

Lawyers, Leadership, and Hope



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"I have never had a feeling, politically, that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence....It was...that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty not alone to the people of this country, but hope to all the world, for all future time."

—Abraham Lincoln, speech at Independence Hall, Philadelphia (February 22, 1861)

February 12, 2009, is the 200th anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, one of our country's greatest leaders. This year on Law Day, which falls on May 1, our nation will commemorate the life of Abraham Lincoln with the theme, "A Legacy of Liberty—Celebrating Lincoln's Bicentennial."

At a time when our country was facing one of its greatest crises, the Civil War, Lincoln not only provided great leadership, but also essential hope—hope that every individual would enjoy certain "unalienable Rights," including "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness," as set forth in the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln's dream was "of a place and a time when America will once again be seen as the last best hope of earth."

I do not know whether Lincoln ever contemplated that an African American would become president of the United States of America when he led the nation in freeing

the slaves, but I believe that Lincoln would have embraced the fact that the American people elected Barack Obama to be president. Whether one is an Independent, a Libertarian, a Democrat, or, as Lincoln was, a Republican, all Americans of whatever background or persuasion should be proud that we elected the first African-American president of the United States of America. Obama's election demonstrates that the ideals of freedom, equality, and liberty embodied in the Declaration and Constitution are not mere words, but, in fact, a way of life.

There are a number of similarities between Lincoln and Obama. Both men came out of nowhere to win their party's nomination and the presidency. Both men are or were lawyers. Both men appointed their rivals to their cabinets. Both men actively included in their administrations those who provided diverse views and opposing opinions, rather than "yes" people. And both men faced or face serious national challenges at the time of their presidencies: for Lincoln, a divided Union, slavery, and a Civil War; for Obama, a faltering economy and the war against terrorism, among other critical challenges.

Often, it is in crisis that true leadership emerges and hope springs. Lincoln proved himself to be a true leader. Obama has been given the opportunity to prove himself to be a true leader. In his book, *Toward a Meaningful Life*, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson wrote: "A true leader should be judged not by what he has, but by what he has not—ego, arrogance and self-interest. A true leader sees his work as a selfless service toward a higher purpose....When it comes time to take credit, he makes himself invisible; but he is the first to arrive at the time of need, and he will never shrink away in fear....A true leader wants nothing more than to give people pride, to make

people stand on their own, as leaders in their own right."

The fact that Lincoln was a lawyer and Obama is a lawyer is not merely an insignificant coincidence; lawyers have always been leaders and an integral part of protecting individual liberties and rights under the Constitution. By serving our clients' needs, no matter how mundane, we contribute daily to their quality of life, their liberty, and their pursuit of happiness. What we might learn from Lincoln is that courtesy, equality, humility, integrity, and conviction can go a long way toward providing the type of service that enhances the lives of others.

Law is a profession of service to others. But to Lincoln, service was more than blindly following clients' instructions. He saw lawyers as peacemakers. "Persuade your neighbors to compromise whenever you can. As a peacemaker the lawyer has superior opportunity of being a good man."¹ By encouraging our clients to compromise, as Lincoln did, we can offer a greater opportunity for resolution of disputes. As Lincoln wrote: "I have no other [ambition] so great as that of being truly esteemed of [sic] my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem." Let's all resolve to follow Lincoln's example and make ourselves worthy of others' esteem. In the words of another great leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Life's most persistent and urgent question is 'What are you doing for others?'" What better way to show our leadership and inspire esteem than by practicing our noble profession and instilling hope to those in need. ■

FOOTNOTE

1. When referring to lawyers, Lincoln spoke using only the masculine connotation, which was a reflection of the composition of the bar at his time. Presumably, with his views toward equality, if Lincoln were alive today, he would have included women attorneys in his references and used gender-neutral terminology.