FOUR SCORE

by

WILLIAM E. BARNHART

THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB
7 October 2002

Four Score

Seven years from now, our nation will engage in a great civic celebration. The occasion will be the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. Already, a fifteen-member Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission has begun planning commemorations. Illinois is well represented on the commission, which was created by an act of Congress two years ago. Senator Richard Durbin, Representative Ray LaHood, former governor James Thompson, and the state's First Lady Lura Lynn Ryan are among the members. The commission held its first news conference in June in Springfield's Old State Capitol, a place steeped in Lincoln lore and home to a treasured collection of Lincoln papers. A Web site is in place: www.lincolnbicentennial.gov.

The commission is soliciting ideas from the public for ways to honor the sixteenth president and extend his legacy to current and future generations, here and around the world. A new Lincoln penny will be minted—the third penny design to mark a

---

Original spellings and punctuation in several of the passages quoted in this paper have been changed or corrected for clarity and readability.

Lincoln birthday. Harold Holzer, co-chair of the commission, said, "Abraham Lincoln embodied the best of American leadership and courage."[1]

Since even before his death in 1865, the embodiment of Lincoln's life and deeds in adoring myth and rigorous scholarship has occupied a virtual industry of researchers and enthusiasts. No individual in American history—and few in world history—have drawn such public interest. Evidence, large and small, of Lincoln's fifty-six years has been gathered, sifted, analyzed, and in some cases distorted. (Twenty thousand Lincoln documents housed in the Library of Congress, including 11,000 manuscripts with annotated transcriptions, are available on the Internet at www.loc.gov. Just type "Lincoln papers" in the search field of the home page.)

Lincoln's life is public property, not just for its own sake but also as context, a lens through which people explore their own lives and circumstances. For example, commission member Professor Darrell Bigham of the University of Southern Indiana says the bicentennial, unlike the centennial and sesquicentennial, will delve into race relations and the story of African Americans from Lincoln's time to the present.[2] The evolution of Lincoln's attitudes towards African Americans and slavery no doubt will be examined at length. Current controversies concerning Lincoln's proper legacy to African Americans demand a full airing.

The Lincoln bicentennial offers an opportunity for fresh exploration of another topic that until recently was treated tangentially by scholars and largely ignored by educators. I am speaking of Lincoln's skill and achievements as a writer. Historians have speculated about what the United States would have been like had Lincoln lived. I like to think that if Lincoln had completed his second term and retired to Chicago, where his widow Mary lived after her husband's death, he might have joined the Chicago Literary Club. When the club held its first meetings in 1874, Lincoln would have been

sixty-five years old. Based on recent club statistics, he would have been one of our younger members. Lincoln's surviving son, Robert, joined the club in 1876, although records do not indicate that he ever presented a paper. Evidence of Abraham Lincoln's love of the written word suggests he would have sought out and eagerly attended meetings of a forum dedicated to free and thoughtful presentation of written expression. He would have found vital companionship among the clergymen, lawyers, and businessmen who comprised the initial membership.

I won't belabor this fantasy. But ask yourself why you participate in this organization. As you do, you will walk in the footsteps of Abraham Lincoln, as surely as when you visit the Old State Capitol or the restored New Salem village. Our colleague Robert Carton remarked on the occasion of our 125th anniversary, "If you have things you've always puzzled about, it gives you an opportunity to solve the puzzle."[3] Just such an instinct fired Lincoln's life-long ambition to distinguish himself. In speeches, letters, essays, and poems that have come down to us, he puzzled about death, religion, intemperance, mental illness, relations with the opposite sex, even a murder mystery.

Most of all, he puzzled about slavery, the Union, and the Constitution. He solved these puzzles for himself and his countrymen through the power of words, artfully crafted and skillfully presented in the media of his day. Against his many shortcomings stands Lincoln's achievement as a writer.

Harold Holzer is a Lincoln scholar and vice president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, a fitting intersection of career paths for heading the bicentennial. Asked why he was proud to serve, Holzer said he looked forward to honoring "a man who did so much to preserve, articulate and symbolize freedom and democracy in this country."[4] Today, political articulation has fallen into disrepute. Garry Wills, the author of *Lincoln at*

Gettysburg, publicly lamented the reading of the Gettysburg Address at ceremonies to mark the one-year anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Harshly, Wills called it an insult to Lincoln, an insult to those who died in the Gettysburg battle, and an insult to those who died in last year's attacks. And, he said, "It's an insult to say people are incapable with coming up with anything adequate."[5]

Lincoln did not write sound bites or boilerplate, although his words have been abused as such over the years. He revealed the goal of his own public discourse in a eulogy he wrote in 1852 for one of his intellectual mentors, Henry Clay.

> Mr. Clay's eloquence did not consist, as many fine specimens of eloquence do, of types and figures—of antithesis, and elegant arrangements of words and sentences; but rather of that deeply earnest and impassioned tone, and manner, which can proceed only from great sincerity, and through conviction, in the speaker of the justice and importance of his cause.... All his efforts were made for practical effect. He never spoke merely to be heard. He never delivered a Fourth of July oration, or an eulogy on an occasion like this.[6]

When Lincoln arrived in Gettysburg on the eve of the cemetery dedication, townspeople called him out onto the balcony of the home where he stayed the night. He spoke as follows: "I appear before you, fellow citizens, merely to thank you for this compliment. The inference is a fair one that you would hear me for a while at least, were I to commence to make a speech. I do not appear before you for the purpose of doing so, and for several substantial reasons. The most substantial of these is that I have no speech to make. In my position it is somewhat important that I should not say foolish things." At this moment, a voice in the crowd yelled, "If you can help it." Lincoln continued, "It very often happens that the only way to help it is to say nothing at all."

The crowd moved next door, where Lincoln's secretary of state, William Seward, obliged them with extemporaneous remarks.[7]

To understand and appreciate Lincoln the writer, we must do more than search published texts of Lincoln material and his manuscripts, which in later years comprised mostly speech texts. We must enter the mind of a writer and ask why we find Abraham Lincoln there. We must look beyond Lincoln's public persona, as described by his contemporaries and historians. Lincoln probably would have been an accomplished writer had he followed his leanings after a single, undistinguished term in Congress and withdrawn from elective politics forever in 1849.

A characteristic of many good writers is the absence of distinction outside their craft. In Lincoln's case, years of hard labor as a child and young man left him physically powerful but determined not to build his life on his back. Lincoln's business skills left much to be desired. His presidential staff bemoaned his daily failures as an administrator. His social behavior was, some would say, bipolar, oscillating from bright conviviality to disturbing gloom. He lacked the attractive appearance and commanding voice of a great orator. At the time of his finest literary achievements—the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural—his leadership and intellectual skills were still widely dismissed by his fellow countrymen. Indeed, he was considered by certain organizers of the solemn occasion not to be a fitting speaker at the dedication of the national cemetery at Gettysburg in 1863.

Instead, we find a solitary individual, focused comfortably yet expectantly on the output of his own mind. We find a man who privately was his own best audience but who understood the public power of words. Like writers everywhere, he exploited words to assert his identity and achieve his purposes. Newspapers, with their politically active editors and stenographically capable reporters, were his palette. Publishers of traditional magazines and books distributed his extended remarks. The newest communications tech-

nology, the telegraph, by the way, fit Lincoln's preference for brevity and clarity.

Lincoln trusted his ability to figure things out. He wanted to impress others with the fruits of his thinking, whether in levering a loaded barge over a dam on the Sangamon River or in getting a client accused of murder off the hook by citing moon phases in an almanac. As he matured, words became his primary tool. During his post-congressional years, when Lincoln is said to have contemplated earning regular income as a public speaker, he gave credit where credit was due.

In a speech, "Discovery and Invention," which he made on several occasions in the late 1850s, Lincoln discussed human progress through invention. Invention was a natural topic for him. Among the puzzles he solved was the problem of lifting steamships over river shoals. Lincoln designed what he called "adjustable buoyant chambers," a technology for which he received a patent. He remains the only president to hold a patent. But his speech touched on an invention that seems obvious to a literate society—the written word. He said, "Its utility may be conceived by the reflection that to it we owe everything which distinguishes us from savages. Take it from us, and the Bible, all history, all science, all government, all commerce, and nearly all social intercourse, go with it."[8]

Lincoln's associates in the Illinois legislature and the circuit of courts in central Illinois remarked on his ability to get to the nub of a matter, as he had done in "Discovery and Invention." He loved words. His education was mostly self-directed. He was not above speaking plainly about the origin of what would become the essential tool of his lifetime work. He practiced elementary explanations throughout his life. Two examples illustrate the point: one from a childhood friend of Lincoln's, as told to Lincoln friend and chronicler William Herndon, and one from a portrait artist who spent time in the Executive Mansion and wrote a book on his recollections.

Anna Caroline Gentry was the wife of Allen Gentry, who accompanied Lincoln on a flatboat trip to New Orleans in 1828. Anna and Abraham were teenage schoolmates in Crawford, Indiana.

> One evening Abe and myself [Anna] were sitting on the banks of the Ohio or on the boat spoken of. I said to Abe that the moon was going down. He said, "That's not so—it don't really go down; it seems so. The Earth turns from west to east and the revolution of the earth carries us under, as it were; we do the sinking, as you call it. The moon as to us is comparatively still. The moon's sinking is only an appearance." I said to Abe—"Abe, what a fool you are." I know now that I was the fool—not Lincoln.... No man could talk to me that night as he did unless he had known something of geography as well as astronomy. He often and often commented or talked to me about what he read—seemed to read it out of the books as he went along—did so to others—he was the learned boy among us unlearned folks. He took great pains to explain—could do so simply.[9]

The artist Francis Carpenter asked President Lincoln to explain his insistence on verbal clarity. Lincoln replied as follows:

> Among my earliest recollections, I remember how, when a mere child, I used to get irritated when anybody talked to me in a way I could not understand. I don't think I ever got angry at anything else in my life.... I can remember going to my little bedroom, after hearing the neighbor talk of an evening with my father, and spending the night walking up and down, and trying to make out what was the exact meaning of some of their, to me, dark sayings. I could not sleep... when I got on such a hunt after an idea, until I had caught it; and when I thought I had got it, I was not satisfied... until I had put it in language plain enough, as I thought, for any boy I knew to comprehend. This was kind of a passion with me, and it has stuck by me.[10]

Lincoln caught knowledge wherever and whenever he could in his impoverished early years. His eagerness to absorb books and newspapers is central to the Lincoln portrait. As a child, Lincoln learned by simple means. His stepmother, Sarah Bush Lincoln, told Herndon: "When he came across a passage that struck him he would write it down on boards if he had no paper and keep it there until he did get paper. Then he would rewrite it, look at it, repeat it.... Abe, when old folks were at our house, was a silent and attentive observer—never speaking or asking questions until they were gone and then he must understand everything even to the smallest thing, minutely and exactly. He would then repeat it over and over to himself again and again, sometimes in one form and then in another and when it was fixed in his mind to suit him he became easy and he never lost that fact or his understanding of it."[11]

Well into his twenties, Lincoln read, copied, re-read, and in many cases memorized a wealth of written material, including the poetry of Robert Burns and William Shakespeare as well as long passages from the King James Bible.

Lincoln biographies mention in passing his fascination with the principles of logic and mathematical reasoning. Judge David Davis, in whose judicial circuit Lincoln practiced, told Herndon about Lincoln's study of Euclid's *Elements*. According to Herndon's notes on his interview with Davis, Lincoln "studied Euclid, the exact sciences. His mind struggled to arrive at moral and physical mathematical demonstration."[12]

Euclid gets a mention in several Lincoln biographies. Recently, Lincoln was mentioned in a book about Euclid. Leonard Mlodinow, an educator and scientist who wrote several "Star Trek" screen plays, writes in his book, *Euclid's Window*, that Abraham Lincoln was among the many for whom Euclid's work "had influence rivaling that of the Bible."[13] Certainly, Lincoln used principles of geometry and trigonometry when as a young man in New Salem he

worked as a surveyor. But he took more from the ancient thinker. Mlodinow puts it as follows: "The most important contribution of Euclid's *Elements* was its innovative logical method: first, make terms explicit by forming precise definitions and so ensure mutual understanding of all words and symbols. Next, make concepts explicit by stating explicit axioms or postulates... so that no unstated understandings or assumptions may be used. Finally, derive the logical consequences of the system employing only accepted rules of logic, applied to the axioms and previously proved theorems."[14] This was Lincoln's primary method of elevating his writing above typical political harangue.

In the fourth of the debates between Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, held at Charleston, Illinois, Lincoln displayed his affinity for Euclid: "If you have ever studied geometry, you will remember that by a course of reasoning Euclid proves that all the angles in a triangle are equal to two right angles.... Now, if you undertake to disprove that proposition... would you prove it to be false by calling Euclid a liar?"[15]

In an early speech, before the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield in 1838, Lincoln applied Euclidian logic to politics and government in the method he would utilize for the rest of his life. He said the patriotism and revolutionary spirit that surrounded the Founding Fathers helped make America strong in its early years as a nation. But, he said, those men are gone and those emotions have faded.

> Now, that they have crumbled away, that temple must fall, unless we, their descendants, supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason. Passion has helped us; but can do so no more. It will in future be our enemy. Reason, cold calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defense.[16]

The Lyceum speech, delivered just before Lincoln turned thirty, is largely autobiographical and anticipates Lincoln's emergence

as a writer and public figure who could say the Civil War was testing "the proposition that all men are created equal."

Lincoln's cold dialectic resonates in a passage he is believed to have written in the summer of 1854.

> If A. can prove, however conclusively, that he may, of right, enslave B.—why may not B. snatch the same argument, and prove equally, that he may enslave A.? You say A. is white and B. is black. It is color, then; the lighter having the right to enslave the darker. Take care. By this rule, you are to be a slave to the first man you meet with a fairer skin than your own. You do not mean color exactly? You mean the whites are intellectually the superiors of the blacks, and therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet with an intellect superior to your own.[17]

Lincoln's speeches and writings throughout the 1850s reflect this laser-like use of language, drawn at right angles. His style differed sharply from the grandiose political rhetoric of the time. But none of these efforts endeared him to literary critics of later generations or to compilers of American literature anthologies. In 1938 Roy Basler, editor of the eight-volume *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln,* wrote as follows: "Abraham Lincoln, during the 72 years since his assassination, has received possibly the most complete and widespread study given one man within an equal number of years. Yet what may 70 years hence be considered his most important phase has hardly been touched. Lincoln above all was an artist.... Exposition has never been reckoned a form conducive to the highest flights of literary expression; yet Lincoln demonstrated that it could be so beautifully and austerely sculptured that the very solidness of solid matter would vie with the ethereal."[18]

By the time of the Lincoln bicentennial, we will have reached Basler's "70 years hence." There's a chance his prediction finally will

come true. One of today's leading Lincoln scholars, Douglas Wilson of Knox College in Galesburg and author of *Honor's Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln,* writes, "Lincoln was a poet long before he was a politician, a circumstance of real significance, though one little emphasized or appreciated by his biographers."[19]

Wilson finds in Lincoln's poetry important clues to his development as a political leader. As if to guide future scholars, Lincoln's earliest samples of creative writing that survive appear on the pages of his sum book, in which he practiced arithmetic. Wilson says, "Thus a page dedicated to long division when the student was fifteen ends with this":

> Abraham Lincoln is my name
> And with my pen I wrote the same
> I wrote in both hast[e] and speed
> And left it here for fools to read.[20]

On another page, on which Lincoln practiced monetary calculations, we find an example of Lincoln's learning by copying, in this case a verse, written as prose, from Christian hymn writer Isaac Watts:

> Time what an empty vaper tis and days how swift they are swift as an Indian arrow fly or like a shooting star the present moment just is here then slides away in haste that we can never say they're ours but only say they're past.[21]

This passage revealed Lincoln at an early age turning poetry into prose, with sounds and meter as well as ideas. There is no evidence that Lincoln had any special musical abilities or interests. But singing hymns, including hymns by Isaac Watts, and reciting religious verse, especially the Bible, comprised an integral part of his boyhood. His mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, and sister, Sarah, sang well. The family attended religious camp meetings, with their singing and shouting.

As he did with books, young Lincoln learned by mimicking the camp meeting ritual. Lincoln's stepsister, Matilda Johnson Moore, told William Herndon this: "When father and mother would go to church, they walked about one and a half miles. Sometimes rode. When they were gone, Abe would take down the Bible, read a verse, give out a hymn, and we would sing, were good singers. Abe was about fifteen years of age. He would preach, and we would do the crying. Sometimes he would join in the chorus of the tears."[22]

Few recorded examples of Lincoln's early poetry survive. Daniel Kilham Dodge, a professor of English at the University of Illinois from 1892 to 1928 and one of the first scholars to investigate the literary side of Lincoln, made the following observation: "The less said about Lincoln's early poetical efforts,...the better. They are not only rude and unfinished, but they give no promise of the author's later style." Dodge is more charitable toward poems Lincoln had published in a Quincy newspaper in 1847. He wrote, "While the sentiments are not especially original, there is a decidedly poetical coloring to the whole, charged as it is with the melancholy natural to Lincoln."[23]

In one poem, Lincoln described his visit in 1844 to his Indiana home after an absence of fifteen years. The poem begins as follows:

> My childhood's home I see again,
> And sadden with the view;
> And still, as memory crowds my brain,
> There's pleasure in it too.

And ends,

> I range the fields with pensive tread,
> And pace the hollow rooms,
> And feel (companion of the dead)
> I'm living in the tombs.[24]

Douglas Wilson writes that while the work "won't stand comparison with those of another contemporary student of Watts's metric, Emily Dickinson, its concluding imagery is strikingly reminiscent of her own."[25] Dickinson was a teenager in Amherst, Massachusetts, when Lincoln had this verse published in Quincy, Illinois.

The few published verses from the mid-1840s apparently represent the end of Lincoln's life as a poet. Professors Herbert Edwards and John Hankins, in a 1962 paper "Lincoln the Writer," note that Lincoln's burst of poetry came at the same time he was studying Euclid and developing the stark, geometric style of argument that suited him as a circuit-riding lawyer. As the professors put it,

> At the very time when Lincoln carried his pursuit of lucidity and logic to its ultimate in Euclid, his power of imaginative sympathy was growing most strongly. At the time (1849) when he was issued a patent for perfecting a device for "bouyant chambers for steam boats" to help them over shoals, he was not only reading more and more poetry, but he was interested in writing verse. It was the special paradox of his nature that the two streams, a passion for lucidity and a passion for imaginative thought and feeling, should run side by side until, under the stress of great events, they should be joined and pour forth in the Gettysburg Address.[26]

The dual pursuit of logic and art might not be as paradoxical as the professors suggest. Lincoln worked hard to earn a comfortable living for his family as a lawyer. He had little hope of sufficient income as a professional writer to support the lifestyle his wife had enjoyed in her youth. Mary was a daughter of Robert Todd, a wealthy merchant and banker in Lexington, Kentucky. A facility with words became a tool of Lincoln's work as much as an axe was a tool in his days working for his father. His legal writing and oral presentations in court, as recalled by his associates at the bar, were

practical and spare. Even the Emancipation Proclamation, issued in January 1863, conspicuously lacked literary features. But the document brimmed with political and legalistic nuance, crafted by Lincoln in several drafts beginning six months earlier.

By most accounts, Lincoln's performances in court were not without wit. But he kept most of the homespun humor, off-color stories, and biting sarcasm for late-night reverie in roadhouses on the central Illinois judicial circuit and for Springfield politics. That is not to say that his courtroom appearances went unnoticed. In May 1850, a newspaper in Danville published a review of Lincoln on stage as a lawyer. Lincoln was "rough, uncouth, and unattractive—stern . . . and unfamiliar . . . slow and guarded," yet "profound in the depths of his musings."

> He lives but to ponder, reflect and cogitate. . . . In his examination of witnesses, he displays a masterly ingenuity . . . that baffles concealment and defies deceit. And in addressing the jury there is no false glitter, no sickly sentimentalism to be discovered. In vain we look for rhetorical display. . . . Seizing upon the minutest points, he weaves them into his argument with an ingenuity really astonishing. . . . Bold, forceful and energetic, he forces conviction upon the mind, and by his clearness and conciseness, stamps it there not to be erased.[27]

A line from one of Lincoln's own poems, "The Bear Hunt," illustrates his courtroom manner:

> And now a dinsome clamor rose,
> 'Bout who should have his skin;
> Who first draws blood, each hunter knows,
> This prize must always win.
>
> But who did this, and how to trace
> What's true from what's a lie,
> Like lawyers in a murder case
> They stoutly argufy.[28]

When he emerged as a nationally recognized politician in the late 1850s, Lincoln perfected the ability to separate or meld argument and art as his purpose required. One rhetorical technique was the highly selective use of metaphor. A few years ago Princeton University historian James McPherson presented an entire paper on this subject, titled "How Lincoln Won the War With Metaphors." Here's how Lincoln advised General Grant to deploy smaller forces of Union soldiers in aid of the North's main armies: "Those not skinning can hold a leg." To encourage Grant's trademark persistence, Lincoln sent a telegram to his general, saying, "Hold on with a bulldog grip, and chew and choke as much as possible."[29] Contemporary critics condemned Lincoln's use of such backwoods images. But to McPherson and other historians, Lincoln used poetic license to make plain and accessible many abstract concepts that otherwise might have sown confusion. He wanted and needed to speak, as artist Francis Carpenter recorded Lincoln as saying, "In language plain enough, as I thought, for any boy I knew to comprehend."

The metaphors may have been uncouth. But Lincoln adopted another rhetorical device from the best public speakers of his day. Many of his speeches ended with a peroration and an emphatic, emotional conclusion designed to implant the message of the speech and incite listeners to action. We find metaphor and peroration in his speech to the convention of the fledgling Republican Party in 1858. At the beginning comes a biblical metaphor, one that would serve Lincoln well and annoy his opponents.

> "A house divided against itself cannot stand." I believe a government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved. I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other.[30]

Lincoln then laid out his argument against the extension of slavery into new territories, expressing his thoughts in expert Euclidian fashion. At the end, came the peroration, wherein Lincoln let loose of calculation and moved to partisan exhortation.

> Two years ago the Republicans of the nation mustered over thirteen hundred thousand strong. We did this under the single impulse of resistance to a common danger, with every external circumstance against us. Of strange, discordant and even hostile elements, we gathered from the four winds, and formed and fought the battle through, under the constant hot fire of a disciplined, proud and pampered enemy. Did we brave all then to falter now? Now, when the same enemy is wavering, dissevered and belligerent? The result is not doubtful. We shall not fail—if we stand firm, we shall not fail. Wise counsels may accelerate or mistakes delay it, but sooner or later the victory is sure to come.[31]

The address in February 1860 to the Young Men's Republican Union at New York's Cooper Institute, known as the Cooper Union speech, began not with a metaphor but with a quotation from his rival, Stephen Douglas. Douglas had asserted that the Founding Fathers favored his laissez-faire position on the extension of slavery. Lincoln methodically dissected Douglas's remark and then turned his attention to the people of the South. At the end, he spoke to his own supporters: "Neither let us be slandered from our duty by false accusations against us, nor frightened from it by menaces of destruction to the Government nor of dungeons to ourselves. Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it."[32]

The finest examples of Lincoln's argument and art came with the presidency. In Lincoln's writing, logic, metaphor, and peroration eventually blended seamlessly. His First Inaugural Address

presented a carefully reasoned statement to the South, intended to defuse fear that his election meant inevitable war. But listen to the lyrical conclusion.

> I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearth-stone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.[33]

This closing paragraph contains four sentences, the last one with forty-seven words, potentially a real mouthful. But Lincoln's punctuation, as well as the words themselves, tells an important tale. Thanks to drafts of the speech that have survived, scholars have dwelled on the "mystic chords" paragraph. Lincoln adapted concluding words offered to him by William Seward, a more widely respected leader of the Republican Party and Lincoln's first cabinet appointment, as secretary of state. Seward was the author of the "mystic chords" phrase. But Lincoln, in effect as Seward's editor, gave the imagery its literary power. Comparison of the two versions of the paragraph reveals a skill essential to successful writers—the ability to revise. In this case, Lincoln revised the more wordy and confusing prose of Seward.

Lincoln focused at least as intently on editing his own material, often changing the text of speeches after they were delivered. Professor Wilson tells us that Lincoln's willingness and ability to revise his texts, not to mention his skill in doing so, "testify to Lincoln's formidable skill as a writer.... Subtle though such changes might be, they are the mark of an astute writer, one who knew that the difference between the merely good and the memorable is often in the details."[34]

In an addendum to this paper, you may compare the Seward and Lincoln texts at your leisure. Lincoln trimmed Seward's paragraph to seventy-six words from eighty-five, without rejecting any of Seward's thoughts. Brevity was not his purpose. The final sentence of each text has the same number of words. But he greatly improved the imagery, including the "mystic chords" metaphor. Moreover, Lincoln's final text was marked carefully with commas. The commas remind us that the sixteenth president was at heart a poet.

But Lincoln was not a facile or extemporaneous writer. He labored over his texts, including the Gettysburg Address, which was by no means dashed off on an envelope during his trip from Washington. The ideas and images in the speech resonate from much earlier Lincoln texts. He collected ideas over many years. The House Divided speech, delivered in 1858, built on a theme Lincoln set down in a letter three years earlier. A drawer in his desk in the Executive Mansion contained scraps of paper with notes and ideas jotted down for later use.

English professor Kathryn Whitford of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee offers the following: "Lincoln was not a natural or unconscious author of fine prose.... The manuscripts which survive demonstrate a consistent concern for rewriting and polishing sentences to achieve balance and cadence. No writer who writes and rewrites as Lincoln did is writing unselfconsciously."[35] Professor Wilson has a different view but reaches the same conclusion. "As is often observed," he wrote, "Lincoln had a way with words and was undoubtedly gifted with a natural talent for writing, but what is not so well recognized is that he had learned along the way the importance of revision. It is not too much to say that... rewriting had become for him an essential part of deliberate expression. Although he had originally made his mark in politics speaking extemporaneously on the stump, he had come to rely more and more on what he could write out and revise ahead of time."[36]

Lincoln spent a lot of time in his early days in Springfield "hanging out"—as we would say—in newspaper offices, fraternizing with editors. But in Wilson's view, Lincoln had no mentor or role model in learning the skill of editing. Evidence of Lincoln's writing, including many manuscripts and hand-marked printed texts, indicates simply an uncommon ability to focus on the task at hand and, as his stepmother recalled, "repeat it over and over to himself again and again, sometimes in one form and then in another and when it was fixed in his mind to suit him he became easy." Once the expression had been hammered out, Lincoln sought a venue for delivery. It might be a public letter responding to criticism by a famous New York newspaper editor or a cemetery dedication in Pennsylvania. As Wilson put it, "The occasions were fitted to the writings and not the other way around."[37]

The words now etched reverently in walls and monuments were the product of a skillful literary craftsman using the media of the day. Most political oratory of the period was performance-art that, as Wilson notes, often did not translate well to the page. You had to be present to absorb the efforts of Henry Clay, John Calhoun, Daniel Webster, or Edward Everett, the leading orator of the time. Everett spoke for two hours at the Gettysburg cemetery dedication. Shortly afterwards, he wrote to Lincoln, "I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes."[38]

Lincoln was one of the first political figures to bridge the gap between oratory and literature. Debate still rages about whether poems require an effective aural quality to be considered successful. There is no doubt where Lincoln stood on that dispute. He enthusiastically criticized the delivery of actors performing Shakespeare in Washington theaters. He grew up in communities where men were expected to be good story-tellers. The ability to hold an audience to the end of a story was highly prized, and by all accounts Lincoln was a master.

Whitford sees the oral tradition in the poetic phrasing of Lincoln's most revered speeches. The phrases and punctuation reflect his desire to be heard and understood as he addressed large audiences without benefit of electronic amplification. Breath control was essential to holding maximum volume. Whitford wrote, "There must be pauses for breath, and ideally the pauses should come in appropriate places in the syntactical structure of the sentences."[39] Also, Whitford said that pauses, which Lincoln usually denoted for himself with commas, were necessary to give the audience moments to comprehend what he was saying. She said Lincoln learned to deliver phrases interrupted by pauses to allow time for the echo of his words to dissipate in public halls.

Was Lincoln a poet, or merely a clever wordsmith and exploiter of contemporary communication techniques? You can best solve that puzzle in the manner Lincoln would. Obtain copies of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address and the Gettysburg Address. Copy them in your computer word-processor, if no wooden boards are handy. Recite phrases several times aloud, like students in an Indiana blab school. You will be walking in Lincoln's footsteps. You will mimic and by doing so understand Lincoln's discipline and achievement as an artist. And you will know why Lincoln's bicentennial should celebrate one of America's great writers.

Addendum

Set forth below is the text of the conclusion of the First Inaugural Address that was offered to Lincoln by his secretary of state, William Seward, after Lincoln had asked Seward for help on the address. Immediately following Seward's version is Lincoln's rewrite, which became the final version of the conclusion. The sentences comprising each version have been arranged in a fashion intended to assist the reader in comparing the textual differences as well as to highlight the superior rhythmic elements of the Lincoln version.

Seward's Version

I close.

We are not, we must not be,
aliens or enemies,
but fellow-countrymen and brethren.

Although passion has strained
our bonds of affection too hardly,
they must not, I am sure they will not,
be broken.

The mystic chords
which, proceeding from so many battlefields
and so many patriot graves,
pass through all the hearts and all the hearths
in this broad continent of ours,
will yet again harmonize
in their ancient music
when breathed upon
by the guardian angel of the nation.

Addendum

Lincoln's Version

I am loath to close.

We are not enemies, but friends.
We must not be enemies.

Though passion may have strained,
it must not break our bonds of affection.

The mystic chords of memory,
stretching from every battlefield,
and patriot grave,
to every living heart and hearth-stone,
all over this broad land,
will yet swell the chorus of the Union,
when again touched,
as surely they will be,
by the better angels of our nature.

Notes

1. Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, press release, August 12, 2002.

2. Jon Yates, "Planning for Lincoln's '09 Bash," *Chicago Tribune,* June 10, 2002.

3. William E. Barnhart, "Speech! Speech!" *Chicago Tribune Magazine,* March 14, 1999.

4. Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, press release.

5. Joyce Purnick, "A Dissent on Hallowing 9/11 Ground," *New York Times,* September 5, 2002.

6. Abraham Lincoln, "Eulogy on Henry Clay," July 6, 1852, in *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings,* ed. Roy P. Basler (Cambridge, Mass.: DeCapo Press, Perseus Book Group, 2001), 269-70 (hereafter cited as *Speeches and Writings*).

7. Quoted in Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (New York: Touchstone Books, Simon & Schuster, 1992), 31.

8. Abraham Lincoln,"Discoveries and Inventions," April 6, 1858, quoted in Wills, 154.

9. Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, *Herndon's Informants* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 132.

10. James M. McPherson, "How Lincoln Won the War with Metaphors" (Fort Wayne, Ind.: Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum, 1985), 5-6.

11. Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants,* 107.

12. Ibid., 350.

13. Leonard Mlodinow, *Euclid's Window* (New York: Touchstone Books, Simon & Schuster, 2002), 29.

14. Ibid., 30.

15. Lincoln/NET, Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project, Northern Illinois University Libraries, http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu.

16. Lincoln, "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," January 27, 1838, in *Speeches and Writings,* 84.

17. Lincoln, "Fragments on Slavery," undated, in *Speeches and Writings,* 278.

18. Roy P. Basler, "Abraham Lincoln—Artist," *The North American Review,* spring 1938 (reprinted in the Congressional Record, May 24, 1938), 3-4.

19. Douglas L. Wilson, "The Literary Lincoln," unpublished paper, Knox College, 3.

20. Ibid., 2.

21. Ibid., 3.

22. Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants,* 109.

23. Daniel Kilham Dodge, *Abraham Lincoln: The Evolution of His Literary Style* (Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1900, republished in 2000), 36.

24. Lincoln, "My Childhood Home I See Again," 1846, in Wilson, "The Literary Lincoln," 12.

25. Wilson, "The Literary Lincoln," 14.

26. Herbert Joseph Edwards and John Erksine Hankins, *Lincoln the Writer: The Development of His Literary Style,* University of Maine Studies, Second Series, No. 76 (Orono, Maine: University Press, 1961), 46.

27. Robert G. Gunderson, "'Stoutly Argufy': Lincoln's Legal Speaking," address to the Annual Meeting of the Lincoln Fellowship of Wisconsin, 1962 (reprinted in *Wisconsin Magazine of History,* winter 1962-63), 8.

28. Lincoln, "The Bear Hunt," 1846, in *Speeches and Writings,* 195-96.

29. McPherson, "How Lincoln Won the War with Metaphors," 12.

30. Lincoln, "A House Divided," June 16, 1858, in *Speeches and Writings,* 372.

31. Ibid., 380-81.

32. Lincoln, "Address at Cooper Institute," February 27, 1860, in *Speeches and Writings,* 536.

33. Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address," in *Speeches and Writings,* 588.

34. Douglas L. Wilson, "Lincoln's Sword," unpublished paper, Knox College, 3-4.

35. Kathryn Whitford, "Abraham Lincoln: An Assessment of His Place in American Literature," (Madison, Wis.: Address to the Annual Meeting of the Lincoln Fellowship of Wisconsin, 1972), 2.

36. Wilson, "Lincoln's Sword," 3.

37. Douglas L. Wilson, remarks to Lincoln Symposium at Knox College, September 28, 2002.

38. Edward Everett to Abraham Lincoln, letter, 20 November 1863, in *Speeches and Writings,* 738.

39. Whitford, "Abraham Lincoln: An Assessment of His Place in American Literature," 4.

Bibliography

Anderson, David D. *The Literary Works of Abraham Lincoln*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles Merrill Publishing Company, 1970.

Basler, Roy P. "Abraham Lincoln Artist." Address printed in the Congressional Record of May 24, 1938; reprinted from *The North American Review*, spring 1938.

_____. "Abraham Lincoln's Rhetoric." *American Literature*, Duke University Press, Volume 11, March 1939-January 1940, 167-82.

Dodge, Daniel Kilham. *Abraham Lincoln: The Evolution of His Literary Style*. Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1900 (republished in 2000).

_____. *Abraham Lincoln: Master of Words*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1924.

Donald, David Herbert. *Lincoln*. New York: Touchstone Books, Simon & Schuster, 1996.

Edwards, Herbert Joseph, and John Erskine Hankins. *Lincoln the Writer: The Development of His Literary Style*. University of Maine Studies, Second Series, No. 76, University Press, Orono, Maine, 1962.

Gunderson, Robert G. "'Stoutly Argufy': Lincoln's Legal Speaking." Address to the annual meeting of the Lincoln Fellowship of Wisconsin, 1962; reprinted in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, winter, 1962-1963, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

Lincoln, Abraham. *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*. Edited by Roy P. Basler. Cambridge, Mass.: DaCapo Press, Perseus Book Group, 2001.

McPherson, James M. "How Lincoln Won the War With Metaphors." Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum, Fort Wayne Indiana, 1985.

Miller, William Lee. *Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2002.

Mlodinow, Leonard. *Euclid's Window: The Story of Geometry from Parallel Lines to Hyperspace*. New York: Touchstone Books, Simon & Schuster, 2002.

Purnick, Joyce. "A Dissent on Hallowing 9/11 Ground." *New York Times*, September 5, 2002.

Simon, Paul. *Lincoln's Preparation for Greatness: The Illinois Legislative Years*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971.

Stern, Philip Van Doren, ed. *The Life and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*. New York: The Modern Library, 1999.

White, Ronald C., Jr. *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002.

Whitford, Kathryn. "Abraham Lincoln: An Assessment of His Place in American Literature." Address to the annual meeting of the Lincoln Fellowship of Wisconsin, Madison, 1972.

Wills, Garry. *Lincoln and Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America*. New York: Touchstone Books, Simon & Schuster, 1992.

Wilson, Douglas L. *Honor's Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.

_____. "Lincoln's Sword." Unpublished paper at Knox College, Galesburg, Ill., 2002.

_____. "The Literary Lincoln." Unpublished paper at Knox College, Galesburg, Ill., 2002.

Wilson, Douglas L., and Rodney O. Davis, eds. *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements About Abraham Lincoln*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998.

Yates, Jon. "Planning Starts for Lincoln's '09 Bash." *Chicago Tribune*, June 10, 2002.

This paper was written for The Chicago
Literary Club and read before the Club on Monday
evening, the seventh of October, Two Thousand and Two.
This edition of three hundred copies
was printed for the Club in the month of
September, Two Thousand and Four.

Printed in the
United States of America