

Obama, Lincoln and 2008: The Mobilization of Memory
In Contemporary American Politics¹

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The recent campaign, election, and inauguration of President Barack Obama included repeated references to the person and presidency of Abraham Lincoln. These references took the form of analogies between the two men, images associating one with the other, historical analyses, tributes to Lincoln, and ceremonial gestures. They became pervasive enough to capture the attention of political commentators and have come to constitute what might be termed the “Lincoln-Obama phenomenon.” Some have found the phenomenon excessive, a misuse of history, and/or indicative of the new president’s ego. While I share a few of their misgivings, as a scholar interested in how historical memory gets put to use in American politics, I believe the phenomenon’s significance lies, first of all, in the fact that it marks an unprecedented mobilization of collective memory in American politics: although Barack Obama may have initiated much of the discourse that makes up the Lincoln-Obama phenomenon, it has been a group effort, furthered and sustained by a wide variety of cultural producers, ranging from the media to “ordinary folk.” It has also appealed to certain collective memories of who Abraham Lincoln was and of his meaning to American history.

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This mobilization of memory has also had more practical consequences including the recovery of history by the Democratic Party and the recovery of Lincoln from the margins of mainstream political discourse. Over the past several years commentators on the left have bemoaned the left's lack of effective vision—as articulated in political speechmaking—and the right's near monopoly on inspirational political rhetoric. Barack Obama's soaring oratory changed all that, as we know, and an important part of his rhetorical success stemmed from his inspiring invocation of America's past, present, and future destiny. This invocation, in turn, relied upon effective appeals to selected historical memories of the nation's past. At the same time, the left's renewal of its historical vision helped return Abraham Lincoln from the commemorative sidelines. While Lincoln has been a venerated national icon since the early part of the last century, and although his figure and words have been central to the nation's ceremonial discourse since then, his active employment in mainstream political discourse has ebbed since the Civil Rights era. "Greatest President" polls that once consistently ranked him at the top, have seen him drop a few pegs in recent decades. And Lincoln's portrayal in popular culture has also come to include an increasing number of unflattering representations indicative, in one scholar's opinion, of the fracturing of national memory and our collective denial of heroes.² The Lincoln-Obama phenomenon has brought him back, at least for the time being, because the memory of the "great and good" Lincoln resonates in

² Barry Schwartz, "Lincoln at the Millenium," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 24 (Winter 2003) : 1-31; "Postmodernity and Historical Reputation: Abraham Lincoln in Late Twentieth-Century American Memory," *Social Forces* 77 (September 1998): 63–103. See also Schwartz's recently published *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era: History and Memory in Late Twentieth-Century America*, (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

the nation's political unconscious (or at least a significant portion of that unconscious), and its historical memory of who Lincoln was and its perception of who Obama is.

Although Obama's published references to Lincoln date to 2005, the recent phenomenon began with his February, 2007 candidacy announcement from the steps of the old statehouse in Springfield, Illinois. As Obama reminded his audience, Lincoln declared his run for the U.S. Senate in 1858 from the same location, at which time he delivered his famous "House Divided" speech. In honoring the "unyielding faith" of many Americans to change the country for the better Obama invoked his Illinois predecessor at length:

That's what Abraham Lincoln understood. He had his doubts. He had his defeats. He had his setbacks. But through his will and his words, he moved a nation and helped free a people. It is because of the millions who rallied to his cause that we are no longer divided, North and South, slave and free. It is because men and women of every race, from every walk of life, continued to march for freedom long after Lincoln was laid to rest, that today we have the chance to face the challenges of this millennium together, as one people -- as Americans.³

As the primary contest began in earnest in early 2008, so too did the references to Abraham Lincoln. In March, *Vanity Fair* national editor Todd Purdum published a lengthy biography in the magazine. Unique among the journalists I have covered so far, Purdum distinguished between the various memories of Lincoln, and chose to pass over the "holy Lincoln of hagiography, and the melancholy Lincoln of martyrdom," to focus

³ "Illinois Sen. Barack Obama's Announcement Speech," *Washington Post*, Feb. 10, 2007: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/10/AR2007021000879.html>; accessed Feb. 3, 2009.

instead on Lincoln's "steely ambition" and "cold political calculation" in his closing comparisons to Obama.⁴ *Rolling Stone* Jann Wenner's endorsement of Obama in the magazine's March issue ended in more conventional iconic fashion: "Like Abraham Lincoln, Barack Obama challenges America to rise up, to do what so many of us long to do: to summon "the better angels of our nature."⁵ Indicative of the growing use of Lincoln by Obama, when he spoke at Cooper Union in New York at the end of March, journalists covering the campaign placed bets on how many times he would mention Lincoln in his speech. He didn't, although those introducing him did.⁶

On April 26, 2008, on the eve of the crucial primaries in North Carolina and Indiana, Hillary Clinton challenged her opponent to a series of "Lincoln-Douglas" style debates in the key state of Indiana. Clinton's campaign manager noted the historical context, the holding of the original debates 150 years earlier in neighboring Illinois, and that she had no doubt "Senator Obama, who hails from that great state, understands how valuable and vital these national conversations were to the heart of America." Citing the need to spend time with voters in the ten days remaining before the primaries, and the fact that the two has already debated 21 times, Obama's campaign declined the offer.

On May 1, historian Gary Wills published "Two Speeches on Race" in the *New York Review of Books* comparing Lincoln's famous Cooper Institute address to Obama's

⁴ Todd Purdum, "Raising Obama," *Vanity Fair*, March 2008: <http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2008/03/obama200803?currentPage=1>.

⁵ Jann S. Wenner, "A New Hope," *Rolling Stone*, March 20, 2008:

⁶ Tom Robbins, "Name-Dropping Lincoln at the Obama Speech," Runnin' Scared News Blog, *Village Voice*, Mar. 27, 2008: http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/archives/2008/03/namedropping_li.php; accessed Feb. 3, 2009. This is an early instance of commentary on the "Lincoln play."

March 18, 2008 speech responding to the controversy sparked by Jeremiah Wright.

While recognizing the very different contexts that shaped each speaker's words, Wills emphasized their similar intentions. Both politicians "used a campaign occasion to rise to a higher vision of America's future. Both argued intelligently for closer union in the cause of progress." Lincoln and Obama, Wills concluded, argued against the politics of fear. Without denying the somber chapters of our national history, both Lincoln and Obama sought out what Lincoln once famously termed "the better angels of our nature."⁷

On May 22, Obama made his first public reference to Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals* in response to a question at a town meeting in Boca Raton, Florida. The questioner asked whether Obama would consider—assuming he was nominated—"everybody who is a possible help to you" as a running mate, a clear reference to Hillary Rodham Clinton. Obama's response, that he was "a practical-minded guy" whose heroes included Abraham Lincoln, led him to mention Goodwin's book and its basic proposition. Lincoln had invited his rivals into his cabinet "because whatever, you know, personal feelings there were, the issue was, 'How can we get this country through this time of crisis?'"⁸

Speaking at the Democratic convention in August, 2008, Al Gore compared the nation's present to the Civil War past. He noted the qualities Lincoln possessed to guide the nation during that critical time including "his powerful ability to inspire hope in the

⁷ Gary Wills, "Two Speeches on Race," *New York Review of Books*, May 1, 2008. Online at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21290>.

⁸ Jack Tapper, "Obama Proposes 'Team of Rivals' Cabinet," Political Punch, ABCNews.com: <http://blogs.abcnews.com/politicalpunch/2008/05/obama-proposes.com>; accessed Feb. 3, 2009.

future at a time of impasse. He was known chiefly as a clear thinker and a great orator, with a passion for justice and a determination to heal the deep divisions of our land. He insisted on reaching past partisan and regional divides to exalt our common humanity.” Now, Gore continued, the nation found itself “at the end of an era with a mandate from history to launch another new beginning. And once again, we have a candidate who experience perfectly matches an extraordinary moment of transition.”⁹

During the general election campaign, the appeals to Lincoln by Obama and his campaign appear to have been more muted. Production, however, shifted to journalists, media outlets, and grassroots culture makers like pop artist Ron English. English’s “Abraham Obama” composite portrait quickly achieved iconic status (and copies of the prints are now selling for a hefty \$ 2,000). Its showing generated controversy and spawned the production of YouTube videos, songs such as The Sutcliff’s *Take it Back*, and international press coverage. A thorough Google™ search turned up nearly thirty different images associating Obama with Lincoln in one fashion or another. These images range from political cartoons published in major dailies, to magazine covers (including the covers of *Newsweek* and the *New Yorker*), to popular art creations like Ron English’s but also including t-shirts and coffee mugs, to grassroots productions including a pair of carved Obama and Lincoln Halloween pumpkins.

⁹ Al Gore, 2008 Democratic National Convention Speech, August 28, 2008, Mile High Stadium, Denver, Colorado. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/convention2008/algore2008dnc.htm>; accessed Feb. 3 /2009.

But it was following Obama's historic victory and through to his inauguration a few weeks ago, that the invocation of Lincoln reached its highest intensity. There was, to begin with, the heating up of the "team of rivals" analogy as the president-elect began his cabinet selections. The announcement of primary opponent Hillary Clinton's selection as his choice for Secretary of State marked the high-point of this particular discourse. Not all commentators agreed with the analogy and a few historians found fault with Goodwin's formula.¹⁰ That, however, was not the point, as Obama obviously found inspiration in her thesis, and journalists found the "team of rivals" analogy a ready-made package for the story.

On Thanksgiving evening, PBS's *Newshour* aired a segment titled "History Lessons," featuring noted historians Harold Holzer and H.W. Brands. Each had recently published a study of, respectively, Abraham Lincoln's pre-inaugural period and Franklin Roosevelt's transition from patrician candidate to populist president.¹¹ Both scholars gave thoughtful responses—as thoughtful as the short time slot allowed. In essence, both argued for the partial parallels between what Roosevelt and Lincoln faced, and what Obama faces now. Although careful to note the differences between past and present (Holzer remarking at one point, "Red state-blue state divisions are not the same as gray state-blue state divisions"), both men clearly felt that the experiences of these past leaders had important lessons for Obama in the present. Holzer was the most passionate in this

¹⁰ Jack Tapper, "Will Obama's Team of Rivals Fare Better Than Lincoln's?" ABC News Political Punch Blog, Nov. 23, 2008. <http://blogs.abcnews.com/politicalpunch/2008/11/will-obamas-tea.html>; accessed Nov. 25, 2008.

¹¹ "Lincoln, Roosevelt Presidencies Offer Lessons for Obama," PBS Newshour, Nov. 27, 2008: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/white_house/july-dec08/historians_11-27.html; accessed Dec. 1, 2008.

regard, stating at one point that Obama's actions in recent months were "eerily similar" to those of his Illinois political predecessor, and that he (Obama) seemed to be reading from a playbook provided by Lincoln.

Several days prior to the inauguration, the Gilder-Lehrman Institute, a major private academic foundation, announced that co-founder Lewis Lehrman would appear on the *Fox News Channel*, "Saturday, January 17, 2009, at 9:20 a.m. EST shortly before President-elect Obama boards the Inaugural Train in Philadelphia, a train trip similar to the one taken by Lincoln in 1861," to discuss "the similarities and differences between Mr. Lincoln and President-elect Barack Obama."¹²

And finally, at the inauguration itself, President Obama was sworn in using the Lincoln-Taney Bible, placed upon a table from the Second Inaugural. Following the ceremony, President Obama and the nation's political leaders enjoyed a luncheon featuring a "Lincoln-inspired menu" including seafood stew, duck-breast with cherry chutney, and apple-cinnamon sponge cake. The luncheon also showcased 19th century American painter Thomas Hill's "View of the Yosemite Valley," in reference to Lincoln's 1864 signing of an act setting aside Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of giant Sequoias as public preserves.¹³

This partial resume hopefully suffices to demonstrate the Lincoln-Obama phenomenon's extent. As noted earlier, the production of the discourse that makes up the phenomenon

¹² "Lewis Lehrman on Lincoln and Obama," e-mail message dated January 16, 2009,

¹³ Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies (JCCIC), website: <http://inaugural.senate.gov/luncheon/>; accessed January 26, 2009.

ranges from the political principals, to journalists, academics, and grassroots producers. And there is more out there. I failed to mention the inaugural celebration at the Lincoln Memorial, Obama's choice to ride the rails from Springfield to Washington D.C. in imitation of his predecessor, or the lengthy commentary on the blogosphere ranging from the most adoring (both of Obama and Lincoln) to the most sinister. To be honest, researching this topic has been like trying to hit a moving target, as the production of images and texts continues to this day. As I was preparing my final draft for the talk upon which this paper is based, historian Eric Foner published a lengthy piece in *The Nation* titled "Our Lincoln," and the *New York Times* online edition ran an article on the "new informality" of the presidential team that included a photo of an Oval Office meeting showing the President in shirtsleeves and—in the background—a portrait of Abraham Lincoln.¹⁴

What should we make of all this? There are some obvious answers, to be sure. First of all, it was a political campaign and national politicians like to draw upon historical figures to strengthen their appeal. Second of all, it is the bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth, and with or without Barack Obama we were bound to hear a lot of talk about Abraham Lincoln. Thirdly, we cannot discount the impact of the Internet in encouraging the production of images and texts associating (for better or worse) both men. Obama's campaign has been credited with using the Internet to mobilize grassroots support, and the Lincoln-Obama phenomenon certainly benefited from the mass culture

¹⁴ Eric Foner, "Our Lincoln," *The Nation*, Jan. 26, 2009: <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090126/foner>; Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "White House Unbuttons Formal Dress Code," *New York Times*, Jan. 28, 2009: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/29/us/politics/29whitehouse.html>.

effect made possible by the Internet. Indeed, one of the greatest lessons to be learned here may be what it teaches us about the propagation and reception of collective memories in the digital age.

These qualifications aside, the Lincoln-Obama phenomenon still stands as one of the most exceptional instances of the mobilization of collective memory for political purposes in recent American history. All presidents invoke their predecessors to some extent; but this has been enormous. It's been a commemorative blitz.

Historians have both contributed to the production of the Lincoln-Obama phenomenon and commented upon its appropriateness. Speaking on CNN shortly after the election Eric Foner, Harold Holzer, and Ronald White (Foner is one of the nation's foremost historians of Reconstruction, Holzer and White are both noted Lincoln scholars,) offered their views on whether Lincoln provided Obama with a useful "playbook" in planning his own presidency. While White and Holzer appeared cautiously optimistic, Foner struck a more skeptical chord remarking at one point "people ought to calm down a little about these comparisons." Lincoln and Obama, he continued, faced "entirely different situations, worlds, political systems. There aren't I think a lot of exact direct lessons one can or should necessarily try to learn from Lincoln." He also argued for the essential fluidity of the memory of Lincoln in American culture, comparing him to a Rorschach

test in which people find what they want to see. As a result, he noted, “saying ‘I’m reading Lincoln or modeling myself on Lincoln’ doesn’t really tell us a heck of a lot.”¹⁵

A few historians have adopted an openly partisan tone in evaluating the comparisons between Obama and Lincoln. Princeton historian Sean Wilentz, writing in the *Los Angeles Times* at the start of the primary contest a year ago, went so far as to accuse Obama and his “many avid supporters in the media and the academy,” of exceeding Reagan zealots in distorting the historical record. Frankly stating his support for Hillary Clinton, Wilentz’s major beef centered on the Obama campaign’s alleged attempts to minimize its candidate’s lack of experience by comparing him to past greats who, it argued, similarly lacked experience. “These comparisons,” Wilentz stated “distort the past beyond recognition.” And he concluded:

Historians cannot expect all politicians and their supporters to know as much about American history as, say, John F. Kennedy, who won the Pulitzer Prize for a work of history. But it is reasonable to expect respect for the basic facts -- and not contribute to cheapening the historical currency. Spreading bad history is no way to make history.¹⁶

Whether Wilentz was speaking tongue-in-cheek here is impossible to determine. His reference to Kennedy’s *Profiles in Courage* is at once disconcerting and fascinating given

¹⁵ Ed Hornick, “Can Lincoln’s Playbook Help Obama in the Years Ahead?” CNN.com, Nov. 19, 2008: <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/11/18/obama.lincoln/index.html>; accessed Feb. 24, 2009.

¹⁶ Sean Wilentz, “Obama’s Misuse of History,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 26, 2008: <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-wilentz26jan26.0,5561702.story>. Other sites and authors critical of Obama’s appropriation of Lincoln include *The Rawness* blog, “Deconstructing Obama, Part 3: Lincoln and the Narcissist”: <http://therawness.com/deconstructing-obama-pt-3-lincoln-and-the-narcissist/comment-page-1/>, no date.

the book's contested authorship.¹⁷ Did Wilentz's memory of the heady days of Camelot lead him (whether consciously or not) to ignore the sticky details of Kennedy's authorship?

More recently, Lincoln scholar Allen Guelzo has criticized the Lincoln-Obama linkage on ideological rather than party-partisan grounds. His "Our Lincoln: Obama he was not" published in the conservative *National Review* was clearly aimed at Eric Foner's similarly-titled piece in the leftist *Nation*.¹⁸ Whereas Foner's interpretation of Lincoln stressed his commitment to working towards the promise of full citizenship and rights implied in the Declaration of Independence, Guelzo emphasized Lincoln's essential conservatism, of "preserving the old against the new." At the core of Lincoln's conservatism, Guelzo argued, stood the Declaration of Independence, and it is a different document than that described by Foner. According to Guelzo, Lincoln understood the "created equal" principle as a natural law doctrine: it did not imply "radical egalitarianism, . . . Lincoln's notion of equality was about leveling up, not whittling down."¹⁹ In the end, Guelzo's essay really concerned competing liberal and conservative interpretations of the nations' founding documents with Lincoln playing the role of strict interpretationist. And interestingly, he invoked the image of Lincoln the Self-Made Man and free-labor advocate, in making his case for the conservative Lincoln. This version

¹⁷ Ted Sorensen, *Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History*, (New York: Harper-Collins, 2008): 144-50. Sorensen defends Kennedy's authorship and credits him with the basic concept and structure of the work. But he also characterizes it as a collaborative effort in which he appears to have done the bulk of the writing.

¹⁸ Allen C. Guelzo, "Our Lincoln: Obama, he was not," *National Review*, Feb. 23, 2009: 25-8. Interestingly, Guelzo does not mention other aspects of Lincoln's conservatism including his support for Whig Henry Clay and Clay's American System, and his opposition to United States territorial aggression in the war with Mexico.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

didn't receive much airtime (as noted earlier) in the production of Lincoln-Obama discourse and its ties to a conservative political viewpoint bear notice.

In fairness to those who have argued against the Lincoln-Obama connection, historians have also contributed to promoting the comparisons between the two men, or more properly between the image of who Obama is and the memory of who Lincoln was.

Harold Holzer's references to "eerie similarities" and a "playbook" on the Thanksgiving PBS interview certainly fall in this category. The CNN interview Holzer participated in the week before his PBS appearance used similar word imagery. The preface mentioned "the similarities are eerie," as well as the candidates inexperience, and that "Both were raised by women other than their mothers (Lincoln by his stepmother and Obama by his grandmother) and later visited the women before their respective inaugurations." These comments, I would suggest, did not function to facilitate clear historical analysis of the similarities or dissimilarities between Obama and Lincoln, but rather to forge in viewers' minds a string of emotive coincidences between the past and present that served to reinforce the connections between the two men.

Prior to the New Hampshire primary in January, 2008, prize-winning filmmaker Ken Burns also weighed in on the partisan debate by declaring for Obama. For Burns, the crucial similarity between Obama and Lincoln involved their perceived candor and genuineness. In his remarks to reporters he stated: "We need someone who is authentic, someone who will inevitably make mistakes just like every president going back to George Washington, but someone who is themselves [sic] and authentic....Someone who

is able to dream, someone who is able to suggest a future that isn't so completely tied to the past."²⁰ And lastly (although this by no means exhausts the historians' commentary on the Lincoln-Obama phenomenon), historian Joseph Ellis's op-ed piece in the *Los Angeles Times*, "The 'better angels' side with Obama," fairly obviously spurred Wilentz to pen his response one week later.²¹

"Angels," "eerie similarities," and authenticity are not words generally associated with historical analysis. But the point here is not to castigate historians for engaging in the political forum (although in a few instances more discretion was probably in order). Rather, it is to highlight the variety of commentary making up the Lincoln-Obama phenomenon, and the evocations of Lincoln that comprised a crucial part of it. Although trained to distinguish evidence and carefully parse arguments, historians also contributed to the emotional and value-laden language that evoked certain memories of Lincoln and of times in which he lived. Rather than indicating any weakness on their part, I believe it points to the pervasiveness of historical memory in shaping even the words of those who ordinarily engage in producing a more objective rendering of the past.

Collective memories often neglect factual accuracy in their efforts to establish certain values or visions, and from a social and political viewpoint this is not necessarily a bad thing. Historical accuracy is important, and any public figure referencing the past has an

²⁰ Alec MacGillis, "Ken Burns Compares Obama to Lincoln," *washingtonpost.com*, Dec. 18, 2007: http://blog.washingtonpost.com/44/2007/12/18/ken_burns_compares_obama_to_li.html.

²¹ Joseph J. Ellis, "'The better angels' side with Obama: the candidate's appeal to a more unified electorate rings historically true," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 19, 2008: <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-ellis19jan19.0,3818349.story?coll=la-opinion-center>.

obligation to respect the historical record. However, the insistence on accuracy in public political discourse misses the point. Here, the invocation of a historical figure or event is not about ascertaining the facts, but about evoking a group memory of the past (a historical memory) that helps to establish a vision, or set of values useful for framing the present tense and mobilizing public opinion. It is about constructing a useable and persuasive narrative that rallies people to collective action. What Obama and all those contributing to the Lincoln-Obama phenomenon did—whether they recognized it or not—was evoke a set of collective memories about Lincoln that helped frame the historic nature of Obama’s candidacy and mobilized support both for his near-term electoral goal and his longer-term political objectives.

Grasping the perspective advocated here requires abandoning the personal frame and recognizing that the production of the Lincoln-Obama discourse was not the sole product of Obama and his avid supporters. It was a collective effort involving both the speeches and writings of political and intellectual elites, the productions of grass-roots supporters, and the reception of the discourse by an even larger public. The speeches themselves drew upon traditional political rhetoric forms including the political jeremiad and the language of the American civil religion. The multiple images connecting the two men further testify to the phenomenon’s collective nature. These ranged from the pop-art installations of artist-provocateur Ron English, to editorial cartoons published in newspapers, to t-shirts, to a paste-up of Matthew Brady’s photograph of Lincoln visiting McClellan following Antietam. Ironically, even Obama’s bitterest primary opponent abetted its production by calling for a series of “Lincoln-Douglas” debates. And so did

those who denied the associations between the two men and invoked Lincoln's greatness in order to do so.

Here, I share the perspective of other scholars of memory that collective memory functions as a "meaning-conferring cultural system" used by societies to "make sense of" and model the present. Sociologist Barry Schwarz has argued that the commemorative activities that established Lincoln as a national icon in the early twentieth-century reveal much about Americans' self-perceptions, anxieties, and sense of national purpose during this period.²² In the most recent case, I would argue for a similar effect but with a difference in tone. The recent invocation of Lincoln reflected the longing of many Americans (but not all) for what they believed was the long-deferred attainment of the democratic promise. Without denying Barack Obama's evident oratorical abilities and his knowledge of history, or the impact of his racial background in forging the connection to Lincoln, the connection was possible because the time and conditions were propitious. Obama *found* Lincoln and Lincoln (figuratively speaking) *found* Obama and each benefited the other. Lincoln helped "make sense" of the historic dimension of Obama's campaign and election; Obama, for his part, helped return Lincoln from the collective memory sidelines where he has for the most part resided since the Civil Rights era.

How this symbiosis formed is interesting to ponder. There is no doubt that race played its role. Lincoln became relevant again because the memory of him as the Great Emancipator helped Americans frame the historic nature of Obama's candidacy.

²² Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000): 18-25.

However, race doesn't explain everything. Neither Jesse Jackson nor Al Sharpton, to my knowledge, ever invoked Lincoln in their presidential bids and in Al Sharpton's case at least, he would have explicitly denied the "Great Emancipator" image of Lincoln. Nor is it simply a matter of party. Democrat Mario Cuomo tried to revive the political memory of Lincoln in 2004 with his campaign book *Why Lincoln Matters: Today More Than Ever*.²³ Cuomo and Harold Holzer, who helped him with the book, even struck many of the same chords the Lincoln-Obama phenomenon would four years later: Lincoln as a unifier, as a prophetic visionary of democracy, as a fair-minded politician who strove to overcome party divisions. But the message didn't play, as the Democrats were still relying on the social-science prescriptions of George Lakoff and others. The Lincoln-Obama phenomenon hasn't told us anything new about Lincoln, and we shouldn't expect that it would. It confirmed rather than explored: it helped convince potential voters that the soaring rhetoric, calls for renewal, and racial innovation (a person of color running for the nation's highest office) had a solid and great precedent in American history. It helped "ground" Obama in the American past and in doing so relieved the anxieties many people may have felt concerning his identity and his calls for change. The version of Lincoln that has been invoked draws from existing models—the Great Emancipator, the Savior of the Union, the First American, and the Man of the People. These memories of who Lincoln was have been around for a century at least and amply commemorated in word, song, and stone. We can see their reiteration in recent months by simply parsing the words used by those contributing to the Lincoln-Obama discourse. Words such as "his will and words," "the better angels of our nature," "the

²³ Mario Cuomo, *Why Lincoln Matters: Today More than Ever*. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2004.

heart of America,” “a higher vision of America’s future,” “this time of crisis,” “inspire hope in the future.”

Consider the memories of Lincoln that have not been invoked: Lincoln the violator of civil liberties and Lincoln the centralizing tyrant, although both of these memories still get play.²⁴ Neither did the various marginal representations of Lincoln—as a drunk, as gay, as melancholy, as suffering from debilitating illness—surface during the recent proliferation of references to him. Less obviously, except for *Vanity Fair*’s Purdum and Allen Guelzo, none of the discourse focused upon Lincoln the self-made man, the rangy frontiersman, the wily politician, and coolly ambitious lawyer, although these images would not have been out of sync with the character of Barack Obama. Lastly, the recent discourse did not invoke a major element of the early twentieth-century rendition of Lincoln—Lincoln the racial moderate and friend of the white South.

Much of what I have just enumerated is common sense, as we would not expect the hateful memories of Lincoln to get much play. But the point here is that the memory of Lincoln mobilized recently is a selective memory. On this particular, I believe Eric Foner erred. Lincoln is not a Rorschach test from which people read what they want. The political and cultural contexts determine what versions stick and which don’t. Obama appealed to him selectively, as did most of those who contributed to the Lincoln-Obama phenomenon. Certain memories fit the vision the candidate sought to project and that the

²⁴ The “Lincoln-haters” club has a long lineage, traceable all the way back to the Civil War Copperheads. For a contemporary manifestation, see economist Thomas DiLorenzo’s *The Real Lincoln: A New Look at Abraham Lincoln, His Agenda, and an Unnecessary War* (Prima Lifestyles, 2002).

public sought to receive: the thirst for democratic renewal expressed by both the candidate and a sizeable segment of the public gave us back the “great Lincoln.”

The mobilization of this memory of Lincoln also provided the Democratic Party with the opportunity to recapture the story of America’s past and with it, to forge an inspiring vision of the nation’s present and future. Up until the 2008 presidential campaign, the enunciation of vision has bedeviled the Democratic Party and the left generally. The journals and blogs of the left were filled with prescriptions for regaining an edge in articulating a forceful and compelling message regarding the nation’s future course. Political scientist Harvey Kaye has pleaded for years for liberals to take back the story of the nation’s past from the conservative version that has held sway since Reagan. The solutions to the problem of the “vision thing” (ironically, a term coined by the senior Bush in 1988) ranged from the “framing” paradigm of linguist George Lakoff—all the rage during the 2004 presidential contest, to the argument of the faith-based left that it must challenge the monopoly of the religious right in telling the story of God’s Chosen Nation. However, the suspicions of the secularists towards religion in general were matched by the faith-based left’s mixed attitudes towards abortion, gay marriage and similar issues. Democratic Party speechwriters tried to walk the razor’s edge of offending neither camp, and the result was often, as commentators noted, less than inspiring. The conservatives, on the other hand, had no such problem. They spoke the language of faith with conviction and welded it to an inspiring story of the nation’s past, present, and future destiny. The difference between the two approaches is abundantly clear when

reading the respective acceptance speeches of the presidential candidates in 2000 and 2004.

Barack Obama's great accomplishment as a presidential politician so far has been to break the monopoly of the Republican Party in this area. Furthermore, I believe that by virtue of his racial identity and church membership he has been able to "trump" the liberal divide—at least for the time being. As a result, he has been able to recover the story of the past for the Democratic Party, and with it the ability to craft an inspiring message about the nation's past, present, and future. He has been able, for the first time since the Civil Rights era, to inspire this nation with a version of American exceptionalism that stresses our responsibilities towards one another, and our duty to act morally and with charity at home and abroad. It is a version that denies our right to tell other nations how to lead their lives. Many historians, and I would agree, believe this version has its origins, in part, with Abraham Lincoln.

However, bear in mind, as I have noted throughout this paper, that the effort was not his alone: he was able to accomplish his alternate message of America's past and present greatness because his audience was ready to hear it. Nor was it a matter of "stealing" Lincoln from the GOP. For the Republicans and conservatives in general, Lincoln has occupied an increasingly tenuous place in their pantheon for quite some time. While he remains a national icon, the appeals to him from the right are largely ceremonial and de-politicized. I doubt that Allen Guelzo's paeon to a free-market and libertarian Lincoln will bear much fruit. As the founding father of a strong central government and the

alleged (in some quarters) desecrator of civil liberties, his conservative credentials have always been suspect. The Bushes and Reagan preferred the founding fathers and World War 2 in evoking their historical memory of the nation. In fact, the last notable usage of Lincoln in a Republican presidential campaign came at the National Convention in 1992 when former President Reagan “quoted” Lincoln on the virtues of economic self-sufficiency and trickle-down economics. The quotations turned out to be false, the words of an early twentieth century minister and conservative pamphleteer.²⁵ Further indicative of his slipping status on the conservative end, the traditional Lincoln Day Dinner, long an standard event of local party chapters, has in some parts of the country been renamed the Reagan-Lincoln Dinner.

As for Lincoln’s position in all of this, I believe that his return from the margins of mainstream memory reflects not only the workings of Americans’ long-cherished hopes for political renewal, but also the work of dedicated historians over the past generation. Eric Foner, Jim Horton, Jim McPherson, David Blight and many others besides, have labored for years against the tides of the Myth of the Lost Cause and similar versions of the Civil War and Reconstruction. They have kept alive the memory of the war as a struggle for racial equality, and as embodying the nobler impulses of American society. It is nice to see that their hour has finally come, and that their diligent work in the vineyards of historical research has influenced our collective memory of the Civil War.

²⁵ Herbert Mitgang, “Republicans in Houston: For the Record; Reagan Put Words in Lincoln’s Mouth,” *New York Times*, Aug. 19, 1992. Available through the *Times* Archives at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E0CE5DC173DF93AA2575BC0A964958260>. Despite being debunked at the time, Mitt Romney would use the same quotations during a primary campaign speech in Florida in 2008.

Maybe the time has come as well for Abraham Lincoln to take his final leave from us. Even as he recovered his political meaningfulness in recent months, the election of the nation's first mixed-race president, raises the question of whether we need to invoke him any further. This is by no means intended to suggest that Barack Obama has achieved anywhere near the stature Lincoln holds. But I am suggesting that memories, like clothes and tools, do reach the end of their usefulness. There comes a time when they need to be retired in order to allow the person, or in this case, the group to move on to a new future and a new history. While Lincoln will always be with us, the time has come to lay his spirit to rest.

Partial annotated bibliography of current sources:

Eric Foner, "Our Lincoln," *The Nation*, Jan. 26, 2009. Available online at <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090126/foner>.

John F. Harris and Alexander Burns, "Straw Man? Historians Say Obama is No Lincoln," *Politico*, Dec. 15, 2008: <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1208/16569.html>.

Harris and Burns debunk the Lincoln-Obama connection with help from Eric Foner and Sean Wilentz. Wilentz, comparing Obama's mobilization of Lincoln to past presidential practice is quoted as saying "there's never been anything like this, and on this scale. Ever."

Julian Zelizer, "Commentary: Why Obama's picks will make Bill Clinton smile," CNN.com, Dec. 1, 2008: <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/12/01/zelizer.centrist/index.html>; accessed Dec. 1, 2008.

Zelizer, historian and public policy at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School, argues that Obama has assembled a "team of centrists," drawing from veterans of Clinton's DLC and committed to globalization and less government.

Jack Tapper, "Will Obama's Team of Rivals Fare Better Than Lincoln's?" ABC News Political Punch Blog, Nov. 23, 2008. <http://blogs.abcnews.com/politicalpunch/2008/11/will-obamas-tea.html>; accessed Nov. 25, 2008.

Debunks the "team of rivals" analogy with help from Douglas Brinkley and Matt Pinsker. Brinkley quoted: "It's based on a false historical analogy." Pinsker points out just how dysfunctional things got, and how Goodwin contrived to leave out the really dysfunctional players (Simon Cameron) from her portrait.

Dalton-Beninato, Karen. "Obama, Lincoln, and the Encouraging Double D's," The Huffington Post, May 11, 2008. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/karen-daltonbeninato/obama-lincoln-and-the-enc_b_101216.html; accessed 11/21/08.

Discusses the parallels between David Davis, Lincoln's promoter and campaign manager in 1860, and Dick Durbin, Obama's Illinois Senate-mate and early supporter. Mentions Obama's 2004 DNC speech and publication of his "Audacity of Hope" as defining moments.

McGillis, Alec. "Ken Burns Compares Obama to Lincoln," *Washington Post*, Dec. 18, 2007: http://voices.washingtonpost.com/the-trail/2007/12/18/ken_burns_compares_obama_to_li.html; accessed 11/21/08.

Noted filmmaker and New Hampshire Ken Burns endorses Obama before primary. Notes parallels between the two men including their lack of experience in national affairs and capacity for vision: "While others find themselves mired in their past actions, he is presenting a vision for the future that is not only possible but essential to our survival as a nation, . . . We need someone who is authentic, someone who will inevitably make mistakes just like every president going back to George Washington, but someone who is themselves [sic] and authentic....Someone who is able to dream, someone who is able to suggest a future that isn't so completely tied to the past."

Rutten, Tim. "Obama's Lincoln Moment," *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 2008: <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-rutten19mar19,0,5754610.column>; accessed 11/21/08.

Compares Obama's May 2008 speech on race, "A More Perfect Union," to Lincoln's "House Divided" speech in 1858, and Kennedy's address on Catholicism and politics to the greater Houston ministerial association in 1960. Rutten characterized these and similar speeches as "historical signposts that divide that which went before from all that followed on an issue of crucial national importance."

Rutten also mentions the "lankiness" as a trait in common between Obama and Lincoln. So did Burns.

Hornick, Ed. "Can Lincoln's Playbook Help Obama in the Years Ahead?" *CNN*, Nov. 19, 2008: <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/11/18/obama.lincoln/?iref=mpstoryview>; accessed 11/21/08.

The lead-in: "The similarities are eerie." Followed by the usual list of mundane coincidences—mothers, age, inexperience, both from Illinois, etc. Bullet points include:

Barack Obama often cited Abraham Lincoln in campaign speeches
 There are several similarities between the two politicians
 Historians say Obama can use Lincoln's strategies to help him lead the country
 One historian cautions Americans to "calm down" about comparisons

Historians Ronald White and Eric Foner interviewed for piece. Ron White notes both men's impressive use of language. Eric Foner cautions against comparisons.

Fineman, Howard. "Obama and the Echoes of Lincoln," *Newsweek*, Race to the Finish Blog, Oct. 6, 2008: <http://blog.newsweek.com/blogs/racetothefinish/archive/2008/10/06/obama-and-the-echoes-of-lincoln.aspx>; accessed 11/21/08.

Questions Obama's real similarities to Lincoln, given the lack of record or trying experiences.

Thomas, Evan and Richard Wolff. "Obama's Lincoln," *Newsweek*, Nov. 24, 2008. Published online Nov. 15, 2008; <http://www.newsweek.com/id/169170>.

Obama as the "unifying leader" in the presumed Lincoln mold. Reports on Axelrod's review of Favreau's victory speech draft: "Barack wants to lean into bipartisanship a little more, . . . Figure out a good Lincoln quote to bring it all together," and suggested that he look at the end of the First Inaugural Address. And Favreau did, passing over the "better angels of our nature," to the preceding sentences: "We are not enemies, but friends . . . Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection."

Also notes January 2008? Katie Couric interview during which Obama noted that after the Bible, the one indispensable book in his Oval Office would be Doris Kearns Goodwin's bestselling *Team of Rivals* (2005), which has as its principal thesis Lincoln's ability to harness the talents of a potentially-divisive group of cabinet members.

[Post-election, the media's theme appears to be unity.]

Obama, Barack. "What I See in Lincoln's Eyes," *Time*, June 26, 2005: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1077287-2,00.html>; accessed 11/21/08.

An early piece by then recently-elected Senator Obama, in which he reflects upon the personal dimensions of Lincoln's legacy following his (Obama's) commencement at Knox College, where Lincoln spoke during the L-D debates. Historically astute, Obama had done his homework: "Waiting for the soon-to-be graduates to assemble, I thought that even as Lincoln lost that Senate race, his arguments that day would result, centuries later, in my occupying the same seat that he coveted. He may not have dreamed of that exact outcome. But I like to believe he would have appreciated the irony. Humor, ambiguity, complexity, compassion--all were part of his character. And as Lincoln called once upon the better angels of our nature, I believe that he is calling still, across the ages, to summon some measure of that character, the American character, in each of us today." (concluding para.)

Noonan, Peggy. "Conceit of Government: Why Are Our Politicians So Full of Themselves?" *Wall Street Journal Opinion Archives*, June 29, 2005: <http://www.opinionjournal.com/columnists/pnoonan/?id=110006884>; accessed 11/21/2008.

Noonan debunks Obama's *Times* article and the comparisons of himself to Lincoln. Wittily done.

State of the Black Union, New Orleans, Morial Center, February 23, 2008. Available as a webcast: http://www.c-spanarchives.org/library/index.php?main_page=product_video_info&products_id=204090-2 ; accessed June 9, 2008. Obama chose not to attend the conference, for which he was soundly criticized by host Tavis Smiley and others. Hillary Clinton was the only major presidential candidate to attend. However, support for Mrs. Clinton and for the Clintons generally was not unanimous among the panelists.

White, R. C. (2005). *The eloquent president: A portrait of Lincoln through his words*. NY: Random House.

Wills, Gary. "Two Speeches on Race," *New York Review of Books*, vol. 55, no. 7, May 1, 2008. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21290>.