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# The Global Lincoln: European Dimensions

*by Richard Carwardine and Jay Sexton*

**Abraham Lincoln yearned to leave a permanent legacy. It is doubtful, however, that Lincoln, even when Confederates surrendered, appreciated just how far he had stirred hearts and minds at home and abroad. Yet his death, just days after Lee laid down his arms at Appomattox, prompted a quite extraordinary explosion of mourning around the world.**

1 Abraham Lincoln yearned to leave a permanent legacy. “It isn’t a pleasant thing to think that when we die that is the last of us,” he told a New Salem neighbor, and there’s little evidence to suggest that his views changed later in life (Wilson and Davis 88; Stevens 12; *CW* 1:96–97. The individual’s best hope of immortality lay in achievements that lasted in public memory. During his presidency he felt acutely the historical moment. The international significance of the American Union would give the Civil War’s contending parties a permanent place in public memory, home and abroad. “Fellow-citizens,” he declared after twenty months of war, “we cannot escape history. […] The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation (CW 5: 537). A little later he issued his emancipation proclamation, declaring free the slaves in areas still under Confederate control, and could reflect upon the edict’s far-flung impact and the foreign eulogies it elicited, even if their grandiloquence was not to his taste. “Heir of the thought of Christ and of [John] Brown,” Giuseppe Garibaldi wrote from Italy, “you will pass down to posterity under the name of the Emancipator! More enviable than any crown and any human treasure!” (Giuseppe Garibaldi, Menotti Garibaldi, and Ricciotti Garibaldi to Lincoln, 6 Aug. 1863, *ALP*).

2 It is doubtful, however, that Lincoln, even when Confederates surrendered, appreciated just how far he had stirred hearts and minds at home and abroad. Yet his death, just days after Lee lay down his arms at Appomattox, prompted a quite extraordinary explosion of mourning around the world. “What a general consternation, what an immense grief all over Europe! Lincoln dead! Lincoln assassinated! That is […] the universal cry, the all-excluding topic in court-Palaces and in the cabins of the poor.” So wrote the distraught United States Consul in Bremen. “I have witnessed in Europe the memorable epochs of 1830 and 1848, but never have I seen such a general commotion, such a deep consternation” (Heinrich Börnstein to Montgomery Blair, 30 April 1865, Blair Family Papers, LC, qtd. in *Abraham Lincoln: An Exhibition* 82). A blizzard of tributes engulfed American consulates, the messages of ordinary men and women and the voluntary civic groups they represented: churches, secular societies, workingmen’s improvement and mutual aid associations, democratic circles, ragged schools, antislavery and freedmen’s societies, temperance leagues, Masonic lodges, ladies’ societies, literary and reading groups, student clubs, gymnastic and choral unions, fire-fighting companies, chambers of commerce, and agricultural alliances. The US State Department’s compendium of foreign condolences ran to over 800 pages. European voices from Austria and Belgium to Switzerland and Württemberg and Latin American ones from Argentina to Venezuela dominated the volume, but those from China, Japan, north and west Africa, and the gamut of British imperial dependencies indicated that Lincoln had become a truly global figure, known in every continent, and that well beyond the walls of courts and parliaments he had touched the lives of common people. From the US Legation in Paris, John Bigelow confessed his sheer amazement at the grip that Lincoln had exerted over popular opinion among “the masses of Europe” (Bigelow to William H. Seward, 31 May 1865, US Department of State 86–87).

3 This outpouring was the substantial prelude to a longer and more significant story. Lincoln’s international standing would burgeon over the next two generations, well into the 1920s, and he would continue to be widely invoked throughout the twentieth century, in different places, at different times, for sundry purposes. By 1900, his life had been published in German, French, Dutch, Italian, Portuguese, Greek, Spanish, Danish, Welsh, Hebrew, Russian, Norwegian, Finnish, Turkish, Swedish, and Japanese; and

over the next twenty-five years or so the list extended to Polish, Chinese, Czech, Arabic, Hungarian, Persian, Slovak, Armenian, Korean and Vietnamese. Lincoln's protean quality licensed a range of heroic readings: democrat, liberal, emancipator, nationalist, citizen-commander, frontiersman, orator, self-made man, total abstainer, philosopher, martyr, and more.

## The Defender of the Principles of Liberal and Democratic Nationalism

4 During the heyday of his international reputation, during the last third of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the next, Lincoln's authority derived less from his role as emancipator than as the perceived defender of the principles of liberal and democratic nationalism. Lincoln was widely cast as the heroic tribune whose defense of his nation's integrity was far removed from narrow chauvinism. Instead, he won the acclaim of radicals and nation-builders whose own lives were devoted to projects inspired by the same universal democratic principles. This purposeful nationalism spoke to a wide spectrum of progressives: socialists, radicals, and democrats, who combined nationalist aspirations with informal membership of a community dedicated to freeing the world from monarchical power, aristocratic privilege, and constrained popular rights. For them, the nation was not an end in itself, but the mechanism by which political freedom and individual rights might be universally achieved. Lincoln provided the model of how to transcend one's nation to become a symbol of the common people's universal struggle.

5 Lincoln thus had great traction in a Europe that was undergoing seismic social and political transformations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Spain, the *progresistas* of the Revolutionary Sexennium of 1868–1874 paid homage to Lincoln the democratic hero. Garibaldi's Italian democrats saw in the combined force of emancipation and assassination Lincoln's potency as a champion of republican liberty. French liberals and republicans brandished Lincoln as a weapon of popular democracy in their assault on Napoleon III and the conservative establishment of the Second Empire. He won admirers amongst German radicals and, following the Meiji restoration, Japanese modernizers. Several leading German social democrats and anti-Nazis of the Weimar Republic found an ideological anchor in Lincoln. He inspired influential figures amongst the Slavic minorities of the Austro-Hungarian empire: Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk—self-made scholar, intellectual and first president of Czechoslovakia—began by pressing for progressive reform and Czech autonomy within the empire, but after 1914 invoked Lincoln's and Woodrow Wilson's democratic ideas in the pursuit of full independence.

6 Lincoln's sublime exaltation of the people, the Gettysburg Address, became the credo of separatist and consolidationist nationalists, each group invoking the democratic basis of the cause. The versatility and utility of that address is no better exemplified than in its adoption by both Irish Unionists and Irish republican nationalists. "I believe fundamentally in the right of the Irish people to govern themselves," Eámon de Valera declared in 1921. "I believe fundamentally in government of the people by the people and, if I may add the other part, for the people" (qtd. in Kevin Kenny, "Abraham Lincoln in Irish Political Discourse," *Global Lincoln* 164). No less earnestly, covenanting Ulster Unionists years later swore an oath en masse "that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that Government of the Ulster people, by the Ulster people, for the Ulster people, within the United Kingdom shall not perish from the earth." (Richard Carwardine and Jay Sexton, "The Global Lincoln," *Global Lincoln* 8).

7 Indicative of the ecumenical applications of Lincoln's thought are the many ways in which he was invoked to qualify or complicate a simple celebration of the nation state. His appropriation by exponents of Pan-Americanism exemplifies the attempt to separate Lincoln from the nation and deploy him on behalf of an alternative, supranational structure that would contain and control the ambitions of a powerful nation like the United States. The co-option of Lincoln by British Liberals as part of a larger Anglo-Saxonism revealed how Lincoln could be embraced in a racialized transnational way that sat awkwardly with his own concept of the nation.

## The Universal Appeal of the Self-Made Man

8 Central to Lincoln's appeal abroad was his reputation as the archetypal self-made man, and the narrative

of his rise from obscure and humble origins, through self-education, enterprise, hard work, and the simple virtues of the natural man. The image of Lincoln the 'rail-splitter' is perhaps as ubiquitous beyond the United States as at home. The self-made man theme harmonized with the democratic aspirations of many of Lincoln's foreign admirers. It also personified the miraculous economic growth of nineteenth century America. What gave Lincoln special power was the way he served as an example of how the interests of the individual, self-improving laborer could be congruent with, indeed inseparable from, the larger development and modernization of a national economy. This view of Lincoln was most frequently articulated in places undergoing rapid economic development—Domingo Sarmiento's Argentina in the late 19th century, early twentieth century Japan, and, later, the independent Ghana of Kwame Nkrumah—where Lincoln served as hope or reassurance that the dislocating changes of economic modernization would benefit both the individual and the larger polity.

9 In the popular Lincoln narratives of this era emancipation and racial liberation are more often than not a lesser theme. Although his emancipationist record meant he could be deployed as an antislavery champion, more often this aspect of his achievement served as a symbolic element in the larger narrative of the hero of democratic freedom. When Irish separatists paid tribute to Lincoln for freeing the slaves it was to make a link with national liberation. German socialists, following the enthusiastic example of Karl Marx, tended to celebrate Lincoln the slave's liberator for his emancipation of a class, not a race. In Cuba, as in Brazil, Lincoln certainly featured in debates over abolition, but his predominant image there was that of the nation-builder, not the emancipator.

10 Lincoln's emancipationist record took on special significance for what it said about his humanitarianism, moral code, and religion, elements that led an early twentieth century Japanese biographer to deem him "the kindest man among the great men, and the greatest man among the kind men" (Õson Sakurai qtd. in De-min Tao, "A Standard of Our Thought and Action: Lincoln's Reception in East Asia" *Global Lincoln* 227). That Lincoln never in fact made a declaration of Christian belief—and that his celebration of reason made him the hero of secularists—was no barrier to his widespread representation as a Man of Faith. In Britain in particular, Lincoln the foe of slavery (as well as the abstainer from alcohol and tobacco) won a place in the hearts and minds of pious, reform-driven, Protestant church-goers. The members of the predominating Nonconformist traditions in Wales, many of whom would have read and re-read Uncle Tom's Cabin in their native tongue, and who championed teetotalism, saluted Lincoln for his religious devotion. This was a reading strengthened by the circumstances of his death. Booth's bullet created a sacrificial figure, a martyr who died to bring an end to the suffering of others, a composite of Moses and the redemptive Christ, whose Good Friday Passion he shared. For Emilio Castelar he was a "new Moses" removed "in the very moment of his victory, like Christ, like Socrates, like all redeemers" (Carolyn Boyd, "A Man for All Seasons: Lincoln in Spain" *Global Lincoln* 11); French Masons regarded him as "the sublimest martyr […] who came into the world, like Jesus of Bethlehem, to take away its sins"; Garibaldi yoked them as the two transformational giants of history; Lincoln's martyrdom spoke directly to the Christianized westerners of Meiji Japan (see Carwardine and Sexton, *Global Lincoln* 3–27).

11 In many readings, Lincoln the gentle humanitarian accompanied the forceful, resolute defender of constitutionalism, and the strong-willed, unyielding nationalist. He spoke to the often profoundly religious elements within the forces of aspirational nationalism. But to uphold justice and the democratic principle, a leader might have to overcome his natural inclination for peace and learn the arts of war. Germans, Irish, Italians, Slavs: all these, and more, found in Lincoln a supreme model of robustness in defending the principle of national unity. Indomitable, manly, physically and morally strong, Lincoln evinced a firmness of purpose that took him to the edge of constitutional legitimacy, but whose natural prudence would let him travel no further. Conscription, the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, and the American Union's other war measures had not spilled over into despotism; popular opinion had been respected. Lincoln became the epitome of the firm, prudent, and moderate war leader. No one expressed this better than David Lloyd George, by no means the only national leader to see himself in Lincolnian terms. The British Prime Minister during the First World War and its aftermath prized the sixteenth president as a model of civilian but strong leadership, dealing with troublesome generals and politicians, mastering military strategy, pursued unconditional surrender in the supreme crisis of the

nation, and finally, in victory, worked for clemency and reconciliation.

12 In emphasizing Lincoln's genealogical roots in rural Norfolk—"He belongs to the Race […] as a man of pure English blood," claimed James Bryce in 1918—his English admirers constituted only one of many sets of claimants around the world (Brittain 289). In Wales he was called "our Welsh president," descended from medieval princes. Germans—finding a 'Linkhorn' amongst his ancestors, and convinced that German immigrants played an essential role in securing the Republican party's electoral success in 1860—made him one of them; Friedrich Ebert, the first president of the Weimar Republic, became in death "the Abraham Lincoln of German history." French Freemasons claimed him as "one who had handled the hammer, the square, and compass, the living insignia of our immortal society," and saw in his life story a progression through degrees of Masonry. Such disparate appropriations reflect the adaptable dimensions of Lincoln's thought and how taking on Lincoln's mantle was seen to confer power (Carwardine and Sexton, *Global Lincoln* 12).

## Cultural Symbol and Ideological Reference

13 Lincoln's impact on the world beyond his nation's borders would never again enjoy quite the range and force that it achieved during the half century or so after his death. Yet his versatility as a cultural symbol and point of ideological reference during the rest of "the American century" meant that he continued to be appropriated, and would enjoy a new salience during the Second World War and the subsequent era of anti-colonialism and Cold War hostilities. During the 1940s the British political class turned once more to his words, especially the Gettysburg Address, to give Anglo-American expression to the fight for democracy and humanity. In Germany, too, during the post-war era, West Berliners linked their cause to a narrative of United States history that deployed Lincoln as a symbol of anticommunism and self-determination. "The truths which Lincoln spoke […]" in his House Divided speech of 1858, West Berlin Mayor Willy Brandt declared a century later (the speech in which Lincoln used the Christian gospel to assert that a Union divided between slave and free could not permanently stand), "are perhaps even more applicable to the present situation of the German people than to the one which he faced" (Carwardine and Sexton, *Global Lincoln* 12–13). Lincoln also came to be deployed in parts of the globe where he had once been a less familiar presence. In the "new birth of freedom" that followed the fall of the Axis powers, the anti-colonialist movements to establish independent countries in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean appropriated Lincoln as both an exemplar of freedom and a national unifier. The ambiguities in the "real" Lincoln's historical actions, as both liberator and consolidator, allowed his deployment in these incongruent ways (Kevin Gaines, "From Colonization to Anti-Colonialism: Lincoln in Africa, *Global Lincoln* 265).

14 Although Lincoln's influence on the larger global processes of the modern age cannot be precisely calibrated, he must be accorded a major inspirational role in the era of liberal and democratic nationalism. Lincoln's central role in the construction of the modern American nation, one premised not upon racial identity or state's rights, but upon a more inclusive idea of common peoples joined by democratic and civic principles, has constituted the core of his appeal abroad, combined as it has been with his standing as the premier self-made man of the age. Lincoln embodied the key features of "modernity": the entwined processes of economic development and self-improvement, signaled by the expansion of the capitalist market, the assault on ancestral privilege, and the widening of life-chances as individuals freed themselves from hierarchies of ascribed status. As a self-made man from humble origins, Lincoln stood for the dignity of labour; as statesman and war leader, he embraced the modernization of a national economy. Without these larger forces at work in the wider world it is doubtful that Lincoln would have had lasting impact beyond his own country. But America's inter-connectedness with the broader currents of his time delivered that expansive arena of influence. In spare and memorable language fit for the modern age, he spoke directly during his own lifetime and beyond to those around the globe who saw themselves engaged in freeing the present from an ossified past and who looked, as Lincoln himself did, to "a vast future also" (Carwardine and Sexton, *Global Lincoln* 37).

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