

## Getting Right with Lincoln: Republicans, the Party of Lincoln?

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In writing his monumental six volume biography of Abraham Lincoln, Carl Sandburg said that he studied Lincoln, *“in the hope of getting a better understanding of this man who the Republican Party and the GAR (Grand Army of the Republic) and the preachers magnified until he was too big to see.”* Lincoln’s picture was on walls of politicians and big businessmen who *“do not understand him and probably would not approve of him if they did.”* 1

Abraham Lincoln is considered to be America’s greatest president. When the 2004 Republican Convention got underway in the midst of concerns of holding elections so soon after events of 911 and further terrorists attacks, Republicans, as they have done and will continue to do every four years at their national party conventions, evoked the name of the Great Emancipator to identify themselves as the Party of Lincoln.

A closer look at history, offers a different perspective. The “Republican Party” in 1860, under whose banner Abraham Lincoln ran and was elected as its first candidate for president, was formed to limit the spread of slavery in the new territories that were entering the Union as states. As president during the Civil War, Lincoln centralized the national government. An internal revenue service was established to collect taxes to pay for the war; the jurisdiction of the federal courts system was expanded; a national currency was created under a federally chartered banking system; the first national draft provided men to fight for the Union armies and the first social welfare agency was established through creation of the Freedmen’s Bureau for the freed slaves.

Shelby Foote, who wrote his own monumental work, “The Civil War: A Narrative,” was asked if he ever felt that the South had a chance of winning the war. His response was that the North had fought the war with one hand behind its back. At the same time it was conducting the war, the national government was still governing the country by passing legislation as the Homestead Act and overseeing the transformation of this country from an agrarian to an industrial society. *“I think that if there had been more Southern victories, and a lot more, the North simply would have brought that other arm out from behind its back. I don’t think the South ever had a chance to win that war.”* 2

When Lincoln ran for re-election in 1864, a contest he felt certain to lose due to the North’s wariness over the financial and human costs that would eventually claim over 620,000 lives, he reconstituted the “Republican Party” to rally both his political foes and friends to the cause of Union. He ran and won re-election to a second term as the candidate of the “National Union

Party.” During this contest many questioned the wisdom of holding an election while a civil war was being fought which divided the country. He responded during a serenade on November 11, 1864, *“We cannot have free government without elections, and if the rebellion could force us to forego or postpone a national election, it might fairly claim to have conquered and ruined us....it (the election) has demonstrated that a people’s government can sustain a national election in the midst of a great Civil War.”* 3

The great irony is that the two main parties of today stand oppose to what they stood for during Lincoln’s day. The Democratic Party then stood for state rights and the Republican Party, for a strong national government. Were he alive today, Abraham Lincoln would most likely identify himself with the ideals and principles of the Democratic Party. There are those today who say that Lincoln was forced to act to propose and have passed legislation to meet the necessities of leading the country at a time of Civil War. Even Lincoln said of himself that he was controlled by events. 4 But Abraham Lincoln, who had a healthy respect for the traditional separation of powers, was being too modest. His example of presidential leadership during the crisis of war still is the standard every president needs to be measured against.

Footnotes:

1 The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia, Mark E. Neely, Jr., Da Capo Press, New York, New York, 1984, pg. 267

2 The Civil War- An Illustrated History, Geoffrey C. Ward, with Ric Burns and Ken Burns, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, New York, 1991, pg. 272

3 The Collected Works of Lincoln, Roy P. Basler, Marion D. Pratt and Lloyd A. Dunlop, Editors, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1953, Vol. VIII, pg. 101

4 CW, Vol. VII, pg.282, in an April 4, 1864 letter to A.G. Hodges, Esquire