

Framing Sustainability

In June of 1858 Abraham Lincoln began his address at Springfield, Illinois, by saying “If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do and how to do it.” He spoke on the issue of slavery that day with a directness that other politicians were loath to practice. At Springfield he asserted that “A house divided against itself cannot stand . . . this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free.” His immediate targets were the evasions and complications of the Kansas–Nebraska Act of 1854 and the Supreme Court ruling handed down in the Dred Scott decision as well as those whom he accused of conspiring to spread slavery to states where it did not already exist. In his speech Lincoln accused Senator Stephen Douglas, President Franklin Pierce, Supreme Court Justice Roger Taney, and President James Buchanan of a conspiracy to spread slavery supported by circumstantial evidence such that it was “impossible to not believe that Stephen and Franklin and Roger and James all understood one another from the beginning, and all worked upon a common plan or draft drawn up before the first lick was struck.” His opponent in the upcoming Senatorial election, Stephen Douglas, he described as a “caged and toothless” lion.

Lincoln had begun the process of “framing” the major issue of the day without equivocation but in a way that would build electoral support based on logic, evidence, and eloquence. On 27 February 1860, Lincoln’s address at the Cooper Institute in New York extended and deepened the argument. He began with words

from Stephen Douglas “Our fathers, when they framed the government under which we live, understood this question just as well, and even better, than we do now,” and proceeded to analyze the historical record to infer what the “fathers” actually believed. Lincoln, in a masterful and lawyerly way, identified 39 of the founders who had “acted on the question” of slavery in decisions voted on in 1784, 1787, 1789, 1798, 1803, and 1820. In contrast to the position held by Douglas, Lincoln showed that 21 of the 39 had acted in ways that clearly indicated their belief that the federal government had the power to rule on the issue of slavery and the other 16 who had not been called upon to act on the issue had in various ways taken positions that suggested that they would have concurred with the majority.

Having destroyed Douglas’ position, Lincoln proceeded to address the “the Southern people . . . if they would listen.” He began with the assertion that every man has a right to his opinion, but “no right to mislead others, who have less access to history and less leisure to study it” and proceeded down the list of charges and counter-charges in the overheated politics of 1860. His aim was to join the Republican cause with the constitutional power to restrain the extension of slavery and not to assert the power of the federal government to abolish it, while also saying bluntly that slavery was wrong. He admonished his followers to “calmly consider [the] demands” of the southern people and “yield to them if, in our deliberate view of our duty, we possibly can.” And then he closed by saying “LET US HAVE FAITH THAT

RIGHT MAKES MIGHT, AND IN THAT FAITH, LET US TO THE END, DARE TO DO OUR DUTY AS WE UNDERSTAND IT” (emphasis is in Lincoln’s text).

The Cooper Institute address was instrumental in Lincoln’s election to the presidency and also in framing the constitutional issues over slavery and state’s rights that had smoldered for 74 years before bursting into the conflagration of the Civil War. As president, Lincoln further refined the issues of slavery, states’ rights, and constitutional law. In his first inaugural address in 1861 Lincoln attempted to reach out to the “people of the Southern states,” assuring them that he neither claimed nor would assert a right as president to “interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists.” The address is an extended description of the constitutional realities as Lincoln saw them in which a national government could not be dissolved by the actions of the constituent states. The point was that the Union remained unbroken and that he had sworn only to defend the Constitution and the union that it had created, not to abolish slavery. He regarded himself still as the president of the southern states and the conflict as a rebellion, not a war between independent countries. Lincoln admonished his “countrymen” to “think calmly and well” on the issues at hand and then closed with the words:

“I am loth [sic] to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave

to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

The call went unheeded and war came.

Through the next 4 years Lincoln continued to frame the meaning of the Constitution relative to the issues of the Civil War, but always in measured strokes looking to a horizon that most did not see. The Emancipation Proclamation carefully calibrated to the war situation and the nuances of keeping the loyal slave states neutral proclaimed only a partial emancipation, drawing the ire of the impatient. At Gettysburg, Lincoln in a masterpiece of eloquent concision based on years of arguing the principle "If men are created equal, they cannot be property" corrected the Constitution, in Garry Wills' (1992) view, without overthrowing it. The "unfinished work" he described was that of restoring the Union and, in effect, taking a country of states to "a new birth of freedom" as a nation with a government "of the people, by the people, for the people."

Lincoln's second inaugural address is the capstone of his efforts to frame slavery within the Constitution and describe a nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. The setting was the final months of the Civil War, with Confederate armies on the threshold of defeat. Lincoln's tone is somber, not triumphal. Although both sides in the war prayed to the same God, the prayers of neither were answered in full. "The Almighty," Lincoln reminds the nation, "has His own purposes" that transcend those of either side in the war. Drawing from Matthew 7:1 Lincoln reminds the victorious not to judge former slaveholders, "that we be not judged." Lincoln closes by saying "With malice toward none; with charity for all . . . let us . . . bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all

which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace."

From his earliest utterances on slavery to "charity for all" Lincoln progressively framed the issues of slavery in ways that left no doubt that he thought it a great wrong but that preservation of the Constitution was the prior consideration. When war came, Lincoln's first aim was to maintain the Union but he then used the occasion to enlarge the concept of a "nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

We are now engaged in a worldwide conversation about the issues of human longevity on Earth, but no national leader has yet framed a satisfactory vision of sustainability. It is still commonly regarded as one of many issues on a long and growing list, not as the linchpin that connects all of the other issues. Relative to the large issues of sustainability, we are virtually everywhere roughly where the United States was, say, in the year 1850 on the matter of slavery. On the art of framing political and moral issues, much of late has been written (Lakoff 2004). What can be learned from how Lincoln cast the problem of slavery?

First, Lincoln did not equivocate or agonize about the essential nature of slavery. He did not over think the subject; he regarded slavery as a great wrong and said so plainly and often. "If slavery is not wrong," he wrote in 1864, "nothing is wrong." Moreover, he saw the centrality of the issue to other issues on the national agenda such as the tariff, sectionalism, and national growth. Second, more clearly than any other political figure of his time, he understood the priority of keeping the constitutional foundation of the nation intact and dealing with slavery within the existing framework of law and philosophy. He did not set out to create something from whole cloth but built a case from sources ready at hand: the Bible, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution. Third, he used language and logic with a

mastery superior to that of any president before or since. Lincoln was a relentless logician but always spoke with vernacular eloquence in words that could be plainly understood by everyone. Fourth, although the issue of slavery was a great moral wrong, Lincoln did not abuse religion to describe it. Although his language was full of biblical metaphors and allusions, he avoided the temptation to demonize the South and to make the war a religious crusade. Throughout the 7 years from the House Divided speech to his assassination in 1865, Lincoln's is one of the masterpieces of political framing that combined shrewdness and sagacity with moral clarity. The result was a progressive clarification of the issues leading to a larger concept of nationhood.

From Lincoln's example we might learn, first, to avoid unnecessary complication and contentiousness. The issues of sustainability are primarily ones of fairness and intergenerational rights, not ones of technology or economics, as important as these may be. Lincoln regarded slavery as wrong because no human had the right to hold property in the form of another human being, period, not because it was economically inefficient. This was the magnetic north by which he oriented his politics. By a similar logic, ours is in the principle that no human has the right to diminish the life and well-being of another and no generation has the right to inflict harm on generations to come. Lincoln did not equivocate on the issue of slavery, nor should we on the tyranny one generation can now impose on another by leaving it ecologically impoverished. Climate change and biotic impoverishment are prime examples of intergenerational remote tyranny and as such constitute a great and permanent wrong and we should say so. Each generation ought to serve as a trustee for posterity, a bridge of obligation stretching from the distant past to the far future. In that role each generation is required to act cautiously, carefully, and wisely (Brown 1994). In Wendell Berry's words this

“is a burden that falls with greatest weight on us of the industrial age who have been and are, by any measure, the humans most guilty of desecrating the world and of destroying creation” (Berry 2005).

Second, Lincoln built his case from sources—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bible—familiar to his audience. In doing so, he took Jefferson’s views on equality to their logical conclusion and recast the Constitution as the foundation for a truly more perfect union that could protect the dignity of all human beings. In our time we can draw on similar sources but now much enhanced by other constitutions and laws and proclamations of the world community. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Earth Charter, for example, describe an inclusive political universe that extends a moral covenant to all the people of Earth and all those yet to be born. It is reasonable to expand this covenant to include the wider community of life, as Aldo Leopold once proposed.

Third, Lincoln’s use of religion is instructive both for its depth and for his restraint. He used biblical imagery and language frequently, but did not do so to castigate southerners or to inflate northerners’ pretensions. His use of religion was cautionary, aimed to heal, not divide. Lincoln oriented the struggle over slavery in a larger vision of an imperfect nation striving to fulfill God’s justice on Earth. The message for us is to ground the issue of sustainability in higher purposes resonant with what is best in the world’s great religions but owned by no one creed.

Fourth, Lincoln understood the power of language to clarify, motivate, and to ennoble. Few, if any leaders have ever used words more powerfully or to better effect in a good cause than did Lincoln. His rhetoric was not what we now call “spin” or manipulation of the gullible; rather, it was the art of persuasion at its best. Lincoln did not have speechwriters to create his message and fit it to

the latest polls. He wrote his own addresses and letters and is reported to have agonized sometimes for hours and days to find the right words. He spoke directly, often bluntly, but he softened his words with humor and the adroit use of metaphor and homespun stories. The result was to place the horrors of combat and the bitterness of sectional strife into a larger context that motivated many to make heroic sacrifices, and a legacy of thought and words that “remade America,” as Garry Wills (1992) puts it. Now perhaps more than ever we turn to Lincoln for perspective and inspiration.

The tragedy of the U.S. Civil War originated in the evasions of the generations prior to 1861. The founders chose not to deal with the problem of slavery in 1787 and it subsequently grew into tragedy the effects of which are still evident. Similarly, without our foresight and action, future generations will attribute the tragedies of climate change and biotic impoverishment to our lies, evasions, and derelictions. But the issue of slavery and that of sustainability also differ in important respects. Slavery was practiced only in a few places and it could be ended by one means or another. The issues comprising the challenge of sustainability, on the other hand, affect everyone on the Earth for as far into the future as one cares to imagine, and they are once and for all time. Never again can we take for granted that the planet will recover from human abuse and insult. For all of its complications, slavery was a relatively simple issue compared to the complexities of sustainability. Progress toward sustainability, however defined, will require more complicated judgments involving intergenerational ethics, science, economics, politics, and much else as applied to problems of energy, agriculture, forestry, shelter, urban planning, health, livelihood, security, and the distribution of wealth within and between generations.

Differences notwithstanding, Lincoln’s example is instructive. He un-

derstood that the deeper problems of race had not been solved by war, which had decided only the constitutional issues about the right of states to secede. It did nothing to resolve the more volatile problems that created the conflict in the first place. He had the faith that they might someday be solved, but only in a nation in which strife and bitterness were set aside by the better angels of our nature. His aim was to create the framework, including the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution that prohibited slavery, in which healing and charity might take root. Lincoln continues to inspire in our time because he framed the legalities of Constitution and war in a larger context of history, obligation, human dignity, and fundamental rights.

The multiple problems of sustainability will not be solved by this generation or the next. Our role, nevertheless, is to frame them in such a way as to create the possibility that they might someday be resolved. Lincoln’s example is instructive to us because he understood the importance of preserving the larger framework in which the lesser art of defining particular issues might proceed with adequate deliberation, which is to say that he understood that the art of framing issues is a means to reach larger ends. In our time many things that ought to be and must be sustained are in jeopardy, the most important of which are those qualities Lincoln used in defining the specific issue of slavery: clarity, courage, generosity, kindness, wisdom, and humor.

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