

WHAT WOULD LINCOLN DO?

An important question in 1860 and 2009:

A glance at Lincoln from the often overlooked

Economic perspective.

Von Drehle, David. “What Would Lincoln Do?” *Time Magazine*. February 16, 2009.

- 1. Using the opening three paragraphs describe Lincoln’s vision of what we call the American Dream.**
- 2. What did Lincoln “cut his political teeth” on before speaking about maintaining the Union and fighting slavery?**
- 3. What would Lincoln say about the nation’s wealth today?**
- 4. Based on his experience in the crashes of 1837 & 1857, what do you think Lincoln would say about our current economic crisis?**
- 5. How did Lincoln see race and slavery issues as an economic issue? How did he reconcile his understanding that whites and slaves may never be socially equal?**
- 6. Give two examples of how “the romance of the log cabin masks a grim reality.”**
- 7. Through New York Governor DeWitt Clinton (and earlier Henry Clay), how did Lincoln find a way to “unlock the prison of poverty?”**
- 8. How did Lincoln fight for the “right to rise” in the crash of 1837?**

9. What programs did Lincoln Initiate as President (while fighting a Civil War) that fit his drive for national wealth?

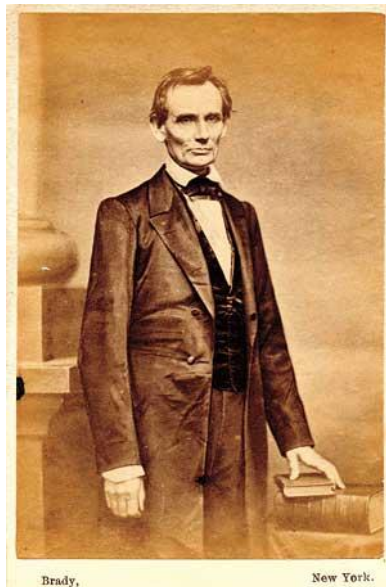
10. How is Lincoln's home in Springfield a symbol of his economic beliefs?

11. GOING DEEP HERE!! Why do we only talk about Lincoln in terms of race and civil rights, when he had such strong confident feelings about government and economics? Explain. (2 E.C.)

12. GOING DEEPER!! Economist and Historian Thomas DiLorenzo in *The Real Lincoln*, blames Lincoln for our corrupt connection between large government and Corporate America that are effecting us today. Can you give any insight into this thought? (2 E.C.)

What Would Lincoln Do?

By DAVID VON DREHLE / SPRINGFIELD



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Abraham Lincoln's marble temple in Washington is as familiar as the back of a penny. But the figure enthroned inside will always be above and apart, a demigod — martyr, prophet, scourge and healer rolled into one. That he was killed on Good Friday with hosannas of triumph still echoing in his ears added a religious overtone to the grief of his countrymen and, from the hour of his death, guaranteed that Lincoln could never again fit into the frame of an ordinary man. ([See pictures of Lincoln.](#)) But he was a man, in ways as familiar as the guy next door. He liked sports, dirty jokes and being the alpha male. He flirted with pretty women and suffered occasional deafness when his wife was talking. He put his feet on the furniture, encouraged his sons to roughhouse and break things, suffered from bad digestion. And he spent a lot of his life thinking about money. Not that he was greedy — quite the opposite — but he had a poor boy's understanding of the fact that money is a powerful tool, the lever that makes ambition possible. "The penniless beginner in the world," he once explained, "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 length hires another new beginner to help him." This steady, gradual advance, Lincoln insisted, is "the prosperous system, which opens the way for all — gives hope to all, and energy, and progress, and improvement of condition to all." We know it as the American Dream, and it certainly worked for him. Beginning with nothing, Lincoln managed to educate himself, raise a family in comfort and subsidize his history-shaping political campaigns — all thanks to that useful instrument, money. ([See 10 elections that changed America.](#))

This mundane fact may seem so obvious that it isn't worth mentioning in the middle of a flood of Lincoln hoopla. February marks the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth. Bookstore shelves are sagging under the weight of new Lincoln tomes. Museums, galleries and lecture halls across the country and around the world have scheduled Lincoln programs. New pennies are being minted, old controversies revisited. And this already keen interest has been further stoked by what Lincoln Bicentennial Commission executive director Eileen Mackevich calls an "Obama wind." The new President, another slender fellow from Illinois, has been busy reading about Lincoln, quoting Lincoln, evoking Lincoln. The Lincoln Memorial was among Barack Obama's first stops in Washington, and when Obama was sworn in last month it was, for many, the culmination of a long march that began with Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. ([See the greatest speeches of all time.](#))

Inevitably, the main focus of all this attention is Lincoln's views on race and equality, and his leadership during the cataclysmic Civil War. Yet given the fix we're in, Lincoln's economic ideas deserve some attention too. Long before he gave his first speeches about Union or slavery, Lincoln was a crusader on questions of economic development and banking. He cut his political teeth on conditions painfully topical for us today: an economic crash that left the young legislator struggling to shore up a failing bank while arguing for government spending on public works.

Lincoln would surely be intrigued to see the son of an African man living with his wife, the descendant of slaves, in his old digs at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. But what might fascinate him

even more, were he to materialize for his bicentennial, is the extent to which the American economy has fulfilled and exceeded his urgent vision of an entrepreneurial, innovative marketplace geared to upward mobility. The man who once said "I know of nothing so pleasant to the mind, as the discovery of anything which is at once *new* and *valuable*" would have a swell time visiting Apple headquarters or touring a genetic-engineering lab. Among the mansions and pretensions of our millionaires and billionaires, he would shrug and say (as he said in 1860), "I don't believe in a law to prevent a man from getting rich; it would do more harm than good. [But] while we do not propose any war upon capital, we do wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with everybody else."

An equal chance. Lincoln's thoughts on money are relevant today because he reminds us of the best aspects of the American economy — not just how to survive a crash but why it matters that we do. The boggling complexity of today's marketplace would amaze him, but the fact that bust has once again followed boom would not. Lincoln lived through two major economic crashes, in 1837 and 1857, and he learned some timeless lessons. He foresaw, in the Union he struggled to preserve, an open, competitive, capitalist, enterprising nation, tied together by rapid transportation and communication. He believed that government had a leading role to play in building the infrastructure of a growing economy. But the guiding principle for all of it, the whole reason for the nation's being, was that "equal chance" — the humble citizen's right to get ahead. Lincoln understood that economic freedom was the bedrock of political liberty. One is not possible without the other.

Thus it was not just virtuous but also necessary to fight the slave economy. Lincoln has been criticized for saying, during his famous debates with Stephen Douglas, that white and black might never be equal in social terms. But he was firm on the economic question: "In the right to eat the bread, without leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns," Lincoln insisted, a black person "is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man." Another time, responding to the Southern argument that Northern factory workers were, in essence, just as enslaved as plantation hands, Lincoln zeroed in on the crucial difference. "There is no permanent class of hired laborers amongst us," he said. "Free labor has the inspiration of hope; pure slavery has no hope." ([See pictures of the civil rights movement, from Emmett Till to Barack Obama.](#))

There is little trace of this money-conscious Lincoln at the great memorial on the National Mall. To catch the scent of that man — the one who knows what we're going through and why the right solutions remain urgently important to the world — we're better off visiting another white-stone, Greek-style temple. Older and odder than the monument on the mall, this Lincoln memorial is situated on an out-of-the-way hilltop in western Kentucky, roughly on the spot where Lincoln was born.

Humble Beginnings

The cornerstone of the Kentucky temple was laid a century ago, 13 years before the dedication of the memorial in Washington. But instead of a statue inside or tablets carved with Lincoln's words, the birthplace monument contains a crude one-room hut with a mud-and-stick chimney — a replica of the mythic log cabin. Putting a dirt-floor hovel inside a columned temple is a bit weird, yes. On the one hand, it is a way of sanctifying the Lincolnian ideal of upward mobility. On the other hand, the transfiguration from squalor to shrine sanitizes Lincoln's life story and in this way makes it harder for us to understand the intensity of his ideas about money. Lincoln knew the dead-end life of an undeveloped economy: poor, nasty, brutish and short. The romance of the log cabin masks a grim reality. ([See pictures of Lincoln.](#))

When Lincoln was born here on Sunday, Feb. 12, 1809, he entered a world as harsh and primitive as if he had been born a thousand years earlier. The simple act of giving birth put his mother in mortal danger, and her only protection was the old "granny woman" summoned from miles away. Her baby was washed in water carried uphill from a dripping spring, then wrapped in animal skin against the winter cold and put in a bed of corn husks standing on a damp earth floor beside a smoky fire.

In later years, Lincoln allowed his supporters to portray him as a sort of backwoods superman, for already the young nation was beginning to glamorize its frontier roots. Even in the heat of the "rail splitter" campaign of 1860, however, he resisted the idea that life in the wilderness was grand and pure. All the hardship and sorrow of what he called "stinted living" could be condensed, Lincoln said, into a single line from the poet Thomas Gray: "the short and simple annals of the poor." His strongest boyhood memories were of death and near death: the time he almost drowned, the time he was brained by the kick of a horse, the early deaths of his younger brother and beloved mother and eventually his sister Sarah.

Another monument, this one at Lincoln's boyhood home in south-central Indiana, comes a bit closer to the dark reality — especially if you approach the place in winter, as the Lincoln family did when Abe was 7 years old. A sharp wind drives scattered snowflakes, and as you walk deeper into the woods, you might try to imagine the first months, before the tiny cabin was built, when the little family huddled for shelter under a flimsy three-sided windbreak.

Here sits another replica of the iconic cabin, this time in its proper physical context. Carl Sandburg calculated that the walk for water was a mile each way, but try as you might to put yourself in the place of a barefoot child making that long trip with that heavy bucket to that dark and drafty little room, it's almost impossible. For you know that if you grow cold or bored or turn an ankle or run a fever, you'll soon be back in the modern world, temperature-controlled and professionally doctored. Within two years of his family's trek into Indiana, Lincoln's mother was dead. The boy watched her suffer and probably helped make her coffin. His father Thomas Lincoln, unable to cope with farm and family by himself, returned to Kentucky, leaving his children nearly abandoned in the hardwood

forest. Abe was 10, Sarah 12; a teenage cousin was their only company. "The panther's scream filled night with fear," Lincoln later wrote. When Thomas finally returned months later with his new wife, they found the future President and his sister living almost like animals, filthy and deprived.

His stepmother Sarah Bush Johnston organized the home and encouraged Lincoln to read. Armed with that crucial skill, he would walk to Gentry's store, two miles away, where he occasionally found newspapers. In these, he learned of a miracle under way in a far-off state called New York. At the urging of Governor DeWitt Clinton, a great canal had been dug nearly 15 times as long as any previous American canal, connecting one end of the state to the other. Attacked and derided as government waste, the Erie Canal was carrying more freight within a few years than the entire Mississippi River. Thousands of hardscrabble farmers and isolated craftsmen — people like the Lincolns — were suddenly able to move their produce to distant markets, and the boom at the port of New York created thousands of new jobs. The New York governor also founded a bank where these "penniless beginners" could "save a surplus." Their little savings could be gathered into the capital needed for further economic development — an idea, historian Daniel Walker Howe writes, that "seemed novel at the time" but proved to be a "huge success."

Lincoln had found a key to unlock the prison of poverty. Here was an upward path that did not depend on the favor of aristocrats or the force of arms. This was the vision that propelled him into politics. In Indiana, Lincoln experienced the liberating thrill of earning his first half-dollar, for ferrying a pair of strangers to a newfangled steamboat on the Ohio River. Later, having reached manhood, he helped his father move one more time, then left the farm without regret. He soon found himself in New Salem, Ill., a riverside village bursting with hopes, if only its little waterway could be widened for commercial traffic. With this ultimately fruitless project as his first grand undertaking, Lincoln began to puzzle his way toward the goal of becoming "the DeWitt Clinton of Illinois." ([See notorious presidential pardons.](#))

The Right to Rise

"He wanted the government to develop Illinois, to make it a great state in which success would be open to anyone, poor or rich," says Gabor Boritt, a Lincoln scholar at Gettysburg College. Self-taught in economics (as in all other subjects), Lincoln subscribed to the Whig Party's belief that private investment alone was unreliable for creating the canals, railroads, bridges, highways and navigable rivers required for growth. When he emerged from the Indiana woods and moved quickly into the Illinois legislature, Lincoln championed a huge public-works program and a state-chartered bank to back it up.

This aspect of Lincoln's career was largely ignored for the first century after his death, until Boritt came along. His background as a refugee from European tyranny made him keenly receptive to Lincoln's economic philosophy, which Boritt eventually dubbed "the right to rise." By 1956, when he

joined the Hungarian revolt against Soviet communist rule, Boritt already had a lifetime's experience of oppression: forced from home by the Nazis, close relatives murdered at Auschwitz, father and brother seized by Stalin's minions. He recalls the words of the Gettysburg Address resounding from the radios of Budapest to inspire the uprising.

Boritt's first book — *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream* — was published in 1978 and has come to be viewed as one of the most important (if under-read) works on the 16th President. His Lincoln was a man far removed from the familiar yarn-spinning charmer of the cracker barrel: enterprising, visionary and persuasive. Still in his 20s, as a member of the legislature's finance committee, Lincoln became a driving force in the development of preindustrial Illinois. In this role, he first experienced an economic collapse: the crash of 1837, which brought on one of America's deepest depressions. Financial markets froze; government debt soared; public opinion soured on the maneuvering of bankers and the schemes of politicians. At the risk of his budding political career, Lincoln struggled to save the canals and railroads. Once, when his opponents tried to force a vote against the state bank, Lincoln clambered from a statehouse window in a wild attempt to derail their plans.

Lincoln's argument was a sort of primitive foreshadowing of today's Troubled Asset Relief Program, or TARP. While Democrats all the way up to President Andrew Jackson were demonizing the banks, Lincoln maintained that the way to save the system was to pump more money into it. He was convinced that once confidence was restored and commerce began humming again, the public works — roads, canal routes, widened rivers and rail lines — that seemed so expensive during the slump would repay their cost many times over. In his folksy way, he compared a stalled economy to a steam engine and thus summed up the idea we now call stimulus. At the engine's "dead point," Lincoln said, even a single turn is "extremely difficult." But jolt it back to life, and it quickly regains momentum. Then "all will be well again."

He wasn't entirely successful, and in the short term, Lincoln's vision saddled Illinois with a heavy public debt. But he carried lessons from that experience into his far more famous fights against slavery and for the Union. Lincoln's presidency worked an unprecedented economic transformation on the country. For the first time, the Federal Government taxed income, floated bonds on a large scale and issued paper currency. The national wealth — land — was leveraged to promote sweeping social, educational and technological initiatives. Some ideas didn't work as planned, like the Homestead Act. Others, like the Morrill Act to create land-grant colleges, worked brilliantly. Still others achieved their aims only at a cost of waste and graft, like the Transcontinental Railroad.

But all shared Lincoln's characteristic stamp of creative finance, large ambition and spirit of economic advancement. "I published my book at a time of great pessimism about America," explains Boritt. "I wanted to remind people of Lincoln's strong ideas about America and the right to rise." He continues, "Now the country is in another difficult period, and I believe the optimistic ideas Lincoln put forth can once again be central."

Lincoln exhorts us to take risks. Bet on America. But never lose sight of the goal: economic freedom for individuals — the right to rise and prosper. To the extent that President Obama's controversial stimulus plan advances that cause, Lincoln would say it is priceless. But only to that extent.

Of all the places where Lincoln lived, only one remains essentially as he knew it. It is the home he made with his wife Mary in Springfield, Ill. The handsome clapboard two-story at the corner of Eighth and Jackson exudes middle-class comfort: carved and upholstered furniture, woven carpets, colorful wallpaper and sumptuous drapes. I toured it recently on one of the coldest mornings of the year and couldn't help noticing that nearly every room was equipped with a radiating stove — state-of-the-art energy efficiency circa 1860. When the tour concluded in the kitchen, my National Park Service guide, Mike McPeak, noted that this one room was about the same size as the entire cabin in which Lincoln was born.

It's vain to scoff at such progress as being merely material. Lincoln's journey from a frigid hovel to a toasty double parlor was a personal declaration of independence, his emancipation from poverty's dead end. The house in Springfield is a reminder that by the time he left for Washington to save his country, Abraham Lincoln had fully escaped the prison of his birth. He was a free man, possessed of a mission to free others.