

Rendering Unto Lincoln

“Now he belongs to the ages,” Edwin Stanton is supposed to have said, when he learned of President Lincoln’s death. In a trivial sense at least, Stanton was obviously correct. We have Lincoln’s face on the five-dollar bill—a bill that used to be worth more than a Happy Meal, before Lincoln’s disciples degraded the currency—and his grandiose monument in Washington, with a grotesque statue by the Transcendentalist sculptor-politician Daniel Chester French. We even used to celebrate Lincoln’s birthday as a federal holiday, but, now that there is no god but the 14th Amendment and Martin Luther King, Jr., is its prophet, poor Lincoln’s stock has sunk so low that he is lumped together with Millard Fillmore, U.S. Grant, Warren Harding, and Jimmy Carter—those paragons of American political life—in a generic Presidents Day, whose very name suggests that Americans are determined to forget their past. Why not an “American Patriotic Holidays Day” or a “World Religions Day”? I shudder to make this joke, knowing that this is a country where all bad jokes come true. (Did you catch the inauguration ceremony on television?)

In a deeper sense, though, the Lincoln years and their legacy represent the most significant revolution that the United States have undergone. We went from being a confederation of republics that minded their own business, and permitted farmers, merchants, and manufacturers to mind theirs, to a global empire run by stockjobbers, moneychangers, and Transcendentalist do-gooders, a Leviathan with wings that is forever busybodying at home and abroad. From a fairly homogeneous ethnic base—a British core with Northern European accretions—we have morphed into a multiethnic, multilingual, multicultural population in which no one, not even descendants of the oldest stock, knows or cares who he is. Leftists now rejoice that the White House will be presided over by someone whose middle name is Hussein and actually run by someone whose middle name is Israel. What a wicked country this was, when we had to be content with people named Washington, Adams, and Jefferson!

No sensible person can deny the reality of the transformation nor the fact that its first phase coincided with Lincoln’s administrations and those of his heirs and successors. James McPherson and other leftists exult in the revolution, while M.E. Bradford deplored it, but neither doubted that it happened. But how fair is it to blame Lincoln personally for what happened? Many of Lincoln’s cronies would have been puzzled by the allegation that the man they knew as a railroad lawyer and courthouse politician could have staged a revolution. Edwin Stanton, Lincoln’s dicta-

torial secretary of war who breathed the spirit of martial law against any and all opposition, might be imagined to have admired a President whose arbitrary ways and contempt for the Constitution gave him so much power, but Stanton’s early attitude toward Lincoln was little short of contempt, and, while he succeeded in overcoming—or at least concealing—his distaste, he and his boss were frequently at loggerheads. Like some other prominent players in Lincoln’s government (W.H. Seward, Salmon P. Chase, and Charles Francis Adams, Sr.), Stanton probably did not think Lincoln was up to the job. Adams, leaving the country to take up his duties as ambassador to England, tried to interest the President in his sensitive mission but could not distract him from his absorption in “the distribution of offices.” Over a decade after Lincoln’s assassination, he still recalled the “moral, intellectual, and executive incompetency” displayed by Lincoln upon taking office.

In more recent years both Samuel Francis and David Donald (Lincoln’s most respectable apologist) have described an office-seeking money-grubbing politician who blundered his way into revolution. I am inclined to agree with them, though with this caveat: A man who pursues and attains an office for which he is unfit must bear the moral blame for the disasters that ensue.

If Lincoln’s primary fault was that mixture of ambition and incompetence that has characterized American politicians ever since, he was also a romantic who regarded himself as a Napoleonic character destined for greatness. Indulging in what David Donald calls “a rare moment of self-revelation,” Lincoln denigrated the petty politicians who would be content with a seat in Congress: “Such belong not to the family of the lion or the tribe of the eagle.” Routine honors would not satisfy “an Alexander, a Caesar, or a Napoleon”: “Towering genius disdains a beaten path. . . . It thirsts and burns for distinction; and if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves or enslaving free men.” Though we may question whether he did much to run up the former of these expenses, there can be no doubt about the latter.

Whatever conclusion one may come to about Lincoln’s personal responsibility for the revolution that has transformed America in the past century and a half, we can, at least, evaluate the influence of his rhetoric. As the late



M.E. Bradford has shown, Lincoln, although a religious skeptic, cloaked his political agenda in a lofty religious language that tended to elevate politics above the mundane give and take of interests that found a nearly perfect expression in the Constitution. Setting aside that document, with its nice adjustment of checks and balances, its weighing of sectional and economic interests, its aspirations toward more perfect union muted by its respect for local peculiarities, Lincoln spoke of the Union with the mystical reverence that Christians reserve for the Holy Ghost. Before he came along, Yankee politicians like Daniel Webster had been purely pragmatic in overstating American unity: It was simply a canny means of advancing their own sectional interest, and thus, when they found themselves checked by opposition from the West and South, they were perfectly willing to compromise.

Lincoln and the other post-Christian Unionists, however, are a different story altogether. Invoking the Old Testament's God of Battles, they sang "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah" as they sent 600,000 American soldiers and perhaps twice as many noncombatants (most of them black) to their graves. Some years ago, when I was debating Lincoln's legacy, a graduate student asked if I did not think the war that freed the slaves was worth the cost. He was actually shocked that I did not think that hundreds of thousands of dead slaves would have agreed with him.

Lincoln was not an original political mind, and his rhetoric is an echo of the French Jacobin who treated mass murder as the noblest part of statecraft. It is in the French Revolution and its aftershocks that ideology began to take the place of religion as the formative rhetoric of Europe and North America. It hardly matters whether that rhetoric is nationalist—the Jacobins, too, celebrated *la patrie*—or globalist, communist, fascist, or democratist. In an ideological regime the citizens are called upon to sacrifice their private interests and the interests of family and friends to some magnificent abstraction like "liberty, equality, and fraternity," the "glorious Union," the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Aryan race, or the fascist republic of Italy. To be fair to the Italian Fascists, they were, perhaps, the least dedicated and (if one overlooks their North African adventures) the least bloodthirsty of ideologues.

Like Lincoln, Robespierre and St.-Just, Lenin and Stalin, and Hitler and Mussolini were anything but Christian, and it is the rejection of Christianity that is the hallmark of modern ideology. Despite recent attempts—as futile as they are foolish—to blame the horrors of modern war on Christianity, the plain truth is that most of these horrors, from the French to the Russian Revolution, from Abraham Lincoln to Pol Pot, were perpetrated by post-Christians, non-Christians, and anti-Christians. This is not because a cross around the neck is some kind of magic talisman that cures the wearer of the Old Adam's tendency to act like a rogue gorilla. Men have learned to behave with some restraint in both pre-Christian and Christian societies, but as Europeans and Americans gave up the

Faith, they transferred Christian rhetoric about the Kingdom of God and the Millennium to the political sphere. That is where Robespierre and Marx, Lincoln and John Brown come in.

Here is one great difference between traditional commonwealths—whether republics, empires, or monarchies—and the modern ideological state. In ancient Athens or Rome, in medieval France or England, the ruling class interfered rather little in religion. Yes, as part of a program to gain their citizens' loyalty, Pericles and Augustus instrumentalized traditional cults, and, yes, medieval emperors and kings, in attempting to unify their realms, struggled with popes over the investiture of bishops. But it was the rare ruler (a few theology-crazed Byzantines) who either innovated in theology or interfered in religious practices. During and after the Renaissance, kings and their apologists might speak of "the divine right of kings" and assume the power to make their country either Catholic or Protestant, but even John Knox's Scotland is a very long way from that American ruling class that makes war on the religion we have inherited from our ancestors and insists that we worship the state and its "commander in chief."

The hallmark of the Lincoln regime was not the war crimes perpetrated by Sherman, Grant, and Sheridan (among so many other gallant officers who made war on civilians) but Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase's decision to impose paper money as legal tender and to print the words "IN GOD WE TRUST" on coins. What a world of hypocrisy and idolatry lies in that single act and that little phrase.

This was far from being the world's first experiment in fiat money. The bankrupt states of the Union had tried to cheat themselves out of their debts by issuing banknotes and scrip, and the geniuses of the French National Assembly, even as they were beginning their revolt against civilization, issued large-denomination paper notes known as *assignats*. Initially, these notes were backed by parcels of land the assembly confiscated from the Church, but the temporary success of this experiment encouraged these noble dilettantes and small-town lawyers to repeat and broaden the project. The result was entirely predictable: inflation and financial chaos. Of course, our own financial geniuses know better, which is why the Fed has decided that part of the solution to our current crisis is to print lots and lots more money.

When Our Lord, on a famous occasion, was questioned whether Jews should pay taxes to the empire, He asked to see a coin. Pointing to the face on the coin, He told His mockers to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." In those days, Caesar's things were made of solid metal, and neither Jesus nor Tiberius would have confused the Roman Empire with the Kingdom of God. Salmon Chase should have known better—he seems to have been one of the few believers in Lincoln's Cabinet—but, in putting "IN GOD WE TRUST" on the coin that would one day bear Lincoln's image, he was actually telling us to worship the almighty dollar and the government that created that idol. ◊

Seneca Visits Athens

by Joseph O'Brien

For David Sweet

Ignoranti, quem portum petat, nullus suus ventus est.

The things the mind would touch prefer
That they should not be held;
Mine won't stop again to suffer
Cities it once beheld.

The mind is never subtle
But passes a hardened hand
Over ancient brick and rubble
That time grinds to sand.

Before this ruined marble heap
Of works and days undone,
These walls, note well, they did not keep
What Nike's deeds had won.

For all are dead and all is lost,
Nothing to remember,
No hero's grave to ask the cost
Of so much stone and timber.

One barren thought now thinks to speak.
My gaze—it rests upon
Designs which fixed time's cause to break
And call us all to question:

Did princes here, once counting gold
In tumbled over towers,
Die to see their golden means hold
Hands with foreign powers?