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Revolutions REVISITED

Two Faces of the Politics of Enlightenment

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What Manner of Speech?

Popular historians, intent on gratifying our desire to define and characterize whole eras, have responded in kind. With a few bold, simple strokes, they offer for our consideration pictures of an Age of Faith, an Age of Reason, an Industrial Age, and the like. Whatever bewilderment or sense of wonder may first have troubled our view of the past and prompted us to seek their help is in a sense quieted, at least for a while. Yet our satisfaction, such as it is, carries its own price. If we are to remain content with the likely tale they offer us, we have to suspend our native sense that in real life matters are not that simple and unambiguous. Indeed, if the historian's proffered certitude is to overcome our healthy misgiving or doubt, he or she must first to last continue to persuade. The same might be said of any nontrivial use of history: lacking a demonstrative argument, the interpreter

must find some way of making a probable case to an audience that may well be otherwise-minded, suspicious, indifferent, or easily bored.

These difficulties, formidable enough as they stand, are compounded further in the instances to be discussed in the following chapters. There, attention is to be focused not on historians "doing history," still less on philosophers thinking about "History," but on singular practical men of political affairs who make use of historical example and interpretation to advance their own policies and promote their own approaches toward the issues of their day. Recourse to the history of their respective national revolutions bespeaks, in these cases, neither mindless ritual nor antiquarianism. It testifies, rather, to considered judgments that *this* would be the fitting and effective way of reaching and shaping their public's mind.

Our readiness to dismiss such political uses of history as merely manipulative or (in the familiar pejorative sense of the term) rhetorical grows out of a currently strong predisposition to contextualize all statements. According to this school of thought, the surer truth behind any marshaling of reasons is that all such arguments need to be deeply discounted. Once we recognize how pervasively influential are social setting, habits of language, and other historical and cultural factors on our modes of thinking and arguing, any assertions of timeless truthfulness will stand stripped of their pretension and credibility. At most we may say that such claims are used to make the naive believe and the unruly behave—but with a view to someone else's present advantage.

This way of reading, I shall argue, is both reductive and overly simple. Although the immediate concern of these political men's efforts is a decision to be made today—a vote to do this or that, a practical expression of support or opposition—they most emphatically also have larger ends in view. Ultimately their longer focus is on the state of mind that is the substrate, as it were, of all such transient, particular decisions. Within that substrate, passionate attachments

(and aversions) and reasoned argument work upon one another. When resorting to history—"our history"—to help make their case, these men must thus appeal to both the affective and rational parts of their public's souls. Not content merely to gain votes (although of course never for a moment losing sight of that objective), these politicians know they must also gain their countrymen's ears so as to gain their minds. For if they fail to bring that public into *their* peculiar ways of seeing and thinking, any seeming success on a narrow field of action will be but ephemeral.

The problem is how to secure an opening for reasoned discourse and reflection on the long term in a place where arguments don't always join, minds don't often meet, and premiums are paid for the short term. Few would mistake the hustings for a seminar room, the general public for a conventicle of philosophers. A politician, satisfied in his own mind of the justice and rationality of his cause, seeks out arguments that might bring others closer to his position, arguments that may rest on premises that are generally accepted rather than simply true. In acting and speaking thus, the politician behaves as might any advocate; and since the difficulties facing any would-be persuader of a citizenry have been a theme of Western reflection since at least the days of Socrates, there would seem to be little call for an intensive new investigation. Yet for all that, there are some politicians whose sustained efforts to reach their public are both exemplary and of lasting interest. Their uncommon use of common tools sets them apart. We are not apt to conflate the spirited arguments of Edmund Burke, Abraham Lincoln, and Alexis de Tocqueville with the subliminal manipulations of merchandisers of cosmetics, clothing, and cars. I shall try to make evident that politicians of their rank have in view not only a persuaded audience but a more thoughtful public. Especially singular and noteworthy is the manner in which they undertake to make their public rise in some sense above itself. For this alone they would deserve our renewed attention.

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If past is indeed prologue, the politician with a long view and a good voice will remind a people of their history. On hearing such a retelling by a gifted orator, a people may be moved either to be true to their past or to rid themselves of it. In either event the statesman's intention is both practical and philosophical. Drawing on collective memory, he remolds it. Ostentatiously disclaiming novelty or originality, he veils his art. In rehearsing the old story, he furthers his own new, or his people's renewed, political program.

Today's political science seems not to recognize this kind of activity. At least none of the usual tags—political rhetoric, propaganda, civil religion, the engineering of consent, political socialization—conveys the range, depth of analysis, and feeling that a master of this art of speaking can draw upon and evoke in an audience. Working at a level more fundamental than particular policies or the laws themselves, even while seeking to affect such policies and laws, the statesman aims to fix or reform the people's predispositions. These, when settled, make certain outcomes possible and others quite out of the question.

Today we have lost sight of the necessity that once led statesmen to concern themselves with these predispositions. We measure our officials by their readiness to do our bidding; we seek rather to be represented than ruled by those we call "public servants." And our political science follows suit. Plato, in contrast, viewed this persuasive art by which the people's fundamental orientations may be secured to be so much a part of politics that he integrated it into his code of law, which he set forth in the *Laws*, in the form of preludes or *proimnia* to the laws. Despite our contemporary oblivion about the need for such an art, there are within our own modern tradition those who do realize this need. In the most widely recognized instance, Thomas Jefferson manifested his awareness of it in his drafting of the Declaration of Independ-

dence and in some of his most celebrated proposed enactments to free the human mind.¹ My case studies here—Burke, Lincoln, and Tocqueville—remind us of how recently this art was in full flower, yet in order to find a term that adequately characterizes what these moderns are about, we may need to return to ancient political philosophy and to the medieval political science that built on it. Plato may have been the founder of this art, but, surprising though it may seem, Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, a medieval student of Plato, was the first to make this art itself a topic of scientific analysis. This art was familiar within his own tradition as "dialectical theology" or *kaliām*.²

It is helpful, I would submit, to consider some of these modern men's productions as indeed being forms of a political *kaliām*. In distinguishing this Islamic religious science from both political science proper and jurisprudence, Fārābī defines it as an art enabling one "to argue in the defense of the specific opinions and actions stated explicitly by the founder of the religion, and against everything that opposes these opinions and actions."³ Its stance, then, is defensive and protective; its point of reference some original intent. That which it would oppose or check is presented as being at odds

1. See the discussion of these bills in Ralph Lerner, *The Thinking Revolutionary: Principle and Practice in the New Republic* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), 78–88.

2. For a synoptic overview see Muhsin Mahdi, "Philosophy and Political Thought: Reflections and Comparisons," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 1 (1991): 9–29. The most recent comprehensive account of Fārābī's works (along with a bibliography of texts, translations, and interpretations) is Miriam Galston, *Politics and Excellence: The Political Philosophy of Alfarabi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

3. *The Enumeration of the Sciences (Iḥṣā' al-'Ulūm)*, chap. 5. An English translation is in *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, edited by Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), 27.

with, or subversive of, that earlier understanding. The threat to the old may come as readily from those who expect too much reason in politics as from those who behave as though they expect too little. In neither case, however, can there be any recovery of that earlier, purportedly sounder arrangement without recollection.

In urging his people to face up to their founding, the speaker may well use locutions more typical of a family member than of an archeologist or analytic philosopher. The investigation the audience is urged to undertake (along with the speaker, as it were) may be more or less probing but will not seem philosophical and will surely not be distanced or academic. For the intention, to repeat, is defensive; the argument oppositional, dialectical; the object under investigation one's own. Still, for all its apologetic character, the arguments of *kalām* are indeed arguments and thus may provide "a place for reflexion and meditation, and hence for reason, in the elucidation and defence of the content of the faith."⁴ Nor ought its defensive character to be taken as simply precluding an innovative intent. "Necessity" may dictate change—change that might even come close to touching fundamentals—but wise legislators hardly need to be cautioned about appearing unseemly. Their response to necessity will likely be to present their own reformation as a correction of some intervening distortion or corruption and certainly not as a case of their overruling the founding legislator. Indeed, regardless of the reach of their corrections, the successors' speech is less of reformation than of restoration.⁵

4. Louis Gardet, "Ilm al-Kalām," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., vol. 3 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), 1142.

5. See Fārābī's "Summary of Plato's Laws" (*Talkhīṣ Nawāwīs Aflāṭun*), discourse 7, sect. 11. The text is in *Alfarabius Compendium Legum Platonis*, edited by Francesco Gabrieli (London: Warburg Institute, 1952), 35.19–36.2 (Arabic), 27 (Latin).

To speak in a modern Western context of a politician's dialectical theology is to invite disbelief, derision. It smacks of a world of imams, of fundamentalist polemics and God-intoxicated zealotry far removed from the electoral politics of government and loyal opposition. Furthermore, the examples I mean to adduce in the following pages are, to say the least, unusual candidates. Not only are they moderns; they are moderns each of whose political thinking presupposes a modern revolution made (to different degrees) on modern principles. Those principles in turn were presented by their philosophic progenitors to the world at large as rational, as carrying a force clear to even the meanest capacity. Here was a way of thinking that seemed to have as little need for rhetoric as for priestcraft. It is all the more striking, then, that these thoughtful men of practical affairs, heirs to that revolution in thought and deed, found it useful, even necessary, to appeal to history when addressing their public. If this speaks some earlier oversight or inadequacy in the modern rationalist project, it also bespeaks another reason for looking once again to earlier thinking about politics.

Yet it is also likely that those tenth-century Muslims who were Fārābī's contemporaries and immediate addressees were equally (although differently) caught off balance by his analysis. Certain features of his presentation in the *Enumeration of the Sciences* have the effect of making the familiar—in this case the traditional Islamic sciences of jurisprudence and dialectical theology—seem distant and abstract. Fārābī speaks of religions, not of Islam; and his point of departure is an analysis of the scope and methods of political science, not of the Koran. There is not even a nod acknowledging the massive presence of the divinely revealed Law, the *sharī'a*, which constitutes the community and prescribes its definitive actions and opinions. Abstracting from the manifest differences among religions, Fārābī chooses to address the function of jurisprudence in "every religion" and to classify

theologians according to the methods they adopt in defending "religions." He singles out as one of the special targets of dialectical theologians the kind of individual "who has reached the limit of human perfection," one "who is perfect in humanity." At the very least, this delicate reference shows the traditional Islamic sciences to stand in a certain tension with a political science whose basic questions and orientation are neither derived from nor dependent upon the revealed, supreme Law of the land.

The relationship between political science, jurisprudence, and *kalām* that is suggested by Fārābī's account is recognizable in our times and terms as well. Now as then, lawyers and judges are expected to keep within the framework of the regnant law. Its premises and prescriptions are their givens, and they take care to present their arguments and judgments as inferences and deductions drawn from the letter and intention of the lawgiver, be that the constitution or ordinary statutes. Nor are we today without our corresponding political *kalām*, often one falling neatly within Fārābī's typology of modes in which a community's way of life may be defended. Thus there is the defense that disclaims any merely rational justification, holding instead that there is a wisdom in our present arrangement—a product of, say, History—that surpasses any possible merely human contrivance. Similarly, there is the effort to harmonize earlier texts with current opinions to the maximum extent possible. With sufficient interpretive latitude, even inconvenient facts may be made to fit. Less lovely still are those attempts to return fire with more of the same: ad hominem arguments of many kinds, not excluding the use of shame, fear, and systematic "disinformation." It is safe to say that the arsenal of devices described by Fārābī has not diminished over time.

While these forms of political *kalām* are notorious in efforts to deal with external enemies (leading to censorship and the jamming of unwelcome electronic communications, for example), they are by no means limited to that. Arguably, preoccupation with the source of the offense may distract

defenders and keep them from paying sufficiently close attention to the psychic arena at home where doctrines and opinions collide. It is within the souls of subphilosophic citizens that the founding opinions fundamental to the perpetuation of the regime hold sway, or gain strength, or insensibly crumble. How might these opinions be defended and secured against artful (or, for that matter, mindless) corruption by others? One way might be through the methods of confrontation and contention so dear to the hearts of dialectical theologians. Another, more engaging method might be to tell a story. The power of a historical narrative to shape and even alter opinions, to present vivid images of exemplary behavior or cautionary lessons: that was a possibility as present to Jefferson as to Fārābī.⁶

This mode of popular persuasion and instruction remains close to the level of received opinion, presenting a strong likely case without demonstrative argument. Yet it may and often does raise the question "Why?" and to that extent is not simply defensive and not necessarily conservative. Far from simply accepting the ancestral *because* it is old—the conservative stance par excellence—and thereby closing off anything even approaching theoretical inquiry, the recourse to history invites those so inclined and so able to wonder about the reasons and causes that led the forebears to think and act as they did. In seeking to recover those reasons, it enters, however tentatively, into a broader and more challenging field. Here is a chance to move beyond merely passive piety and a gratitude for ancestral efforts. By rising to the demands

6. See Fārābī, *The Book of Religion (Kitāb al-Millat)*, sect. 2. The Arabic text is in *Alfarabi's Book of Religion and Related Texts (Kitāb al-Millat wa-Nuṣūṣ Uḫrā)*, edited by Muhsin Mahdi (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq Publishers [Imprimerie Catholique], 1968), 45-9-24. See also the discussion of public education in Query 14 of Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, edited by William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1954), 147-48.

and equal station among the nations of the earth, Americans become great self-flatterers. Full of themselves, they are in no mood to listen to European visitors complain about boorish complacency and absurd puffery.

The European caricature is not entirely unfair. By the time it is Lincoln's turn to begin raising his voice among his fellow citizens, egregious self-celebration is a staple of American oratory. It is astonishing that he makes himself heard in such a congratulatory clamor, for he speaks in a different key. To be sure, Lincoln has no principled objection to praising America to the Americans. But his conception of the praiseworthy in America is singular, and in the future tense: Americans will have reason to think well of themselves only after learning to think critically of themselves. In the meantime, one does not have to be a European observer, just a far-seeing American, to understand that the American people's self-satisfaction is the greatest obstacle to a well-deserved pride in themselves. In a time and place where thousands heap wholesale flattery (and wholesale damnation) upon uncritical millions, Lincoln's is a voice apart.



No aspiring politician needs to be told that there is a public pulse to be taken, and no halfway competent politician needs to grope for long to take it. Lincoln is more than halfway competent. He understands from the outset and with perfect clarity that the realm of politics is the realm of opinion. He sees that any speaker who would induce a people to hold a critical opinion of itself must first induce it to trust and have a good opinion of himself. But it will presumably not trust or have a good opinion of one who criticizes the opinions it holds dear. It would seem, then, that in order to gain a hearing for his critical, nonflattering speech, a speaker must first dissemble his critical opinions and flatter his audience, thus exacerbating the very sickness he wishes to cure. Lincoln escapes his dilemma in a manner worthy of study.



Lincoln's Revolution

By the time Abraham Lincoln first finds his way to the public podium, the traditional objects of American political celebration have been much altered. In the beginning, and especially to the east of the Hudson, the Lord had been praised by governors no less than by clerics. Both knew whence all blessings flowed and were intent that the public at large never lose sight of that source. Later, the controversies that lead at last to revolution and independence lay greater stress on English law and institutions, the rightful inheritance of a free people. To laud this legacy is at once to justify the struggle and to condemn the corruption and heartlessness of an unfeeling imperious mother. Next, a free America, with a future as unbounded as the very land, offers itself as a new topic fit for orators and poets. But in congratulating themselves for their land, their institutions, their separate

He flatters the people and gains their trust, not by catering to their present noncritical opinions of themselves and their affairs, but by bringing them with him, as equals somehow, into the problem of public opinion as such. He takes them into his confidence and makes them his partners in seeking a solution for the problem of popular government. And in this he succeeds. Not the least of Lincoln's extraordinary political achievements is his success in making general an awareness of the problem of public opinion—his nurturing of an opinion about the signal importance of opinion. A greater achievement, yet impossible without the first, is his persuading many American people to criticize and repudiate the many base opinions about political right and prudence that their base flatterers would have them basely cling to. His *kalam* is directed against the enemy within.

Lincoln's beginning point is the recognition that the basis of any government, "and particularly of those constituted like ours," lies in the attachment of the people to their government's laws and institutions (SW 1:31; CW 1:111).¹ That affection, in turn, although usually arising out of an untroubled confidence or habit, can nonetheless be alienated. The unspoken attachment of a silent multitude can suddenly and terribly show itself to be conditional, evanescent. Thus, far from being something to be presumed, the positive engagement of private sentiment and public structures has rather to be cultivated, nourished, and, in the last analysis, earned. The first fact is that "our government rests in public opinion. Whoever can change public opinion, can change

1. The volume and page locations of all quotations in this essay are cited parenthetically in the text. References are to two editions, separated by a semicolon. The first reference is to Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings*, edited by Don E. Fehrenbacher, 2 vols. (New York: Library of America, 1989); the title is abbreviated SW. The second is to *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, edited by Roy P. Basler et al., 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953-55); the title is abbreviated CW.

the government, practically just so much" (SW 1:385; CW 2:385). That public opinion might as readily be thought of as "a public sentiment" or as a public will that "springs from the two elements of moral sense and self-interest" (SW 1:402; CW 2:409). Politicians no less than policies are to be gauged by public sentiment: "In this age, and this country, public sentiment is every thing. *With* it, nothing can fail; *against* it, nothing can succeed" (SW 1:493; CW 2:552-53). But by the same token, politicians no less than policies are to be gauged by their effect *upon* public sentiment. When someone of influence molds public sentiment, he "goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed" (SW 1:525; CW 3:27).

Rather than remain the tacit understanding in a politician's private calculations, the shaping of public sentiment itself becomes, thanks to Lincoln, a subject of public reflection and debate. His insistence on addressing the "central idea" in our political public opinion" (SW 1:385; CW 2:385) also enables or rather compels others to perceive how a "mighty, deep seated power . . . somehow operates on the minds of men, exciting and stirring them up in every avenue of society—in politics, in religion, in literature, in morals, in all the manifold relations of life" (SW 1:805; CW 3:310).

Lincoln's concern with public opinion differs from the radicalizing summons of a principled politician. A William Lloyd Garrison, a John C. Calhoun, even an Alexis de Tocqueville, might single out some central idea as the shaper of social thoughts and ways. Lincoln goes further and deeper. He offers more than a dissecting tool of analysis or a call to arms. Lincoln contends that "no policy that does not rest upon some philosophical public opinion can be permanently maintained" (SW 2:136; CW 4:17). In raising this concern at all, he in effect attempts to mold and create a philosophically grounded public opinion. Where others see a public wanting in belief, Lincoln sees a public also wanting in understanding. Others would rouse their people to subscribe to some

principle or article of faith. Lincoln does too; but beyond that, he strives to get as many as possible to pause, to reflect on the place and importance of true opinion in their collective lives.

Lincoln's analysis of the crisis of his time leads him to understand that it is no less the crisis of popular government itself. Only a general clarity about the conditions of popular government and only a greater awareness of the role of public opinion within it can enable the Americans to recover their balance and find themselves. Failing that, they will remain victims of their delusions and deluders.

If public opinion is the bedrock on which institutions and policies might be erected, it is also a formidable and omnipresent constraint on the hopes and dreams of theoretic politicians. "The universal sense of mankind, on any subject, is an argument, or at least an *influence* not easily overcome" (SW 1:85; CW 1:275). Confronting such opinions demands not only persistence and adroitness—qualities common enough to fanatics as well—but a genuine and cautious respect for limits, both one's own and those of others. In impinging on the deepest feelings of the people, politicians stir matters not to be trifled with. From early on Lincoln has understood and publicly acknowledged (as in his handbill replying to charges of infidelity) that no one "has the right . . . to insult the feelings, and injure the morals, of the community in which he may live" (SW 1:140; CW 1:382). Still less can a "statesman" feign indifference to some "great and durable element of popular action" (SW 1:346; CW 2:282). Indeed, the same may be said of more contentious and problematic popular sentiments. Whether a particular prejudice "accords with justice and sound judgment, is not the sole question, if indeed, it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill-founded, can not be safely disregarded" (SW 1:316; CW 2:256).

All this, to repeat, bespeaks a need for caution, not a mindless acceptance. Lincoln is far, very far, from the resigned man of sorrows, controlled by events, that he is some-

times portrayed as being. His reentry into national politics is triggered by the crisis over the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. No small part of his resolve to do battle comes from his perception of the injury that the mere passage of that legislation has already inflicted on a fragile, vulnerable public sentiment. Underlying the entire political system of the United States is a "spirit of mutual concession—that spirit which first gave us the constitution, and which has thrice saved the Union" (SW 1:335; CW 2:272). Who now, after the effectual repeal of the Missouri Compromise, could ever again put their trust in such mutual accommodations? More immediately, how might one account for so startling a reversal and repudiation? This latter question is the great device with which Lincoln seeks to arouse and redirect public opinion. In the course of doing so he succeeds in reversing the trajectories of both his own and Stephen A. Douglas's fortunes.

Central to Lincoln's purpose is his effort to impress upon the public mind the realization that "on the question of liberty, as a principle, we are not what we have been." The spirit that drove "the political slaves of King George" to wrest freedom for themselves and to desire a peaceful end to the enslavement of others has "itself become extinct, with the *occasions*, and the *men* of the Revolution" (SW 1:359; CW 2:318). Americans are abandoning the equality of men, that original "central idea" of American public opinion "from which all its minor thoughts radiate" (SW 1:385; CW 2:385). What is more, those keenest on overturning and replacing that principle have the audacity to deny publicly that any such reversal has taken place. The untruth buried in Chief Justice Taney's discreetly disingenuous assumption—"that the public estimate of the black man is more favorable *now* than it was in the days of the Revolution" (SW 1:396; CW 2:403)—is being asserted more brazenly by members of Congress. Thus John Pettit of Indiana, without a word of rebuke from "the forty odd Nebraska Senators who sat present and heard him," could pronounce the Declaration of Independence "a self-evident lie" (SW 1:339; CW 2:275). And Stephen

Douglas can maintain in effect "that negroes are not men—have no part in the declaration of Independence— . . . that liberty and slavery are perfectly consistent—indeed, necessary accompaniments—that for a strong man to declare himself the *superior* of a weak one, and thereupon enslave the weak one, is the very *essence* of liberty—the most sacred right of self-government" (SW 1:493–94; CW 2:553). Here is the "central idea of the Democratic party" under Douglas's leadership (SW 1:741; CW 3:256); under his influence "a vast change in . . . Northern public sentiment" has been effected in but a few years (SW 2:66; CW 3:444). It is a bitter irony that those who might rightly claim political descent from Jefferson have "nearly ceased to breathe his name everywhere" (SW 2:8; CW 3:375).

Lincoln presents Douglas's "Nebraskaism in its abstract purity" as a policy designed "to educate and mold public opinion to 'not care whether slavery is voted up or voted down'" (SW 1:416, 418; CW 2:451, 453). By "*impressing* the 'public heart' to *care* nothing about it" (SW 1:433; CW 2:467), Douglas is securing the "gradual and steady debauching of public opinion" (SW 2:56–57; CW 3:423). Coming from a man of great influence, Douglas's "bare opinion" goes far to fix that of others. "The susceptible young hear lessons from him, such as their fathers never heard when they were young" (SW 1:493; CW 2:553). The struggles, then, against Nebraskaism, against Douglas's "don't care" policy, against his insidious interpretation of popular sovereignty, are all presented by Lincoln as so many efforts to recover an earlier, authentic public opinion. Should Douglas's new heretical doctrines succeed in "penetrating the human soul" (SW 1:527; CW 3:29), there is little hope that slavery may be contained or that the public mind may once again come to "rest in the belief that it is going to its end" (SW 2:37; CW 3:406). To persuade his contemporaries that such an act of political recollection and recovery is both possible and desirable is the greatest challenge Lincoln faces until the coming of the war.

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As with his treatment of public sentiment, Lincoln chooses to make persuasion an explicit theme. To succeed in persuading, a speaker or writer has to come to terms with prevailing modes of thought, especially where these are reinforced by "interest, fixed habits, or burning appetites." These passionate involvements may be worked for good or for ill, but in no case are they to be ignored or despised. Thus it is futile to expect humankind at large to sacrifice now for the sake of generations yet unborn. "Posterity has done nothing for us; and theorise on it as we may, practically we shall do very little for it, unless we are made to think, we are, at the same time, doing something for ourselves." This understanding, according to Lincoln, informs the "more enlarged philanthropy" of the Washington Temperance Society (SW 1:85–86; CW 1:275–76). Less benign by far is the passion-driven misanthropy that can reduce the black man to a being intermediate to the white man and the crocodile. Here public passion is being worked so as to "still further brutalize the negro, and to bring public opinion to the point of utter indifference whether men so brutalized are enslaved or not" (SW 2:139–40; CW 4:20). Here too, as elsewhere, the public's passions are being catered to through use of ingenious falsehood and sophism. In this manner the unspeakable is concealed, "sugar-coated," and rendered plausible; the public mind is debauched and drugged (SW 2:138–39, 255; CW 4:19, 433).

For one engrossed in public affairs, the passion-driven preferences of the people must thus remain a matter of continuing concern and interest. However one views those particular passions—as something to be used or deflected, or even as something to be replaced and transcended—it is these passions that the politician must first somehow reach and affect. In this task the preeminent instrument of action is the politician's power of persuasion. Yet it is striking that so great a master of persuasive speech as Lincoln should insist on the limitations of such speech and thus also on the limits of

politics. He understands the grip of mere fashion on ordinary behavior, "the strong inclination each of us feels to do as we see all our neighbors do" (SW 1:88; CW 1:277). He knows that "the plainest print cannot be read through a gold eagle" (SW 1:403; CW 2:409). He knows as well that it will not do to ignore a niggling charge, for although "it is no great thing, . . . yet the smallest are often the most difficult things to deal with" (SW 1:624; CW 3:135).

All this bespeaks a kind of modesty or perhaps realism when assessing politicians' effectiveness on their chosen fields of engagement. And yet in seeking to ground public opinion anew, Lincoln's objectives are hardly modest and certainly not timid. With the fading of public memories, with the dying-off of the men of '76—those impassioned embodiments of the revolution and its principles—Lincoln's generation has due warning that the temple of liberty "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" (SW 1:35-36; CW 1:115). Henceforth the politics of freedom must rest on the persuasiveness of reason.²

There is abundant evidence that Lincoln does indeed act on this estimate of his, and the American people's, situation. He takes it for granted that he will be held to account for positions he has adopted earlier and elsewhere, that "all the reading and intelligent men in the community would see them [in print] and know all about my opinions" (SW 1:703; CW 3:221). Similarly, he holds the opinions of his opponents to public accounting. They will need "a far better argument than a mere sneer to show to the minds of intelligent men" that they are not responsible for the necessary implications of their pronouncements (SW 1:715; CW 3:232). The ultimate political judge will be, has to be, a thinking public: "I never

2. That this is at least an overstatement is attested to by the lines that follow and form Lincoln's peroration: a heady, passionate appeal for the use of sober reason.

despair of sustaining myself before the people upon any measure that will stand a full investigation" (SW 1:42; CW 1:147).

Yet this confidence, which Lincoln articulates at the very outset of his political career and to which he holds firm till death, dare not be read as the manifesto of a *philosophe*. For although Lincoln loves a demonstrative proof as much as any man in public life, he holds no illusions as to its sufficiency either before the jury box or on the hustings. A widespread public opinion heavily discounts the pronouncements of "Preachers, Lawyers, and hired agents." "They are supposed to have no sympathy of feeling or interest, with those very persons whom it is their object to convince and persuade" (SW 1:81; CW 1:272). It is commonplace to write these types off as self-servers, especially when they assume high moral ground in denouncing and dictating to their erring fellow-citizens. Is it any surprise that the latter are "slow, very slow, . . . to join the ranks of their denouncers, in a hue and cry against themselves"? To expect otherwise is to anticipate what can never be—a reversal of human nature itself. This much at least is given: "that a drop of honey catches more flies than a gallon of gall." So with men." Lincoln insists that "the great high road" to a man's reason has first to be gained, not assumed or commanded or despised. The ethos of the speaker has first to be established as that of a friend. Failing that, "tho' your cause be naked truth itself, transformed to the heaviest lance, harder than steel, and sharper than steel can be made, and tho' you throw it with more than Herculean force and precision, you shall no more be able to pierce him, than to penetrate the hard shell of a tortoise with a rye straw" (SW 1:83; CW 1:273).

Here, then, is a universal truth that informs and undergirds Lincoln's exertions on behalf of a politics of reason. His repeated appeal is of course to thoughtfulness. "I take it that I have to address an intelligent and reading community, who will peruse what I say, weigh it, and then judge. . ." (SW 1:704; CW 3:222). He tells the audience he shares with Douglas at

Galesburg that he is "willing and anxious that they should consider [the candidates' competing views] fully—that they should turn it about and consider the importance of the question, and arrive at a just conclusion." They should "decide, and rightly decide" the fundamental question concerning the extension of slavery before adopting any particular policy (SW 1:721; CW 3:236-37). Yet this appeal to deliberation will only be heeded if it is seen as coming from a friend, from one of their own. By drawing on a common heritage, the heritage of the revolution, and by casting himself as but one of a multitude of beneficiaries in common, Lincoln strives to find the high road to his public's reason. Happily, his need to persuade leads him to the plausible source of the very principles he would espouse. The revolution, as Lincoln conceives or reconceives it, makes him at one with his audience and points them all in common toward the practical policy that conforms to his understanding of justice.



Within the context of the struggle over the expansion of slavery, Lincoln attempts to redirect his contemporaries' thoughts back to the revolution. His immediate aim is that they see afresh who they have been and what they are about. With recollection will come clarity, and with clarity, right action. In all of this Lincoln studiously avoids any suggestion that he is innovating, let alone improving on what earlier generations have wrought. The very language he favors in speaking of the founders' handiwork—the "legacy bequeathed us" (SW 1:28; CW 1:108), their "inestimable boon" (SW 2:264; CW 4:482)—reinforces the thought that the actions most becoming for latter-day Americans are of preserving and giving thanks. It might appear that with the greater work already accomplished, lesser men could now settle down to tasks better adapted to *their* talents.

Yet in fact Lincoln argues no such thing. For while his praise of the revolution and of the revolutionaries is predict-

ably full, his estimate of that legacy is hardly simple or unmixed. There is, to begin with, no evading the fact that "the noblest of cause[s]" drew on some of the unloveliest human traits: the people's "deep rooted principles of hate, and the powerful motive of revenge" (SW 1:35; CW 1:114). Further, for all the revolution's "glorious results, past, present, and to come, it had its evils too. It breathed forth famine, swam in blood and rode on fire." It exacted a harsh human price, leaving in its wake orphans, widows, and a suppressed Tory minority (SW 1:89, 167; CW 1:278, 438-39).

Nor is that all. To be sure, the revolution's central proposition—the capability of a people to govern themselves—can no longer be treated as a matter of doubt. Its truth has been demonstrated in practice; the once "undecided experiment" is now understood to be a success (SW 1:33-34; CW 1:113). Yet the work remains strikingly incomplete. Bereft of its "noble ally," a complementary moral revolution, the grander goal of "our political revolution of '76" still lies beyond reach. The envisioned universal liberty of humankind demands not only the release of "every son of earth" from the oppressor's grip but also the breaking of the fiercer bondage of reason to human appetite and passion. No, the revolution can hardly be said to have run its course (SW 1:89-90; CW 1:278-79).

Nowhere is its incompleteness more evident than in the continuing debate over slavery. Lincoln repeatedly urges his countrymen to look back, "away back of the constitution, in the pure fresh, free breath of the revolution" (SW 1:309; CW 2:249). From that vantage point they may come to see both the promise of the revolution *and* its disappointment. A clue, for Lincoln, lies in Jefferson's having introduced into "a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times" (SW 2:19; CW 3:376). Lincoln confesses to having long thought that this revolutionary struggle "must have been something more than common," "something even more than National Independence" (SW 2:209; CW 4:236). The object in view was not that eighteenth-century Americans achieve parity with eighteenth-century

British subjects "in their own oppressed and unequal condition," but rather "the progressive improvement in the condition of all men everywhere" (SW 1:399-400; CW 2:407). It was that expectation which sustained those who endured the miseries of the struggle: "they were cheered by the future" (SW 2:355; CW 5:373). It was that very expectation, now understood as "the principle of the REVOLUTION," which gave rise to those systems of gradual emancipation that the states had adopted in the closing decades of the preceding century (SW 1:342; CW 2:278). In the light of that history, and in view of the prosperity that attended the free states' having acted on the principle that "every man can make himself," it is simply absurd to pretend (as Douglas does) that these maxims of free government can be treated as indifferent matters. "No—we have an interest in the maintenance of the principles of the Government, and without this interest, it is worth nothing" (SW 1:379; CW 2:364).

In casting Douglas as the chief villain of the piece, Lincoln is responding particularly to the Democrat's attempt to establish historical credentials for his own policy. By denying or finessing the tension between original intent and current practice, Douglas is in effect erasing the disturbing memory that might impel an erring people to recover and reform. "Judge Douglas is going back to the era of our Revolution, and to the extent of his ability, muzzling the cannon which thunders its annual joyous return. When he invites any people willing to have slavery, to establish it, he is blowing out the moral lights around us" (SW 1:527; CW 3:29).³ In truth, however, "the spirit of seventy-six and the spirit of Nebraska, are utter antagonisms" (SW 1:339; CW 2:275). Nebraskism and Dred Scottism are a "burlesque upon judicial decisions, and [a] slander and profanation upon the honored names, and sacred history of republican America" (SW 1:418; CW 2:454).

3. Lincoln's imagery is taken from an 1827 speech by Henry Clay before the American Colonization Society, which he cites in his 1852 eulogy on Clay (SW 1:270; CW 2:131).

But how might a deluded people be made to see that? On the evidence of the Know-Nothings' popularity, Lincoln concludes, "Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid" (SW 1:365; CW 2:323). If a profound change has in fact taken place, then the revolution is indeed incomplete. The union has not only to be saved; it must be so saved, so remade, as "to keep it, forever worthy of the saving." The soiled robe of republican America needs to be washed white "in the spirit, if not the blood, of the Revolution" (SW 1:339-40; CW 2:276). For Lincoln that can only mean a return to the Declaration of Independence.



It belabors the obvious to recall that the Declaration is a great tocsin resounding throughout Lincoln's speeches and writings, evoking memory, alarm, and action. It is his point of departure and his point of return. There simply is no mistaking his regard for "the immortal paper" and its author (SW 1:702; CW 3:220). Lincoln's control and passion vie so impressively in this invocation that one may say that although the subject is hardly original with him, Lincoln emphatically makes it his own.

All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression (SW 2:19; CW 3:376).

He can in perfect truth declare, "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence" (SW 2:213; CW 4:240). Perhaps the most sublime achievement of Lincoln's *kalām*

is the way he reshapes the debate raging over the extension of slavery in the western territories into a debate over the moral foundations of popular government. In that political world of antebellum America, so rife with political theologians and theological politicians, Lincoln succeeds in avoiding the excesses of each. He neither mistakes himself for the appointed agent of the Lord of Hosts nor falls into the idolatry of treating the voice of the majority as the voice of God. By insisting on making the Declaration of Independence the central point of reference, Lincoln is able to occupy a higher but still emphatically political ground. From that ground he can criticize the deniers, sappers, and traducers of its principles. From that high ground, too, he can identify and expose the unthinking forgetfulness that so conveniently encourages people to assume "there is no right principle of action but *self-interest*" (SW 1:315; CW 2:255). By pressing his case as a matter of high political principle—but a principle to which no white man can *afford* to assume or feign indifference—Lincoln leads a reluctant public to a disturbing confrontation with itself.

It is not enough to invoke, with pious tones, the right of self-government or the great principle of popular sovereignty. Where Douglas uses these formulas in an attempt to close off debate, Lincoln insists on using them to reconsider one's assumptions. "[I]f the negro is a man, is it not to that extent, a total destruction of self-government, to say that he too shall not govern *himself*? When the white man governs himself that is self-government; but when he governs himself, and also governs *another* man, that is *more* than self-government—that is despotism." No man, Lincoln insists, is good enough to govern another without that other's consent. That, if anything, is "the leading principle—the sheet anchor of American republicanism" (SW 1:328; CW 2:266). Again, the Declaration's assertion of human equality is not an assertion of equality in all respects but in some: in the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, in "the right to put into his mouth the bread that his own hands have earned" (SW

1:477-78, 512; CW 2:520, 3:16). Denial of that principle will not and cannot stop with the black man. The argument that would justify enslaving a race is "the same old serpent" kings have used to bestride the necks of their people. In their fearful preoccupation with anything that might lift black men up, Douglas and those arguing like him are drawing white men down. They threaten to "destroy the principle that is the charter of our liberties" (SW 1:457; CW 2:500-501).

Lincoln takes special pains to so meld the principle and the charter that an attack on the one has to be an attack on the other. His enlarged interpretation of the Declaration's language and intention means that he can present Douglas's interpretation as a diminution, indeed a trivialization, of what even minimally is "the white man's charter of freedom" (SW 1:339; CW 2:276). In fact, Lincoln argues, the Declaration is much more. In its "noble words" lies the origin of popular sovereignty itself, or at least as applied to the Americans (SW 1:443-44, 583; CW 2:489, 3:94). And though it is indeed a charter of freedom, the Declaration embraces a much broader segment of humankind than only those people of British descent who were resident in North America in 1776. Slaves and Englishmen alike fall under its principles (SW 2:135; CW 4:16). Latecomers to America, European immigrants looking at its language, can "feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are" (SW 1:456; CW 2:499-500). It is to the Declaration that Lincoln traces the genius of American independence. In it is to be found "the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands, every where" (SW 1:585; CW 3:95).

The distinctiveness of America, even its special significance, lies in the stamp of the Declaration's principles upon the hearts and minds of people the world over. In this connection Lincoln has the boldness to speak not simply of his

regard for "the opinions and examples of our revolutionary fathers" and of his love for "the sentiments of those old-time men" (SW 1:329; CW 2:267). From Independence Hall's "consecrated," "holy and most sacred walls" one may still hear "breathings rising"; "the teachings coming forth from that sacred hall" are less an episode of the past than a continuing presence. On the eve of his most dreadful new responsibilities, it is to these teachings that Lincoln sees fit to pledge his devotion. In so doing he uses terms that echo the Psalmist's devotion to Jerusalem as he sat weeping by the waters of Babylon (SW 2:212; CW 4:239). It was no mere wordsmith's trope that led him to speak years earlier of "my ancient faith" and of "our ancient faith" (SW 1:328; CW 2:266), and to warn of "giving up the OLD for the NEW faith" (SW 1:339; CW 2:275). But in rendering the ancestral sacred, Lincoln takes care, as we shall see, to keep it within human reach as an object of warm familiarity. It is "that old Declaration of Independence" and the sentiments of "those old men" (SW 1:443, 456-57; CW 2:488, 499), "the good old one, penned by Jefferson" (SW 2:259; CW 4:438), that he keeps before the public eye. To lose these would be to lose the better part of one's self.

Thus the brunt of Lincoln's charge against Douglas's reading of the Declaration is not quite what one might have expected. By maintaining that the black man is not included in its language, Douglas is tending "to take away from him the right of ever striving to be a man" (SW 1:798; CW 3:304); that is bad enough. But this evil is exceeded by the long-term effect of such thinking: "penetrating the human soul and eradicating the light of reason and the love of liberty in this American people," "he is blowing out the moral lights around us" (SW 1:527, 717; CW 3:29, 234).⁴ This loss is not conjectural but actual. "When we were the political slaves of King George, and wanted to be free, we called the maxim that 'all men are created equal' a self evident truth; but now when

4. Ibid.

we have grown fat, and have lost all dread of being slaves ourselves, we have become so greedy to be *masters* that we call the same maxim 'a self-evident lie'" (SW 1:359; CW 2:318). What once had been "held sacred by all, and thought to include all" now is "assailed, and sneered at, and construed, and hawked at, and torn" beyond recognition (SW 1:396; CW 2:404). In calling for a re adoption of the Declaration and a return to the practices and policy that harmonized with it, Lincoln is also calling for America to return to its promise.

Lincoln never argues that the fulfillment of that promise is easy or at hand. Yet the overall effect of the Declaration's principle gives cause for hope and for pride: "its constant working has been a steady progress towards the practical equality of all men" (SW 1:386; CW 2:385). In what still remains the outstanding characterization of the Declaration, Lincoln speaks of its authors meaning to set up "a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere" (SW 1:398; CW 2:406).⁵ Shorn of its universal intent, of what practical use can that old declaration be? "Mere rubbish—old wadding left to rot on the battle-field" (SW 1:400; CW 2:407). The grandeur of America is inseparable from its founders' dreams. In daring to give "hope to the world for all future time" (SW 2:213; CW 4:240), they secured an immortal fame for themselves and their successors.

5. Lincoln uses comparable language in describing the effects of "the just and generous, and prosperous system" of free labor (SW 2:98, 297; CW 3:479, 5:52).

(C)

Since Lincoln fixes his eye so firmly on the moral aspect of the American Revolution, he attends as a matter of course to the characters of those who made it. Not surprisingly, he finds those men admirable, although not simply so. Though Lincoln is often eager to present them as figures on a pedestal, he is also able to place them in a somewhat less flattering light. The main thrust of his remarks, however, is to present them as benefactors. Lincoln rings many changes on that theme. He, his contemporaries, and Americans yet unborn all owe gratitude to that race of ancestors, those "iron men" who bequeathed them such fundamental blessings (SW 1:28, 455; CW 1:108, 2:499). Beyond that, the patriots of '76 are models and objects of emulation. Just as they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor in support of the Declaration of Independence, their successors ought to pledge their all in support of the Constitution and the laws (SW 1:32; CW 1:112). Lincoln even goes so far as to urge that his contemporaries adopt the salutary habit of regarding the Constitution as unalterable. "The men who made it, have done their work, and have passed away. Who shall improve, on what *they* did?" (SW 1:196; CW 1:488).

Yet moving in tandem with this vein of filio piety is a subdued but unmistakable demythologizing. Lincoln's founders are indeed great men—but men, not demigods. Those who ran the risk of failure, derision, and oblivion in order to make the revolution only dared what any might do who "naturally seek the gratification of their ruling passion." Staking "their *all*" upon their success, those men of ambition wagered—and won celebrity, fame, and distinction (SW 1:34; CW 1:113). Whatever the broader reach of their benefaction, its motivating impulse could not be called selfless.

Nonetheless, models they were and models they remain for Lincoln. He does not cease urging his fellows, "degenerated men (if we have degenerated)," to follow the opinions and examples of "those noble fathers—Washington, Jefferson

and Madison" (SW 2:76; CW 3:453). It is obvious that this insistent message is not meant to be taken as a commendation of mindless adulation; for beyond the level of prattling babes, Lincoln has not a single good word to say in favor of mindlessness of any sort.

Now and here, let me guard a little against being misunderstood. I do not mean to say we are bound to follow implicitly in whatever our fathers did. To do so, would be to discard all the lights of current experience—to reject all progress—all improvement. What I do say is, that if we would supplant the opinions and policy of our fathers in any case, we should do so upon evidence so conclusive, and argument so clear, that even their great authority, fairly considered and weighed, cannot stand; and most surely not in a case whereof we ourselves declare they understood the question better than we (SW 2:119; CW 3:534–35).

In nothing, perhaps, are the fathers more to be followed, more to be studied, more to be imitated, than in their opposition to slavery. Here especially, according to Lincoln, they showed their moral clarity and their political prudence. They knew "a vast moral evil" when they saw it (SW 1:450; CW 2:494). When and as they could, they put "the seal of legislation *against its spread*" (SW 1:514; CW 3:18). They assiduously eschewed and rejected anything suggesting that one might have a moral right to enslave another. "The argument of 'Necessity' was the only argument they ever admitted in favor of slavery; and so far, and so far only as it carried them, did they ever go" (SW 1:337, 478, 765, 802; CW 2:274, 520, 3:276, 308). They intended, expected, and encouraged the public to expect, that slavery ultimately would become extinct (SW 1:448, 603, 800, 2:70–71; CW 2:492, 3:117, 306, 448). This, according to Lincoln, was the position of the leading men of the revolution and the position to which they "stuck . . . through thick and thin." "Through their whole course, from first to last, they clung to freedom" (SW 2:48; CW 3:416).

Purer souls, sterner moralists, can and do argue that, far from being models for emulation, the architects of American constitutionalism were temporizers, or whistlers in the dark, or even covenanters with Satan himself. Where such critics may see weakness and confusion, Lincoln unhesitatingly perceives prudence. The premise of his admiration is plain enough: "From the necessities of the case we should be compelled to form just such a government as our blessed fathers gave us" (SW 2:136-37; CW 4:18). Again, what Lincoln has in mind is a defense not of every jot and tittle of earlier policies and provisions but of the general stance the founders took toward the actual presence of slavery in the new nation. Its presence was a fact, no less a fact than its being a wrong. Neither fact might be ignored or wished away, and the authors of the Declaration responded to both. At one and the same time they both declared the right of all to the equal enjoyment of inalienable rights and took account of the circumstances standing in the way of an immediate universal attainment of these rights (SW 1:398; CW 2:406). A moral imperative was embedded in a far-from-yielding world and then left to work its influence. In surrounding the existing evil with constitutional guards, the forefathers bought peace. But in doing so they did not compromise their understanding of the evil as an evil (SW 1:581-82; CW 3:92-93). "You may have a wen or a cancer upon your person and not be able to cut it out lest you bleed to death; but surely it is no way to cure it, to engraft it and spread it over your whole body." "The peaceful way, the old-fashioned way" of the fathers is the model for others to follow as well (SW 1:808, 2:38; CW 3:313, 407).

The cancer metaphor also appears in another discussion of the founders' prudence. Lincoln is struck, as others must be, by the "ambiguous, roundabout, and mystical" language used in the Constitution's provisions respecting slavery (SW 2:142; CW 4:22). "That covert language," he says, "was used with a purpose" and with an eye to the time when, slavery having expired among the Americans, "there should be

nothing on the face of the great charter of liberty suggesting that such a thing as negro slavery had ever existed among us" (SW 1:801-2; CW 3:307). Without quite saying so, Lincoln implies that the circumlocution was prompted by a sense of shame.

Thus, the thing is hid away, in the constitution, just as an afflicted man hides away a wen or a cancer, which he dares not cut out at once, lest he bleed to death; with the promise, nevertheless, that the cutting may begin at the end of a given time. Less than this our fathers **COULD** not do; and **MORE** they **WOULD** not do. Necessity drove them so far, and farther, they would not go (SW 1:338; CW 2:274).

Principle had made its painful peace with circumstance.

It is to this policy, at once moral and prudential, that Lincoln urges his countrymen to return. In a tireless succession of speeches stretching from 1854 to 1860, he makes the point again and again: by returning to the policy of the fathers, by returning slavery to the position they originally marked out for it, by insisting on treating slavery as an evil (albeit one with constitutional protections), and by restoring the legitimate public expectation that slavery should ultimately become extinct, the country will regain peace and national self-respect (SW 1:340, 458, 470, 514, 803; CW 2:276, 501, 513, 3:18, 308). In this sense it is Douglas himself, not Lincoln and those whom Douglas calls Black Republicans, who is the radical innovator. It is Douglas who cannot let slavery "stand upon the basis upon which our fathers placed it, but removed it and *put it upon the cotton gin basis*" (SW 1:766, 8:11-12; CW 3:276, 316).

Against the charge that the Republicans are revolutionary and destructive, Lincoln insists upon the ancestral credentials of the new party's program. In seeking to "restore this government to its original tone" as regards slavery, the party's chief and real purpose is "eminently conservative" (SW 2:35, 147; CW 3:404, 4:27). Douglas's version of American history cannot—and, under Lincoln's relentless pressure, will not—

conceal the gap between the principles of the contemporary Democratic party and those of its slaveowner-founder, who had confessed that "he trembled for his country when he remembered that God was just" (SW 1:702; CW 3:220). As between the "don't care" policy of the one and the anguished contemplation of the other, Lincoln urges his fellows: "Choose ye between Jefferson and Douglas as to what is the true view of this element among us" (SW 2:42; CW 3:410).

Lincoln's recurrence to the history of the sentiments, policies, and actions of the founders is both a tactical move and a profound necessity. It is both a recollection and a reconception. He believes that his is by far the stronger case, although some later students doubt whether the evidentiary record is as unequivocal as he makes it out to be.⁶ Ultimately, Lincoln's historical narrative is a moral tale whose fervor and un-

6. The most diverse interpreters assert or concede as much before going on to draw utterly incompatible conclusions. Thus, for example, Harry V. Jaffa (in a seminal study to which I am much in debt) allows that "Lincoln's affirmation of the Founders' and signers' meaning, as distinct from his contradiction of Douglas and Taney, is not itself impeccable on purely historical grounds" and surmises that Lincoln "was not innocent of the nature of his subsequent 'reconstruction' of their meaning. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 328 (see also 324, 325). M. E. Bradford charges Lincoln with being "duplicious" while "appealing to an imaginary history." Bradford, "Against Lincoln," in *The Historian's Lincoln: Pseudohistory, Psychohistory, and History*, edited by Gabor S. Boritt and Norman O. Forness (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 111. Garry Wills sees Lincoln's self-conscious artistry as contributing to a romantic, mythic misreading—if not distortion—of Jefferson's principles and intentions. Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), xiv–xxiv. More charitable, perhaps, is the assertion by Mark E. Neely, Jr., that "the Jeffersonian legacy was more ambiguous than Lincoln realized." Neely, *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Jefferson, Thomas" (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), 164.

mistakable force derive from the centrality he accords the Declaration of Independence. He understands with unrivaled clarity that the Declaration's principle of "Liberty to all" has to be "the word, 'fitly spoken' which has proved an 'apple of gold' to us."⁷ The union and the character of the union depend upon the sense that each American has of being historically connected with the nation's astonishing rise to prosperity and might. The recollection of the beginnings, as on the annual Fourth of July celebrations, is a reminder that the bonds are not primarily genetic but moral. The Declaration's principle is "the father of all moral principles" in the founders' descendants, adoptive as well as biological. But if public sentiment were knowingly or unknowingly corrupted, that principle could no longer serve as "the electric cord" linking together "the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men" (SW 1:456; CW 2:499–500). Lincoln's appeals not to break these bonds of affection came too late. In the land of the deaf, the forgetful, and the shrill, the mystic chords of memory would be silenced by guns at Charleston Harbor.

7. See Lincoln's meditation on Proverbs 25:11 in CW, 4:168–69.