

# Our leaders should recall Lincoln's example — and his religious convictions.

By William C. Kashatus

**O**n Feb. 22, 1861, Abraham Lincoln made his first visit to Philadelphia. It was a moving experience for the president-elect, a prairie lawyer chosen by a minority of the popular vote whom many considered ill-equipped for high office.

Facing the insurmountable problem of holding the nation together as it moved hopelessly toward civil war, Lincoln admitted to being "filled with deep emotion" as he stood in front of Independence Hall. He spoke of his strong reverence for the Declaration of Independence which gave "liberty, not alone to the people of this great country, but hope to the world for all future time."

Then, addressing the impending crisis, Lincoln continued: "If this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle — I would rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender it."

"It is the only principle," he resolved, "that I am willing to live by, and, in the pleasure of Almighty God, die by." His words proved to be prophetic — four years later, he returned to Independence Hall in a flag-draped coffin en route to his burial in Illinois.

Today's political leaders should pay heed to Lincoln, the greatest leader this country has ever had. He brought to the American political culture more headstrong conviction, moral energy, and compassion than any other man who preceded or followed him in office. But the true genius of his leadership was its spiritual depth.

Today, it is difficult to find any political leader with a deep spiritual commitment. Personal ambition has become more valued in Washington than moral integrity, which, in many cases, is fostered by a meaningful commitment of religious faith. No wonder so few people trust that their chosen representative will act in their best interests rather than his own.

Lincoln's leadership evolved over the course of his presidency, and his religious convictions played a significant role. In his early days in office, historians have depicted him as America's first "constitutional dictator" for his refusal to call Congress into session during his early months in office. He took extraordinary — and extralegal — action to prepare for war. He blockaded the South, doubled the size of the army, suspended the writ of *habeas corpus* in some areas, and spent treasury funds — all without congressional approval. These actions were the consequence of his unyielding commitment to preserve the Union. He saw the war as democracy's struggle for survival and used every expedient at his disposal to ensure it.

While Lincoln had a strong moral revulsion against slavery, the idea of emancipating blacks by executive order went against his political instincts. He realized that he

had not been elected on an abolitionist platform and he knew that a leader who defied public opinion could lose his capacity to lead altogether. But as the casualty lists grew to appalling proportions, he began to reconsider the meaning of the war in a way that went far beyond politics and public opinion.

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Sometime after the disastrous loss at the Second Battle of Bull Run, Lincoln began to question why the South was winning the war if, in fact, the will of God prevails. "God wills this contest, and wills that it should not yet end," he wrote in a personal reflection known today as Lincoln's "Meditation on the Divine Will." "By his mere quiet power, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without human contest." Thus, Lincoln began to wonder whether he "might be an instrument in God's hands for accomplishing a great work" and looked for some kind of sign to provide him with direction.

The Union victory at Antietam on Sept. 17, 1862, convinced Lincoln that he had been given an "indication of the Divine Will" and that he should "move forward on the cause of emancipation," despite the counsel of several cabinet members. Five days later, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

Although the Civil War would continue for another three years, Lincoln's sense that the contest had some deeper religious meaning increasingly manifested itself in his actions and behavior. He toured hospitals to visit the sick and wounded of *both* armies. He often attended private funerals. And he ran the White House with an open-door policy where *anyone* who wished to see him was welcome. This visible display of compassion inspired trust, loyalty and admiration not only from his subordinates but from the people themselves. Nor was it contrived. Lincoln was a man without pretense. "I claim not to have controlled events, but that events have controlled me," he admitted. "Now, the nation's condition is not what either party or any man devised, or expected. Only God alone can claim it."

Abraham Lincoln never belonged to any church because he was put off by their forms and dogmas. Yet his leadership was grounded in an unshakable belief that God's will was discernible and that the best hope for the nation lay in conforming to that will. He acted on this conviction without being self-righteous or contriving, but with a strong sense of humility and a respect for the dignity of all the American people, appealing to their fundamental sense of justice and morality. As we try to resolve the desperate need for leadership in our time, Lincoln's example is one to emulate.

William C. Kashatus is chair of religious studies at William Penn Charter School in Philadelphia.