

Exhibition at New York's Morgan Library

Lincoln Speaks: Words That Transformed a Nation

By Fred Mazelis
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At the Morgan Library and Museum, New York City, January 23 through June 7, 2015

With the approach of the 150th anniversary of Gen. Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox on April 9, 1865, followed less than a week later by the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, attention is once again focused on the US Civil War, and on the president who led the military and political struggle that ended with the abolition of slavery.

A small but informative exhibition at New York City's Morgan Library and Museum makes use of portions of Lincoln's correspondence, speeches and notes to illuminate the life of its subject, which has already been treated in some 15,000 books as well as about 200 film and television productions, including most recently Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2013).

Lincoln Speaks: Words That Transformed a Nation, on view through June 7, was organized by the Morgan Library and the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, which has amassed some 60,000 documents held at the New York Historical Society. About two-thirds of the 80 letters and other original items in the current show, most of them in Lincoln's hand, were loaned by the Institute, with most of the remaining documents coming from the Morgan itself.

It is fascinating to see this material up close, and to read the remarkably clear handwriting of Lincoln himself in many of his letters, military orders and other documents. The Civil War comes alive and the democratic and revolutionary content of Lincoln's words is vividly displayed.

The exhibition is divided into nine somewhat overlapping sections, each dealing with a period of Lincoln's life or career. These include, among others, "Lincoln the Reader," "the Politician," "the Emancipator," "Commander-in-Chief," "Lincoln in the Eyes of the World" and "A Man For All Time."

Lincoln's passion for reading and knowledge, from an early age, is illustrated with references to the King James

version of the Bible, Blackstone's Commentaries, dealing with the development of English law, and especially the works of Shakespeare, much of which Lincoln knew by heart. One of the volumes of Shakespeare owned by the future president is opened to *Macbeth*, which Lincoln knew best of all of the plays.

This reading was crucial in shaping Lincoln's thought and language as he embarked on a political career that would bring him to the White House at the most crucial moment in 19th century American history. The language and style of his letters and speeches were marked by an extraordinary combination of the simple and even homespun with elevated and elegant prose, which inspired his readers and listeners.

Lincoln had no love for the grandiloquent and flowery oratory for which US senator and statesman Daniel Webster and others were noted. He strove for cogency, without a trace of demagoguery or oversimplification of the issues and principles involved. He connected with his listeners, and never talked down to them. The clarity and simplicity is illustrated in the relative brevity of his speeches, most famously the 272 words of the Gettysburg Address.

As is well known, Lincoln proceeded extremely cautiously on the question of abolition. However, he made no attempt to hide his hatred of slavery and this finds expression in the exhibition in a speech fragment from 1858, in which he praises the British abolitionists William Wilberforce and Granville Sharpe.

When the Civil War began in April 1861, Lincoln threw himself into the details of military strategy in addition to dealing with the political crisis. He mixed easily with Northern troops and there was nothing that smacked of militarism or ceremony in his actions in office, something that was shown effectively in Spielberg's film. The reverence for Lincoln among the troops is illustrated by a letter from John Jones of the Illinois Infantry, who wrote, in response to the news of the Emancipation Proclamation: "The name of Abraham Lincoln will be handed down to

posterity as one of the great benefactors of this country, not surpassed by the immortal Washington himself.”

Lincoln’s could also be absolutely single-minded and even ruthless in the prosecution of the war against secession. Some of the documents in the Morgan exhibition express the ruthless logic of the bloody war—the “irrepressible conflict”—and how it put all of the political protagonists to the test. Lincoln met this revolutionary test, and that is above all why he remains, perhaps alongside Jefferson, the greatest of American presidents.

One example of Lincoln’s leadership, and the shifts in his thinking and actions as the war progressed, can be found in his March 1863 letter to Tennessee Governor Andrew Johnson, the same individual who became vice president after Lincoln’s reelection about 18 months later. “The colored population is the great available and yet unavailed force for restoring the union,” Lincoln wrote. “The bare sight of 50,000 armed and drilled black soldiers on the banks of the Mississippi would end the rebellion at once.” These words revealed a growing understanding of the revolutionary character of the struggle, which constituted the greatest expropriation of private property until the Russian Revolution more than half a century later.

Another illustration in the Morgan Library exhibition is General Order No. 252. In response to attacks by Confederate forces on freed slaves, Lincoln ordered, “For every black soldier killed by Confederates, a rebel soldier shall be executed; and for every one enslaved by the enemy or sold into slavery, a rebel soldier shall be placed at hard labor.”

Among the other documents on display are a printed copy of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, delivered in March 1865, only weeks before he died, and a signed copy of the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution, abolishing slavery and involuntary servitude, and first adopted by the Senate in 1864.

In the section of the exhibition on “Lincoln in the Eyes of the World,” emphasis is correctly given to the relationship between the fight to end chattel slavery and the ideals of the Enlightenment. The relationship between the Civil War and the American and French Revolutions of the past century was widely understood at the time. Just as important, the anti-slavery struggle was inseparably bound up with struggles of the working class, above all in England of the Victorian era. The abolition of slavery had a worldwide impact, and the murder of Lincoln met with an outpouring of grief not only in the US but around the world.

Among the interesting items here is an autograph manuscript of Frederick Douglass in 1880 in which the most famous escaped slave, the eloquent orator and abolitionist, paid tribute to Lincoln as “one of the noblest wisest and best

men I ever knew.” Also on display is an autograph copy of Walt Whitman’s famous “O Captain! My Captain!” the 1865 poem inspired by Lincoln’s death. And noted as well is the famous tribute paid by Karl Marx to Lincoln as “the single-minded son of the working class.”

Also presented are the words of two subsequent US presidents, Theodore Roosevelt and later Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose speech at the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1938 is displayed.

The appearance of Bill Clinton in a short video presentation that forms part of the exhibition only demonstrates the gulf between the leaders of American capitalism today and the president who helped lay the basis for the rapid economic and social development of the United States when capitalism still had a progressive role to play.

Clinton emphasizes Lincoln’s determination to “bind up the nation’s wounds” after the Civil War—true enough, but this entirely leaves out the revolutionary character of the period. He also speaks of Lincoln as representing “equality of opportunity—the right to rise.”

The representatives of the financial oligarchy in the US today cannot possibly explain the role of Lincoln and of the Civil War. In this regard, the role of Richard Gilder and Lewis Lehrman, the founders of the Gilder Lehrman Institute, should be noted. Both are wealthy Wall Street figures and right-wing Republicans, associated with such reactionary outfits as the Club for Growth. Their passion for American history is bound up with notions of “American exceptionalism.” For them the Civil War is to be celebrated as the triumph of capitalism, the supposed summit of human civilization. Clinton of course associates himself with this view.

The documents in this exhibit speak for themselves. They show that Lincoln led a revolutionary struggle to destroy an outmoded social order. This is why Marx, the founder of scientific socialism, enthusiastically welcomed this Second American Revolution, and lauded Lincoln for his resolve and leadership. Lincoln stood in the tradition of his revolutionary forebears, including Thomas Jefferson and Tom Paine. The struggle for equality in the 19th century, with which the name of Lincoln will forever be associated, resonates in the struggle against outmoded capitalism today.

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