

# Lincoln and the challenge of power

By Bob Heleringer  
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“Any man can withstand at least some adversity,” Abraham Lincoln once remarked, “but if you really want to test a man’s character, give him power.”

On the 196th birthday of the most extraordinary political and moral leader Kentucky ever produced, the Great Emancipator’s astute observation about



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political power’s human effect is particularly apt.

Tonight, in Louisville, the Kentucky Republican Party will convene its annual Lincoln Day Dinner. At these gatherings, the previous fall’s election victories/defeats (lawsuits?) are celebrated/dissected with copious amounts of high-octane rhetoric leavened with doses of humor from a cornucopia of speakers. The dinner fare, by tradition, is barely organic but more than balanced by a well-stocked, open bar. Sadly, there is usually little or no mention of the guest of honor, Abraham Lincoln. This year, the revelers may want to get reacquainted with this timeless American icon.

Kentucky Republicans have every right to be euphoric. Like the 19th Century British Empire, the sun never seems to set on the sweeping vistas the GOP currently commands. It is a paradigm that could scarcely have been imagined in 1979 when I was elected to the House of Representatives. There were 25 “R’s” in the House (out of 100), Fort Thomas Councilman Jim Bunning’s election to the state Senate gave us all of nine members in that chamber (out of 38). Our gubernatorial candidate, Louie Nunn, had been eviscerated by the flamboyant John Y. Brown Jr. Now, Republicans sit as Governor and Lieutenant Governor, hold two other constitutional offices, control the Senate and are only a few votes shy of running the state House, either outright or by coalition.

No one questions the unique challenges of an abrupt transition between near-permanent minority status and majority control. For a Republican hierarchy still grappling with the nuances of such a seismic shift,

it would be wise to review the “power” model devised by that most famous co-founder of our party, Mr. Lincoln.

As Lincoln assumed the presidency in 1861, he, too, was treading uncharted waters. As the first Republican president, he obviously had no record of a partisan predecessor to guide him. Lincoln was an enigma to the Washington political establishment of the day. He was a virtual unknown, not having been a previous vice president, senator, cabinet member, governor or popular general.

After the seceding Southern states ignored his conciliatory inaugural address, Lincoln gradually expanded the powers of his office to preserve the Union. He accordingly waged a relentless war against the rebellion even when, during the darkest days, many in his own party



supported a negotiated peace (and two nations). By executive order, he abolished slavery, at least on the Confederate soil the Union Army controlled. Lincoln unilaterally suspended the writ of *habeas corpus*, casting thousands of Southern sympathizers into Northern jails without hearings or appeals and ignored a Supreme Court decision declaring his actions unconstitutional.

Since all history is written by the winners, Lincoln’s use of such power has been accepted through time as essential to preserving the Union.

As Lincoln prepared to begin a second term, he had every reason to believe that his forceful use of authority not only won the war, but laid the foundation for a reconstruction of compassion and reconciliation.

While today’s Republican majority does not confront any crisis approaching the scale of what Lincoln faced, Kentucky’s problems are nonetheless serious, deep-rooted and generational. They include lack of edu-

cational opportunity and investment, deficiencies in basic health care and services for the poor and disabled, and an undiversified economy that lags behind a dynamic, thriving Southern region.

These problems are the opportunities that most minority Republican officeholders of the past sought to redress, only to be rebuffed by omnipresent Democratic majorities. Now that we have the means to do so, and mirroring Lincoln’s doggedness, we should tackle these impediments with an unbounded determination to attain for our people the highest levels of progress and prosperity.

Majority Republicans should move beyond a singular attention to election results and stop treating legislative sessions as mere interregnums between those campaigns.

For there are people living in Kentucky who still don’t have a roof over their heads, enough to eat or even running water. Shamefully, there are thousands of families on waiting lists for services for their retarded loved ones. None of these people care if an equal number of Democrats and Republicans can dance on the head of a pin.

After so many decades toiling in political obscurity, we now have an opportunity to actually govern and, with it, sole possession of the hopes of our citizens who, after nearly 200 years of one-sided rule, are watching closely to see if their decision to try a different way was justified.

On Good Friday, April 14, 1865, while attending the theater, Abraham Lincoln was mortally wounded by an assassin.

Carried unconscious across the street to the Peterson residence, Lincoln died the next morning at 7:22 a.m. At the moment of his passing, his Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, rose from his all-night vigil, looked down at his President’s lifeless body, and quietly said: “Now he belongs to the ages.”

In the last hour of the last “some day” that we Republicans wield the power that we so ardently sought, will the people of the commonwealth of Kentucky say the same thing about us?

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