

Today's officials could learn from Lincoln's leadership



TODAY WE celebrate the 200th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth.

Throughout the year there will be dozens of memorial and educational events, television documentaries

and an onslaught of publications about our 16th president.

Teachers will speak of a lanky rail-splitter from the backwoods of Kentucky who rose from humble beginnings to become the leader of our nation. Civil rights groups will evoke the image of "Father Abraham," who freed the slaves and guided a divided union through the Civil War. And historians will remind us that "Honest Abe" was actually a shrewd politician who knew how to manipulate an undermining Cabinet and antagonistic press in order to preserve the common good.

But will our own political leaders learn anything from his example?

Today it is difficult to find a political leader at any level of government with the same kind of headstrong conviction, moral energy and compassion that Lincoln exhibited.

What set Lincoln apart from our politicians, as well as his own contemporaries, was the spiritual depth of his leadership – something that evolved over the course of his presidency.

During his first months in office, Lincoln was depicted by the national press as a "constitutional dictator" for his refusal to call Congress into session. He took extraordinary – and extralegal – action to prepare for war. He blockaded the Southern coast to prevent foreign assistance to the Confeder-

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acy, doubled the size of the army, suspended 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. Lincoln 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.

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. "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 spiritual 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, in which anyone who wished to see him was welcome.

Abraham Lincoln's leadership was grounded in the unshakable belief that God's will was discernable and that the best hope of 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.

These qualities marked the genius of Lincoln's leadership and made him the greatest president this country has ever known.

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