

Lincoln, Progress and the American Indian:
Industrialization and Assimilation

On a
Fast Track

Matthew R. Holm

**POLITICAL SCIENCE:
ABRAHAM LINCOLN**

Dr. Arnhart

December 5, 2008

Lincoln, Progress and the American Indian:
Industrialization and Assimilation
on a
Fast Track

We know him as Father Abraham, The Great Emancipator, who brought an end to African slavery as it threatened to tear apart the American Union. He is revered as a pragmatic and shrewd statesman, a caring and compassionate man, uncommonly progressive in his understanding of the ideals of the American Creed. The American peoples' understanding of the man Abraham Lincoln is inseparable from the slavery question, but what were Abraham Lincoln's attitudes toward another race of people outside of White and Black Americans, namely the Native American? Lincoln's answer to the Indian Question can tell us a great deal about his vision of America. The Indian Question is a seldom discussed topic as his tie to the conflagration revolving around slavery is so well written as to monopolize his study. John Wilkes Booth assured that questions of his plans for the immediate future of America, White, Black and Red would remain a mystery.

The Reconstruction of the United States under Lincoln is often contemplated with the thought that it would give us a vision of his future. In conjunction with the Indian Question, we can gain a more in depth answer to Lincoln's vision because it tells us what Lincoln considered being America's path. In order to gain an understanding we need to investigate his over-all political philosophy as a young and maturing politician. Once we understand this direction we can look at that philosophy in the caldron of practicality: where philosophy must meet reality—governance. What decisions did Lincoln make in conjunction with his moral and political philosophical compass? Are they aligned and does he stay true to that direction. Ultimately what was Lincoln's course and did he stay true to it?

Hamiltonian Economics with Jeffersonian Political Ideals

A great part of the interest in the study of Abraham Lincoln lies in the fact that he isn't put into a neat partisan box. In early American politics, one was usually defined as a Hamiltonian: aggressive industrialist, upper class elitist and oft intellectual snob, who was distrustful of the labor class, or a Jeffersonian: agricultural, enlightened and distrustful of large government that impinges on individual rights. Abraham Lincoln was a hybrid of these two founders. Alexander Hamilton, a loose constructionist, did battle with Thomas Jefferson over the National bank, declaring that no reference in the Constitution to such a bank, meant that it was left to the Federal Government to decide it's worth, and when needed, its construction. Jefferson vehemently opposed, calling such a move unconstitutional and dangerous to the individuality of the states through the tyranny of the few.

Hamilton, seeking national wealth, argued that constitutionally, the Framers left such arguments for further deliberation. Leaving the powers of creation of federal departments out of the Constitution didn't deny them, but left them to future design. Of course their argument was fought while the Document was still warm, but such debates, Hamilton thought, were the heart of a living Law, "jarring of parties," and meant to "promote deliberation and circumspection."¹ Lincoln would have agreed as a young Whig party member and Hamiltonian torch bearer, who counted Henry Clay and his America Plan as essential steps for the progress of the wealth of the young nation. The direction of American prosperity was left to its posterity and much discussion would be essential in such development.

It is historically understood that Lincoln valued and sought internal improvements to the wilds of the Union, particularly the west. He promoted the building of canals and rails that attached western markets to the eastern seaboard. This required a national commerce system and a national bank to regulate it, but at the same time, like Jefferson, he valued the individual rights of American citizens, particularly when it came to the right of a man to eat from the labor of the sweat of his own brow.

¹ Obama, Barack. *Audacity of Hope*. Crown Publishers: NY. 2006. P.88. I use this text not to be trendy, but to use a Lincoln scholar who understands the moderating nature of Lincoln as a Statesman.

Jefferson understood this eloquently as the “pursuit of happiness.” Unlike Hamilton, Lincoln trusted the growing labor class, and wanted to protect and nurture it.

So stood Lincoln, between the uncharted depths of a constitution that at once promoted growth through debate and interpretation, and the fervent belief that certain principles set forth in the Declaration of Independence and supported by the Constitution were universal, self evident and non-negotiable, like human equality. So, says Future President Barack Obama, as a guide “I am left then with Lincoln, who like no man before or since understood both the deliberative function of our democracy and the limits of such deliberation. We remember him for the firmness and depth of his convictions—his unyielding opposition to slavery and his determination that a house divided could not stand.”² Not only did Lincoln want to preserve the House, but he sought to improve it.

Construction of a More Perfect Union

Much can be learned from Lincoln about his vision of America from an early speech to citizens in Jacksonville, Illinois on February 11, 1859:

We have all heard of Young America. He is the most current youth of the age. Some may think him conceited, and arrogant; but has he not reason to entertain a rather high opinion of himself? Is he not the inventor and owner of the present, and sole hope of the future? Men and things everywhere are ministering unto him...so Young America has “a pleasing hope—a fond desire—a longing after” territory [sic]...he is a great friend of humanity; and his desire for land is not selfish, but merely an impulse to extend the area of freedom.³

Lincoln’s *Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions* is very telling about his attitude toward the Indian Question. *Young America* is hope for those who live in a savage world. The fineries of dress and the dining table, as well as literature, medicine and science are all at the fingertips of America. She seeks to bring others into her fold and provide for them these same advantages. This progress is not meant to be at the behest of malice, or greed or tyranny, but out of the hands of good will.

² Obama, 97.

³ Lincoln, Abraham. *Lincoln: Speeches, Letters, Miscellaneous Writings Presidential Messages and Proclamations*. Vol. II. The Library of America. 1989.

Certainly Lincoln was firm in his beliefs of this national progress and we know that a civil war cost 600, 000 men their lives to enforce it. Those 600, 000 fought to preserve that Union and, for some unwittingly, to protect the right of everyman within the American Union to prosper from the fruit of his own labor. As that fruit grows he is able to further aid others in that venture:

Many independent men everywhere in these States, a few years back in their lives, were hired laborers. The prudent, penniless beginner in the world, labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land for himself; then labors on his own account another while, and at the length hires another new beginner to help him. This is the just, and generous, and prosperous system, which opens the way to all—gives hope to all, and consequent energy, and progress, and improvement of condition to all.⁴

Such is Lincoln's unwavering belief for all men, including Native Americans, many of whom had already adopted such a life under Federal supervision on reservations. While singing the praises of the laborer he was promoting the Homestead Act that would provide sections of 160 acres of untamed land equal to the size of the state of Delaware by 1863.⁵ The Agricultural Department was created to provide for the development and regulation of those farms, and the Morrill College Land Grant Act was signed in order to educate the laborer to promote even further progress. The Pacific Rail Road was developed with Federal Funds in order to keep the expanding nation connected and a transcontinental telegraph wire was planned to keep it in communication. This attitude, Obama tells us, of labor and progress through government support is "Hamilton's and Lincoln's basic insight—that the resources and power of the national government can facilitate, rather than supplant, a vibrant free market—has continued to be one of the cornerstones of both Republican and Democratic policies at every stage of America's development."⁶

While the Civil War endangered the stability of the Union, Lincoln managed to construct an addition that would provide for further unequalled prosperity. Once the idea of colonization for freed slaves had passed, Lincoln knew that space would be needed for Freedmen as laborers, so too for the Tribes who inhabited the western lands. There is no evidence that Lincoln sought to disband the Reservation system, but it is clear that Lincoln expected the Aborigines to adapt to this American System.

⁴ Ibid. 296-297. *Annual Message to Congress*, December 3, 1861.

⁵ This calculation is made using the number of square acres Lincoln reports have been parceled in his Annual Message to Congress on December 8, 1863.

⁶ Obama, 152.

Many would resist hostilely, and many, once they submitted to the new vision, didn't find the prosperity that Presidents going all the way back to Jefferson had promised.

The Practicality of the Indian Question

Thanks to the Library of Congress over a hundred letters concerning Lincoln and his Indian Policy can be perused via the internet. Shuffling through them reveals that the practicality of dealing with Native Americans while waging a Civil War was an arduous task. Secondary sources often disagree about Lincoln's success in promoting *Young America* to the Tribes. David Buice is critical of Lincoln in "Lincoln's Unissued Proclamation," claiming that he abandoned the Five Civilized Tribes, namely the Cherokee, in the west to the Confederacy.⁷ Ernest Darling claims that Lincoln tried to attract these tribes into service, not abandon them, in the same vain that he created the Conscription Act and Emancipation Proclamation. They would need to fight for the Union in order to reap its benefits.⁸ Chief John Ross, in a letter to Lincoln September 16, 1862, expressed regret that the Cherokees attempt to overcome the Confederacy was in vain, as the Indian Territory was surrounded by the Confederacy, but he appealed to Lincoln for "ample military protection, for life and property, ...enforcing the laws and extending to those who are loyal all the protection in your power."⁹

Jeffery S. King and David Nichols, claim that Lincoln's effort to balance the Indian Question and wage the Civil War concurrently are worthy of respect. King portrays Lincoln as a benevolent Father¹⁰ and Nichols explains that Lincoln struggled to reconcile his efforts of expansion with the welfare of the Native people.¹¹ In his annual Address to Congress in December of 1862, Lincoln reported that "The Indian tribes upon our frontiers have, during the past year, manifested a spirit of insubordination," and he

⁷ Buice, David. "Lincoln's Unissued Proclamation." *Prologue*, Vol. 10, Issue 3. 1978.

⁸ Darling, Ernest F. "Lincoln's Message to Indian Territory." *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. 63, Issue 2.

⁹ Ross, John to Abraham Lincoln, Tuesday, September 16, 1862.

¹⁰ King, Jeffery S. "President Lincoln as the Great White Father: Lincoln and the Indians." *Lincoln Herald*, Vol. 84, Issue 3. 1982.

¹¹ Nichols, David A. "The Other Civil War: Lincoln and the Indians." *Minnesota History*, Vol. 44, Issue 1. 1974.

described the threatened Cherokee in Indian Territory, “The Chief of the Cherokee (Ross) has visited this city for the purpose of restoring the former relations of the tribe with the United States.”¹² The very next report in the Annual Message related the event that is most recognized in Lincoln Indian Affairs. On the Santee River in Minnesota, war had broken out between a band of Sioux lead by Chief Little Crow who protested that they were not receiving their annuities, and was pushed over the edge when an Agent told them to “eat dirt.” In the end the Sioux were driven from the state but 300 Santee Sioux were arrested in the process and convicted of crimes against the White settlers.

General Pope and Henry Sibley, Commander of the Minnesota State militia were laden with the task of carrying out the single largest execution in United States history. Not wanting the onus of the burden to fall squarely on their shoulders they called for Lincoln’s endorsement. Surprising the two officers, Lincoln called for a full legal investigation into the atrocities. A legal team reduced the number of convictions to 39. These 39 were guilty of crimes outside of war: rape, murder not part of defense in war, and other carnage. The celebrated Civil War historian James McPherson noted in defense of Lincoln that this was not only the largest mass execution in United States history, but the single largest act of executive clemency.¹³ Such a view supports the image of Father Lincoln, but Lincoln’s pain over the decision is clear in a letter to legal advisor Joseph Holt where he asks if he could leave such an execution order to someone else.¹⁴ It is worth noting that this very heart-felt letter was written the day the Annual Address was being delivered. This note makes clear that while Lincoln had to uphold the Law, he knew that the atrocities were not all one sided. Corruption in the Indian System was rampant and Lincoln was well aware.

A letter from Sarah F. Wakefield of St. Paul, Minnesota shows the pain in Lincoln’s decision and the level of the corruption. In this letter Mrs. Wakefield describes how one of the hanged, Chaskadan, had saved her and her children after another of the tribe shot and killed a George H. Gleason, and killed

¹² Lincoln, 401. Annual Message to Congress, December 1, 1862.

¹³ McPherson, James. “Lincoln and the Devil” (Book Review) *New York Times*, August 27, 2000.

¹⁴ Lincoln, Abraham. “To Joseph Holt, Washington, December 1, 1862” in Basler, Roy P. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Vol. 5 New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953.

and cut open a pregnant woman. Mrs. Wakefield said his name was to be among the pardoned but he was executed regardless. Chaskadan was a friend of the Wakefields and a successful farmer:

This family (Chaskadan's) I had known for 8 years and they were farmers and doing well. Now this poor old Mother is left destitute, and broken hearted, for she has feeling if she is an Indian, surely we are Brothers all made by one God? We will all meet one day, and why not treat them as such here.¹⁵

She concluded her letter sharing her thoughts on the corruption that led to this heart wrenching calamity:

My husband is very anxious this thing should be made public, as he thinks the mistake was intentional on the part of a certain "Officer" at Mankato (Where the Santee Sioux were imprisoned), who has many children in the Sioux tribe. I pray you deem me not bold in addressing you, and grant my pardon for troubling you.¹⁶

The Letter, written in March of 1863, displays the anguish of the event and the corruption of the trials.

Certainly it served to drive a spike into the compassionate heart of Lincoln, who had already suffered emotionally from his execution decision.

His Annual Address, three months earlier, left congress with the task, "I submit for your special consideration whether our Indian system shall not be remodeled. Many wise and good men have impressed me with the belief that this can *profitably* be done." [Italics mine]¹⁷ Prior to Mrs. Wakefield's letter he was aware of the corrupt realities. In fact, the Library of Congress letters show many strong communications asking Lincoln to purge the Indian Bureau of corrupt Agents. It appears that he took this to heart with new appointments of men he believed to be of strong moral character on reservations from Washington State to New Mexico, but distance from the western lands left his hands tied. In practicality, Lincoln was not able to provide a full cleansing of the Agency. At a distance, the Indians were a periphery problem while the Civil War, directly under his nose, was obviously his priority. Until that bloody contest was settled, the Indian question, though heavy on his heart, would not be fully addressed, but the same Annual Address shows the technology of progress would continue. The Union Pacific Rail Road project would be initiated (asked for in the very next paragraph after describing "Little Crow's War"), the Homestead Act installed, the Morrill Act promoted and tribes would continuously be asked to

¹⁵ Wakefield, Sarah F. to Abraham Lincoln, Monday, March 23, 1863.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *Annual Message to Congress*, December 1, 1862.

adapt to the American system. With these advancements in place, the Indian System could be profitably remodeled.

On March 27, 1863, four days after Sarah Wakefield penned her letter to Lincoln in Minnesota (it is very doubtful that he had received it), Lincoln felt the need to meet with several of the Chiefs of western Tribes. He described the technology and progress of *Young America* as well as used what have become belittling terms like “Pale faces” and “Red Brethren” and described the White House as a great “wigwam”. He has been criticized for this use of language, but it is most likely an attempt, although considered condescending today, to speak man to man with the Chiefs. What stands out in the speech is Lincoln’s vision of the Indian Question. Lincoln, like Jefferson before him, expected, that the Tribes would eventually assimilate. Lincoln would not force this, as he believed they would eventually see the wisdom in this or constantly be in conflict with *Young America’s* progress, even in spite of the current Civil war:

Although we are now engaged in a great war between one another, we are not, as a race, so much disposed to fight and kill one another as our red brethren.

You have asked for my advice. I really am not capable of advising you whether, in the presence of the Great Spirit, who is the great Father of us all, it is best for you to maintain the habits and customs of your race, or adopt a new mode of life.

I can only say that I can see no way in which your race is to become as numerous and prosperous as the white race except by living as they do, by the cultivation of the earth.

It is the object of this government to be on terms of peace with you, and with all our red brethren. We constantly endeavor to be so. We make treaties with you, and will try to observe them; and if our children should sometimes behave badly, and violate these treaties, it is against our wish.

You know it is not always possible for any father to have his children do precisely as he wishes them to do.¹⁸

Father Abraham then returned each Chief with an Indian Commissioner to his people with a gift of a medal to wear on his breast.

Colonel Greenwood, Chief Black Kettle’s escort, presented him with a large garrison American Flag. Dee Brown in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* tells us that he presented the flag as protection on

¹⁸ Lincoln, Abraham. Speeches and Writings. March 27, 1863.

the frontier. Colonel Greenwood had told him that as long as he flew that flag no soldiers would ever fire on him. To show his support to *Young America* the Chief should fly the Stars and Stripes over his village. Dee Brown explains Black Kettle cherished this gift in his description of the massacre at Sand Creek, Colorado the following year.¹⁹ Prior to the confrontation, Black Kettle tried to convince the military under Officers Evans, Chivington and Wynkoop that they were at peace with the United States, but miners in the region had made it very clear that they wanted the Cheyenne removed. When Evans insisted the Cheyenne had made a treaty with the warring Sioux, Black Kettle denied it and said he didn't know where he had heard such a thing. Evans countered,

I have learned that you that you understand that as the whites are at war amongst themselves...you think you can drive the whites from this country, but this reliance is false. The Great Father at Washington has men enough to drive all the Indians off the plains, and whip the rebels at the same time...My advice to you is to turn on the side of the government, and show by your acts that friendly disposition you profess to me.²⁰

The actual motivation for this retort was the discovery that the growing town of Denver, a projected rail port of the Pacific Rail line was squarely on land ceded to the Cheyenne, and efforts to persuade the Cheyenne to move south had been resisted.²¹ In this environment, Lincoln's children, Red and White, would act badly towards each other.

At Sand Creek, on November 29, 1864, when Colonel Chivington rode in to "kill Cheyennes whenever and wherever found", Black Kettle rallied around the Star Spangled Banner, attempting to use it as protection against the raiding Colorado Militia. But this Territorial Militia ignored the Red, White, and Blue and slaughtered over one hundred men women and children (Children were targeted by Chivington because, as he was publicly heard to say "Nits make lice."). Black Kettle was one of the few survivors, who despite treaty and promise of protection from Father Abraham, saw his people massacred and the few survivors driven to inferior land on the Arkansas River. The Sand Creek Massacre shows the disastrous practicality of Lincoln's vision. The impatience of progress lead his "Children to act badly."

¹⁹ Brown, Dee. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. Holt, Rhinehart and Winston: NY. 1970. "War Comes to the Cheyenne," Ch. 4, p. 67-102.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 80.

²¹ *Ibid*, 99.

The past practice of war instead of conciliation trumped Lincoln's desire for assimilation, even among those like the Cheyenne and Arapaho who wished to show their loyalty to the Union of Abraham Lincoln.

The Runaway Train

In his Annual Address to Congress on December 6, 1864, Lincoln reported that Young America would continue to press forward as “The territories of the Union are generally in a condition of *rapid* growth. [Italics mine]²²” As in his other messages he spoke of the character of this rapid growth:

The great enterprise of connecting the Atlantic with the Pacific States by railways and telegraph lines has been entered upon with a vigor that gives assurance of success...

Numerous discoveries of gold, silver and cinnabar mines have been added to the many heretofore known and the country occupied by the Sierra Nevada and Rocky mountains, and the subordinate ranges, now teems with enterprising labor, which is richly remunerative... exceed[ing] one hundred millions in value.²³

A reading of the four Annual Messages in succession will show that the report of Internal Improvements from the department of the Interior is always immediately succeeded or preceded by the state of Indian Affairs.

Given only a week after the Sand Creek Massacre, it is doubtful that Lincoln had much intelligence on the event before he wrote his fourth Annual Message. In the past he was able to speak of problems in the Indian Territory of Oklahoma and in Minnesota, but in his final speech he maintained the need to balance the rapid progress with the welfare of both the encroaching settlers and the still reluctant tribes, “Much yet remains to be done to provide for the proper government of the Indians in other parts of the country to render it secure for the advancing settler, and to provide for the welfare of the Indian. The Secretary reiterates his recommendations, and to them the attention of Congress is invited.”²⁴

With such rapid growth, and an infusion of a growing military force and white settlement population in the west, industrialization and assimilation were set on a fast track. As many other

²² Lincoln, *Annual Message to Congress*. December 6, 1864.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Presidents, most notably Jefferson and Jackson, discovered with progress in the East, one of them, Industrialization, can handle and thrives on such a swift pace; the other, assimilation, is slow in developing and becomes dragged by the other. A legendary story of progress versus assimilation explains it best. A young Cheyenne warrior on the plains noted that the advancement of the Whites came with the Iron Horse that spouted great plumes of smoke. One day, determined to end this advancement, he galloped along the track hunting the great beast. As a locomotive noisily came chugging to him, he threw a lasso around it trying to pull it off its determined path. He was pulled violently from his horse and dragged mercilessly down the track to his death, as passengers looked on from their windows. Some cried in vain, others laughed at the ignorance of this young redskin.

Such was the story of *Young America* in the hands of Abraham Lincoln. The train was rolling and the benefits were for many at the suffering of a few. While it lurched on, from coast to coast, he tried to deliberate between the often corrupt, careless, Industries of progress and facilitate the welfare of his children. But like the young warrior trying to stop the train, those who lived under a different way of life were subject to the harsh reality that a moving train cannot be deterred by primitive hands. The young warrior's people looked on in mourning. Some grew more hostile and others pleaded for the protection of their Great Father, believing, as promised to John Ross and Black Kettle, that he would care for them. And he tried, as we can see with his actions with the Santee Sioux and his meetings with the Chiefs, much like he had tried with Freedmen and Frederick Douglass, but he was no longer there to look after their welfare. He had become victim of another man trying to stop that train. And the train kept rolling.