

Crafty Lincoln and Honest Abe in the Media War: The Homespun Spin and the Question of Authorship

by Olivier Frayssé

One of the reasons why Lincoln failed to impress the European elites was that statesmen were expected to show a noble strength of purpose matched by a lofty style. He did not meet the criteria applicable to statesmen, who were expected to show strength of purpose and a personal style. Lack of appreciation of Lincoln's literary style and of his statesmanship went hand in hand. If, as the [Comte de Buffon](#) had it, "the style is the man himself," the early reports of his dress, appearance and manners and the later reception of the style of his speeches and writings reinforced this unfavorable view. This failure to take the proper measure of the man includes ignorance of how his unique style, forged in the crucible of conflict, reflected a relentless quest for authorship that matched his relentless ambition for leadership.

- 1 European perceptions of Lincoln as writer really started with the reception of his Emancipation Proclamation. Tongue-lashing the "English Pindars of slavery, the *Times*, the *Saturday Review* and tutti quanti" that criticized its aesthetics and noticing the contrast with "the drapery in which the Frenchman envelops even the most unimportant point" (*Marx/Engels* 19: 248, Blackburn 200), Marx, an admirer of the U.S. and a staunch supporter of the North, was right to single out Lincoln's style in that terse document as something out of the ordinary. What Marx failed to see, for lack of knowledge about Lincoln and most of his earlier writings, was the extent to which this text, so unlike many other Lincoln writings in form, was yet idiosyncratically Lincolnesque in the way the U.S. president was putting a spin of his own on the issues. When it comes to style, the "French theory" born from Foucault and Barthes, and which has had global appeal, has fought hard to explain the author away from the texts. Ironically, this French student of Lincoln as politician and writer has never been less impressed by the "French theory" than when reading Lincoln's texts. Although a large literature on Lincoln's style has been developed since the 1990s,^[1] a full discussion of Lincoln's rhetorical strategy and tactics still remains to be written, and this paper is also an attempt to chart some of the territory it might cover.

Lincoln as Master of Spin and Media Expert

- 2 Lincoln was first and foremost a politician, and his primary concern with his speeches and writings was their effect on his audiences, his ability to put a spin on public debate. His main rhetorical training came through his practice of the law in court. The purpose of spin is to shape the public's mind by focusing it, forcing some issues to the forefront and burying others six feet under. It is pure strategy: choosing the ground on which the battle is to be fought.
- 3 The word 'spin' was coined in the 1970s when permanent control of the public's mind had become essential in permanent campaigns, watched by round-the-clock media, but it does apply to Lincoln's law practice and politics. An excellent negative definition of spin is to be found in Lincoln's letter to [Usher F. Linder](#) of February 20, 1848: "In law it is good policy to never *plead* what you *need* not, lest you oblige yourself to *prove* what you *can* not (*Collected Works* 1: 453)." [Leonard Swett](#)'s description of his friend Lincoln's method as a lawyer in a letter to [William H. Herndon](#) dated January 17, 1866 also points to the fundamentals of Lincoln's communication strategy: "His mode and force of argument was in stating how he had reasoned on the subject, and how he had come to his conclusion, rather than original argument to the hearer, and as the mind of the listener followed in the groove of his mind, his conclusions were adopted (Wilson 168)." Lincoln's ability to put a spin on debates took various tactical forms in the course of his career, from the adversarial and corrosive to the ecumenical and poetic.

- 4 To be able to use spin outside the courtroom, defining issues narrowly and leading millions in the grooves of your mind, you need to have some measure of control over the media by which issues are presented to the public. Lincoln was a connoisseur of the media. From his early political days on, he had known how to ingratiate himself with the local Whig paper and use it as a platform to rebut the opposite party's organ. He made sure his arguments were properly presented to the readers of his speeches, maintaining close links with the then fiercely partisan newspapers, writing and shadow-writing articles and letters, editing and proof-reading reports of his speeches.
- 5 As candidate and president, he grew even more painfully aware of the power of the press, which was indeed becoming a fourth estate in the U.S. as parties either crumbled or seethed with rivalry, to help him or hinder him. When he angrily denounced the "constant eulogizing" of Douglas by [Horace Greeley's](#) *New York Tribune* in a letter to Lyman Trumbull of December 28, 1857 (*Collected Works* 2: 2 430), he had understood that the press had truly become a media, not a means, and started hiring journalists, the Hays, Nicolays and Stoddards that were the first press managers of the presidential office and put to use the skills of journalists Simon P. Hanscom and Noah Brooks (Burlingame xxii, Holzer 242–45, 415, 449–50). His policy speeches now were few and far between. Each of them was designed to focus attention on the issues he deemed vital. He set the tone, designed the talking points, and let his political friends and secretary-journalists handle the follow up.

Lincoln's Forms of Spin

- 6 Lincoln's formative years were marked by conflict. The [Era of Good Feelings](#) was over, partisan politics were bitter, feeding on conflicts of interests between farmers, squatters, speculators, banks, town promoters and public works entrepreneurs. The first part of his career, before 1854, was dominated by this particular culture of conflict, which was also in tune with the adversarial nature of U.S. legal procedures. No wonder he developed, alongside the argumentative and logical, of which the enthymeme is emblematic, an adversarial style of political rhetoric in the figures of thought he employed. Prolepsis was a favorite, together with concession, irony, litotes, prosopopœia, and even *categoria* or *ad hominem* arguments, and they were sustained by figures of speech like repetition and climax. In this type of rhetoric, the emphasis is on the grounds for disagreement, which must be carefully isolated from the grounds for agreement, and harped upon. The success of the enterprise depends on how well you relate to your audience, and Lincoln was in tune with his until 1848, and after 1854.
- 7 In a predominantly Democratic state, the man who was to become the "Lone Whig of Illinois" in Congress was evidencing courage and independence by aligning with the minority party and upholding the rule of law against Jacksonian experiments. Reverence for the laws, as Aristotle pointed out, is the best way of building the ethos of a free man. The Republic was for Lincoln the silver picture for the golden apple of liberty. But Whiggism was also providing opportunities to distance oneself from the masses in practical terms: wheeling and dealing like others to advance special interests in the legislature, sneaking and eventually marrying into the elite, and soon enough discovering that "politicians [are] a set of men who have interests aside from the interests of the people," a point of view his constituents were later to adopt in his regard twice (*Collected Works* 1: 65–66).
- 8 Indeed, Lincoln twice moved away from his constituency, to the point of losing touch with it: In his later years in the Illinois legislature, when he became identified with the grandiose plans for internal improvements in Illinois that resulted in a fiasco when the panic of 1837 hit the state, and in his two-year term in Congress. The [spot resolutions](#) he offered in 1848 as a Congressman were designed to help him climb up the Washington ladder, the modern Rome's *cursus honorum*, but proceeded from a misjudgment of his constituents' feelings about the war. Precisely because the spot resolutions were out of touch with political realities, they are emblematic of Lincoln's rhetorical training and his conception of spin.
- 9 Lincoln chose to stake his political fortunes on the type of adversarial rhetoric he had perfected, challenging the constitutionality of the U.S.-Mexican War (1846–1848) in his spot resolutions of December 22, 1847 (*Collected Works* 3: 420–22). His point was that the war had been started on

Mexican soil; the spot where the first battle had taken place was the only thing he cared to discuss, and he pressed the [Polk](#) administration with questions about that precise spot, using *epimone*, the unrelenting repetition of questions. The speech encapsulated everything Lincoln had worked on: a frontal attack, here on a national figure whose stature elevated the opponent, the president of the United States, and the strategy of focusing the attention on one single, divisive issue. Unfortunately, his speech did not make any sense to the many exalted patriots or to the few antislavery faithful in Illinois since he eschewed the issue of nationalism and that of slavery. And he almost retired from politics, until the issue of the extension of slavery revived his interest.

- 10 The rhetorical training he had obtained as a Whig served him beautifully as a Republican, in the second part of his career, that of a crusader against the extension of slavery, which was made possible by the [Kansas Nebraska Act](#) of 1854 that allowed settlers of a territory to decide whether slavery would be allowed within a new state's borders. He positioned himself against the Democratic sponsor of the Act, Senator [Stephen A. Douglas](#) and more subtly against Republican [William H. Seward](#). Lincoln pinned down both his opponent and his rival on the issue of the legitimacy of the extension of slavery, both moral and constitutional. Douglas was not interested in legitimacy, while Seward found it in a higher law than the constitution. And they lost, because the question of legitimacy was resonating with Northern audiences, who sensed that the conflict was inevitable and wanted to be assured that they were on the side of the angels, the good side, that of accepted truths and revered precedents and also needed to be told that not much was required to resolve the dispute, just a return to the status quo ante the Kansas Nebraska Act of 1854, a return to the spirit of the [Missouri Compromise](#).
- 11 As president, Lincoln had to forgo adversarial rhetoric but remained a master of spin. His first Inaugural Address delivered on March 4, 1861 revolved around the great question Americans were asking themselves: What will the president do with the Secession? By that time, seven southern states had seceded from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America: South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas. Lincoln's answer was to deny Secession legitimacy, through a long argument "deducted from principles" and that: "The power confided to me will be used to hold, occupy, and possess the property and places belonging to the Government and to collect the duties and imposts; but beyond what may be necessary for these objects, there will be no invasion, no using of force against or among the people anywhere." (*Collected Works* 3: 265–66). To rally the North and divide the South, he had chosen his familiar tactic of narrowing the issue; he even identified the spot where the Rubicon was to be crossed, [Fort Sumter](#), a federal facility located in Charleston harbor, South Carolina. The South was not moved by the sugar-coating that ended the piece (Mitgang 240–48). Whether Lincoln really thought the appeasing rhetoric of the "mystic chords of memory" would be effective, is an open question. But what is undeniable is that poetry was making its entry into Lincoln's public discourse. His pointing to the past held a promise of the future, which was entrusted to him. And his use of the parembolic "I am loth to close" established a poetic conversation with America that continued throughout the war.
- 12 The second question, after the war started, was what to do with slavery. This was a question that took more time and effort for Lincoln had to educate himself and then the public on the issue. The central issue of property rights and his constitutional powers to deal with them was not clear to him for a long time. The terse wording of the preliminary proclamation and the lawyerly language, which elicited the above-mentioned stylistic judgments in Europe, were another example of spin, narrowing the issue to a military necessity and using an appropriate bureaucratic lexicon. The additions to the preliminary proclamation of September 22, 1862 in the Emancipation Proclamation issued on January 1, 1863, including the appeal to "the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity" reconnected the bold act to the presidential narrative, with a little help from Seward (*Collected Works* 6: 30). The Gettysburg Address delivered on November 19, 1863 (*Collected Works* 7: 23) put the spin on the broader issue of democratic principles as the founding elements of legitimacy, paving the way for the solution to the last issue, that of Reconstruction. The President's second Inaugural Address delivered on March 4, 1865, built on this definition in the characteristic humble and conciliating Lincoln

vein, the central point being “with firmness in the right” safely ensconced between the two placating phrases, “with malice toward none, and charity for all” and “as God gives us to see the right” (*Collected Works* 8: 33).

- 13 Whether adversarial and or ecumenical in his tactics, Lincoln always stuck to his spin strategy. The major difference with modern-day spin doctors was twofold: Lincoln never cajoled public opinion, and he never let others define the talking points for him. This leads us to a central characteristic of Lincoln’s personality, his quest for authorship.

Lincoln’s Quest for Authorship

- 14 What Lincoln spun was of his own making. He did not say anything he did not find to be right and true after careful deliberation. He did not try to create emotions he did not feel in himself, and only felt strongly about things that he had thought about thoroughly: “The object must first come in the guise of a principle, next it must be right and true—then is was lovely in his sight”, Herndon wrote about his law partner (Herndon 3: 601). In that sense, he was honest, and the spin was indeed homespun. This trait came from a quest for freedom, which is well-documented: his early leaving of his father’s home, his struggle against poverty, his rejection of religious dogma, his escape from the narrowness of rural life, his difficulty in observing conventions, his knack for wiggling his way out of constraints, including roll-calls and marriage, everything points to an individual who wanted to escape his condition and be free.
- 15 His quest for freedom indeed started as a pursuit of authorship of his own thoughts as expressed in words, authorship of his logos, which could only come from a painstaking personal search for the truth. Behind Lincoln the public writer and orator, there is Lincoln the silent, meditative reader and enquirer. Here and there in the *Collected Works*, we find pieces that the editors entitled “fragments” or “meditations”, ranging from the tariff to the divine will. How many of these fragments have been discarded or lost? What is left shows how much time and effort Lincoln spent trying to make up his mind independently.
- 16 The first Lincoln text that has been preserved, written when he was a teenager, illustrates his yearning for authorship, with his signature as introduction:

Abraham Lincoln
his hand and pen
he will be good
but god knows When
(*Collected Works* 1: 1)

- 17 Lincoln was to define writing as the most important human invention. He can also be defined as primarily an author, not just a writer. He always acknowledged his literary debt to his forebears and kept finding inspiration in the Bible, Shakespeare and lesser authorities. He practiced imitation as a learning tool, from Reuben’s Chronicles (1 Chron. 5) to later pastiches and made an extensive use of scrapbooks, but his style was always his own. As the war dragged on and he had to go much further in his conduct of the war than he ever contemplated, Lincoln found himself the author of actual emancipation, of the cruelest war ever waged in the country, of the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, of pardons granted and refused. His authorship of events, always elusive, became utterly mysterious, and he looked for another Author, albeit indecipherable, to account for the revolution that was going on in himself and by his own hand and pen.
- 18 The immensity of his accomplishment could not but humble the man. In his second Inaugural Address, he completely disappeared behind God and the “we” that appeared at Gettysburg. But here again, it was only through his own, painstaking deliberation that Lincoln reached the conclusion that his self did not matter—one more act of authorship.

Note

[1] Among historians, it started in 1992 with Garry Wills's Pulitzer prize winning *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America*, continued with Howard Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech that Made Abraham Lincoln President*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002; Ronald C. White, Jr., *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002; Gabor S. Borrit, *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech That Nobody Knows*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2006; Douglas L. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words*, New York, Vintage, 2007. Lois J. Einhorn, *Abraham Lincoln, the Orator: Penetrating the Lincoln Legend*, also published in 1992 (by Greenwood Press), signals the entry of professional literary scholars in the field. Michael Leff edited a special issue of *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* devoted to Lincoln in 2000. The latest notable effort, by Fred Kaplan (*Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer*, New York: Harper Collins, 2008), makes a strong case for Lincoln the reader and writer and could spawn a whole generation of intertextual researchers.

Works Cited

Blackburn, Robin. *An Unfinished Revolution: Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln*. London and New York: Verso, 2011. Print. Burlingame, Michael, ed. *Lincoln's Journalist: John Hay's Anonymous Writings for the Press, 1860–1864*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2006. Print.

The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln. Ed. Roy P. Basler, asst. eds. Marion Dolores Pratt and Lloyd A. Dunlap. 8 vols. New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers UP, 1953. Print.

Herndon, William H., and Jesse Weik. *Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life*, 3 vols. Chicago: Bedford, Clarke, 1889. Print.

Holzer, Harold. *Lincoln and the Power of the Press: The War for Public Opinion*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014. Print.

Marx/Engels Collected Works. 50 vols. Moscow: Progress Publishers; London: Lawrence & Wishart; New York: International Publishers, 1975–2004.

Mitgang, Herbert. *Abraham Lincoln: A Press Portrait*. New York: Fordham UP, 2000. Print.

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

Author

Olivier Frayssé is Professor of Language, Literature and Civilization of Anglophone countries at Paris Sorbonne University. He has published extensively on U.S. history and culture, notably on Lincoln: *Lincoln, Land and Labor, 1809-1860*, transl. Sylvia Neeley, Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1994.

Suggested Citation

Frayssé, Olivier. "Crafty Lincoln and Honest Abe in the Media War: The Homespun Spin and the Question of Authorship." *American Studies Journal* 60 (2016). Web. 29 May 2016. DOI 10.18422/60-11.

