

# Land of Lincoln: The Teaching of an Historical Icon at the University of Illinois, 2009

by Jason Hansen

**The celebrations of the 2009 Lincoln Bicentennial revealed the continuing struggle to separate the man from the myth. Lincoln, who has long become an icon of popular culture, as a subject for teaching thus challenges teachers and students alike to divorce the historical figure from his cultural representation(s), which tends to push from view the complexities of his character and his age.**

- 1 The scene opens with Lincoln seated behind a desk. He begins to speak: “A man watches his pear-tree day after day, impatient for the ripening of the fruit. Let him attempt to force the process, and he may spoil both fruit and tree. But let him patiently wait, and the ripe pear at length falls into his lap.” Trembling, the man who has come to meet with Lincoln suggests that the time has come to end their mutual agreement. Incredulous, Lincoln responds in an ominous voice: “You wish secession [...] from me?” In a flash, Lincoln teleports behind the man, bites him on the neck and kills him, adding disapprovingly that “[i]t is better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open one’s mouth and remove all doubt.”
- 2 The scene described above is obviously not an historical one; rather, it comes from the 2008 film *The Transient* produced by University of Illinois undergraduates. The film is a 1980s horror spoof that tells the story of “vampire Lincoln,” a resurrected version of the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States who must suck the blood of four score and seven virgins in one fortnight to become human (and President) again.
- 3 Despite the wildness of this plot, the film does retain some elements of historical realism. Much of vampire Lincoln’s dialogue is drawn from his actual letters and speeches, and the main character is played by Michael Krebs, a professional re-enactor who portrayed Lincoln for the opening of the Lincoln Museum and Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois.
- 4 I begin this discussion about the teaching of Lincoln and the bicentennial by talking about this bizarre film as a means of highlighting the widespread cultural resonance the image of Lincoln has achieved one and half centuries after his death. In American popular culture, Lincoln appears in a variety of roles and contexts: as both blood-thirsty vampire and as vampire killer in the 2010 novel by Seth Grahame-Smith; as a crazy pro-wrestler in a 2009 diet soda commercial; as a friendly historical figure in the 1989 film *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*; and, of course, as the dominant hero or role model for both political parties during the 2008 election.
- 5 His image is everywhere: on Illinois state license plates, on coins and bank notes, and even etched into terracotta on the very walls of certain classrooms at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (Lincoln Hall). Students from across the state are exposed to him at a young age through school trips to the Lincoln museum in Springfield, and meet his visage in local attractions and businesses such as the Lincoln Lodge or the Lincoln Diner. How, then, it must be asked, does one “teach Lincoln” in such an environment, where Lincoln the historical figure must constantly engage with so many cultural competitors? How do we balance between teaching Lincoln the man and Lincoln the myth, of satisfying students’ demand for all things Lincoln without presenting history as just the story of “great men?” This article reflects on these key questions through an examination of the celebration of the 2009 Lincoln Bicentennial, including my own experiences as an instructor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

## Shaping Collective Memory

- 6 To begin with, it is worth noting the heavy hand of the state in celebrating the bicentennial, which reinforced the symbolic perception of Lincoln as the best reflection of American nationalism. As the co-chairs of the congressionally-funded Lincoln Bicentennial Commission noted, celebrations of Lincoln were meant to remember his heroic accomplishments in a way that would “enlighten and inspire us both today and tomorrow.” The past was not to be recalled with an eye towards revealing its complexities, but quite the opposite, would be simplified and caricatured in order to meet the demands of the present. In the words of the Commission the goal was to “better light the way to our future” (Butterfield).
- 7 The activities undertaken by the Commission to celebrate the bicentennial unsurprisingly then followed a traditional blueprint for shaping collective memory. There were, of course, a range of Lincoln-related cultural festivals and activities such as the 2009 rededication of the Lincoln Memorial, which featured appearances by prominent politicians and military bands. At these events speakers tied together the Lincoln legacy with contemporary news stories, framing an historical narrative in which the spirit of Lincoln offered a solution for current social and political ills. At the laying of a memorial wreath for Lincoln’s 200<sup>th</sup> birthday in February 2009, for example, the poet Nikki Giovanni declared that in a time when racial inequality persisted and political corruption had recently been exposed in New York and in Illinois: “We come/at this moment/to renew and refurbish/the American vision/Of Abraham Lincoln,” almost as if the sacred memory of the 16<sup>th</sup> President could transcend time and once more save the Union from its contemporary moral dilemmas (Giovanni). So great was this “cult-of-Lincoln”-type atmosphere that the Bicentennial itself received its own ritual inauguration on Lincoln’s 199<sup>th</sup> birthday in Louisville, Kentucky.
- 8 Celebrations of the Bicentennial also included the production of all manner of symbolic representations of Lincoln, which once again drove home various aspects of the Lincoln mythology. The most prominent example of such material culture was the issue of four new Lincoln pennies by the U.S. Mint, which not only recalled the historical memory of Lincoln, but also marked the decision made as part of the initial wave of Lincoln-related commemorations in 1909 to make Lincoln the first American President to appear on a coin (the decision was highly controversial at the time, since the images stamped on coins had long been associated with representations of royalty).



Lincoln Bicentennial Pennies  
(<https://www.usmint.gov/kids/coinNews/cents/>)



- 9 Each penny featured a traditional symbol associated with the Lincoln legacy, designed to commemorate a particular phase of Lincoln’s life. Thus the log cabin simultaneously represented Lincoln’s Kentucky birth and his working-class roots; the image of Lincoln reading on a log next to an ax his Indiana roots and authenticity as both the “Rail-Splitter” and the “Self-Made-Man”; his portrait next to the state capital building in Springfield his Illinois period and dedication to public service; and finally the unfinished Capitol Building in Washington, DC, which showed his national legacy as the man who “completed” the Union by withstanding secession and abolishing slavery. That each of the personas portrayed on the coins is linked to the political legacy of a particular state was not accidental, but reflected a subtle tug-of-war that has gone on for more than a century between Kentucky, Illinois and Indiana over the Lincoln legacy.
- 10 Alongside these national efforts to construct or reaffirm Lincoln’s symbolic memory, a pronounced effort was also made at the local level to celebrate the bicentennial. Twenty-four states set up their own independent bicentennial commissions, which funded local Lincoln-related activities. In the state of Illinois, for example, the Illinois Lincoln Bicentennial Commission funded fourteen major projects in 2008, including a new Lincoln statue in Jonesboro, a Lincoln music contest at the Ravinia Festival in Chicago and the “Lincoln Road Scholars”—a group of Lincoln speakers who traveled to events around the state. The commission also supported a series of historical re-enactments such as the restaging of all of the [Lincoln-Douglas debates](#), a re-giving of Lincoln’s famous “House Divided Speech” in Springfield and even a recreation of Lincoln’s “historic” 1828 flatboat trip from Rockport, Indiana, to New Orleans, Louisiana. To encourage local innovation, the Commission even provided a list of 101 celebratory activities that had nothing to do with Lincoln, but which residents could ostensibly adapt for the bicentennial. This effort produced an enthusiastic response, with towns lining up to secure their share of Lincoln’s glory. There were Lincoln-themed art shows, the dedication of Lincoln-related buildings such as the Antebellum Home in Freeport, where Lincoln spent the night during an 1856 campaign trip, a Lincoln-inspired triathlon, and a 360 mile “Tour de Lincoln” that retraced the various stages of his life. So great was the appeal of Lincoln-related funding that the Galena History Museum—home to that “other” President from Illinois [Ulysses S. Grant](#)—even got into the act with its own exhibit and documentary film (for the debut on February 12, 2009 attendees were encouraged to dress in period attire and to celebrate Lincoln by eating free birthday-cake).
- 11 Most of these celebrations, like those practiced at the national level, continued to present Lincoln in a canonized form, treating historical episodes like the Lincoln-Douglas debates as quasi-religious events that connected the local population with Lincoln’s sacred legacy. Likewise, activities like cycling the mythical “Lincoln trail,” floating down the Mississippi river in a flat boat or attending a day camp that resembled an 1820s settlement had little to do with historical education, but were essentially forms of entertainment packaged as patriotic practice. In the end, the purpose of reliving the past was not to enlighten the public about the difficult issues its inhabitants faced—especially the nation’s, and Lincoln’s, difficult moral struggle with the issue of slavery, but was quite the opposite, to celebrate the triumph over these problems through the heroic and morally unambiguous figure of Lincoln.

## Historical Subject Versus National Symbol

- 12 In this environment of all things Lincoln, it is not surprising that the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign—the state’s leading public university—also developed into a self-described center of “bicentennial festivities.” Here public demand for knowledge about Lincoln collided with the scholarly responsibility to treat him more as an historical subject than national symbol. The result was a mixture of

both academic and cultural activities that used Lincoln as a selling point, but which also sought to provide historical context to familiar narratives such as Lincoln as the great man. There were, of course, a number of Lincoln-themed lectures offered by leading scholars such as James McPherson, James and Lois Horton, James Oakes and Robin Blackburn. The University's History Department also arranged for a series of teacher outreach workshops, and students in the Phi Alpha Theta honor society organized a Lincoln-themed film festival that examined the construction of Lincoln's memory within films such as John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939), John Cromwell's *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1940) and Lamont Johnson's *Gore Vidal's Lincoln* (1988).

- 13 Finally, the History Department also organized (with the help of the Illinois Lincoln Bicentennial Commission) two Lincoln-themed undergraduate seminars, which were designed to raise students' awareness of the constructed nature and use of Lincoln's memory. The first of these courses—"Myth, National Memory, and the United States in the Age of Lincoln"—examined the creation of the Lincoln mythology, adopting a critical view of Lincoln images found in film and print in the twentieth century. The second class—entitled "Lincoln, Visual Culture and Nation-Building"—focused on the use of Lincoln's image at cultural sites such as monuments, on coins and postage stamps to foster consensus notions of national identity at the end of the nineteenth century. In addition to an examination of both primary and secondary sources related to the creation of the Lincoln legacy, the class also made a special field trip to the Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield to examine the museum's construction and portrayal of Lincoln's image.
- 14 As the instructor for this second course, I must report that my experiences teaching Lincoln were somewhat mixed. The students—all of whom were senior undergraduates that were either history majors or minors—mastered the relevant elements of post-modern theory relatively easily, so that they quickly began to understand the symbolic value of objects like the penny, the Lincoln memorial and even the ritual behind Lincoln's 1865 funeral. Yet beneath this recognition of the crafted nature of Lincoln's image there remained an inherent tendency to drift back from questions of historical interpretation and context into a fixation on Lincoln's personal details. Did Lincoln ever actually see slavery in person? What would the nation have looked like if he had survived the war? For some Lincoln was more a celebrity than historical figure, leading them to fixate on the trivial and personal rather than his connections to broader political, social and economic trends of his era. Was Ann Rutledge really Mr. Lincoln's first love? Did he have a male lover? Awash in a sea of Lincoln memory, many students' historical curiosity moved from questions about Lincoln's era back to questions about the man himself.
- 15 This tendency was also reflected in their interest in the most controversial aspect of Lincoln's life (and indeed of his era's): the belief in biological notions of race, white superiority and slavery. For most students, Lincoln will always be the figure of the great emancipator, his imperfections hidden behind a caricature that portrays him as effectively an inhabitant of the 21st century. Likewise, it is simply incomprehensible to understand how someone like [John C. Calhoun](#) could have believed in the legitimacy of the institution of slavery. These southerners, it is often assumed, were vestiges of an older age, who like the French aristocracy after the Revolution were simply supposed to fade away as the country made the transition to a more democratic society.
- 16 Simply put then, it has been extraordinarily difficult to divorce the historical figure of Lincoln from his cultural representation(s), which tends to push from view the complexities of his character and his age. I find it difficult to blame the students for this, given their intense exposure to the symbolic and mythic representation of the sixteenth President. They are confronted on an almost daily basis with symbolic images of Lincoln—especially by the state and its political leadership, who use Lincoln as a civic tool to teach Americans what they should be, not what they actually have been. And yet, as an historian and an educator, it troubles me that students are conceptualizing the past as an unproblematic terrain, where historical problems and solutions seem so readily apparent and historical figures so morally unambiguous. These assumptions undermine the very foundation (and indeed necessity) of scholarly debate, and I would argue actually mitigate the civic value produced by using figures such as Lincoln as a pedagogic tool.

- 17 Where, then, does this leave us, especially with regard to Lincoln? I and my colleagues at the University of Illinois have found through our various experiences that the best solution to the problem of teaching Lincoln lies in a sustained effort to place Lincoln more clearly in his historical context, to use popular and academic events to mix gradation and nuance into the Lincoln story. We cannot overcome the sheer weight of the Lincoln myth overnight. But I believe that a long-term engagement by Lincoln scholars with these popular myths may produce better understanding and historical awareness among the student body. And ultimately—if I can say this without contradicting myself too much—I cannot help but feel that this is an approach the sixteenth President would approve of. After all, was it not Lincoln—real Lincoln, not Vampire Lincoln—who reminded us of the virtue of patience, to let the ripe pear fall into our lap?

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