kill us. But it was none of it Mr. Lincoln's fault, and we knew that. If he had been somebody we thought didn't care, may be the country would have said "enough" when the death-rolls started coming in with thousands of boys in a day. But we knew that he grieved too, but he was resolute that we get the job over with.

I say "we." I'm talking about people who thought like me, sure. You can't learn *me* much about Copperheads and skunk-hollers! But still you'll notice that the country never deserted Mr. Lincoln, and the longer the war went on – and more so afterwards, of course – the clearer it was that he more than anybody else, more than General Grant, brought us through.

And if all this don't tell you that I wasn't in the Army of the Potomac – well, it should! Those boys loved him too, finally, but you know what I mean. They never would hear much against McClellan, at least not till '64.

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