

Attempts to 'out' Lincoln are misguided

By William C. Kashatus

History, according to a popular aphorism, is what the present chooses to remember about the past. The danger is that the past can be exploited to serve present agendas.

The most recent example of this is Mark Segal, publisher of the Philadelphia Gay News. Segal chose to celebrate LGBT History Month, which ended this week, with a series of features on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people who helped "create this country." He launched his literary offensive partly in response to tea-party conservatives who suggested the Founding Fathers were somehow at odds with homosexuality.

One of Segal's subjects is Abraham Lincoln, whom he calls a "closeted gay." But his evidence is shaky, based on Lincoln's friendships with two men and a vague "boy-marries-boy" poem he wrote. C.A. Tripp, a gay activist, identified the same "evidence" in his *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln* (2005).

The poem, which Lincoln wrote in 1829, describes a marriage-like relationship between two men, Billy and Natty. Billy, the poem says, courted several women, but they re-

jected him, so he married another man.

Since the poem is written in the third person, it's not clear whether Lincoln was writing about himself or taunting someone he knew. In fact, Lincoln was known for ribald jokes and language, which endeared him to many in the Illinois backwoods.

Segal and Tripp also base their theory on the president's close male friendships, contrasted with his problematic, distant relationships with women, including his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln. In 1837, Lincoln, then 28, met Joshua Speed, a 22-year-old partner in a Springfield, Ill., general store. Speed took a liking to Lincoln and hired him as a storekeeper. They lived together for the next four years, sharing a bed, and became lifelong friends.

It was not unusual, however, for two men to share even a small bed due to financial or other circumstances in the 19th century. When Lincoln traveled the circuit with other lawyers, they often slept two to a bed and eight to a room. Indeed, that Lincoln was open about sharing a bed with Speed, who later married, shows it was accepted as a practical matter, not a sexual one.

Lincoln's other alleged homosexu-

al relationship occurred while he was president. Contemporary gossip suggests Capt. David Derickson, who was attached to the Pennsylvania regiment that guarded Lincoln, slept in the presidential bedroom a few times in 1862 while Mary Lincoln was away. Derickson, twice married and a father of 10, transferred out of the regiment the following year.

While Lincoln's relationship with Speed was an intense friendship, his association with Derickson was much less emotional, if at all. There's certainly no evidence that either relationship was sexual or even sensual. To impose the sexually charged conventions of our time on a person who lived more than a century ago is anachronistic and historically irresponsible — as irresponsible as a tea partyer's insisting that the Founding Fathers were homophobes.

In any case, a president or other political leader should be judged not by his sexual orientation, but by his contributions to the nation. And by that standard, Abraham Lincoln was the greatest leader this country has known.

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