

## Prudence, Politics, and the Proclamation

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*Constituit bonos mores civitati princeps et vitia eluit, si patiens eorum est, non tamquam probest, sed tamquam invito et cum magno tormento ad castigandum veniat.* [Justice is established, and vice eliminated, in the state if the ruler is patient with vice, not as if he approved of it, but as though he pursued it seemingly unwillingly and could only use force as a painful last resort.]

Seneca, *De Clementia* I.22.3

Say the word *prudence* to the ancients, and it would be a virtue; say the word *prudence* to the faculties of the American colleges of the 19th century, and it would be a part of the curriculum in moral philosophy; say the word *prudence* today, and it would be part of a joke.

This says something for how ideas change over time; but it also serves as a warning for the difficulty we may have in understanding 19th century American thought, where virtue was discussed seriously and where prudence was considered a desirable trait in public leaders. It also explains a major difficulty we have in understanding the prime American example of prudence in political life, and that is Abraham Lincoln.

Much as Lincoln was a grass-roots, up-from-the-ranks politician, he was perfectly at ease in speaking of the role of virtue (in general) and prudence (in particular) in political life. Lincoln “regarded prudence in all respect as one of the cardinal virtues,” and he hoped, as President, that “it will appear that we have practiced prudence” in the management of public affairs. Even in the midst of the Civil War, he promised that the war would be carried forward “consistently with the prudence...which ought always to regulate the public service” and without allowing it to degenerate “into a

violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle.” Lincoln had little notion that, over the course of 150 years, this commitment to prudence would become a source of condemnation rather than approval.<sup>1</sup>

### WHAT IS PRUDENCE?

Prudence carries with it today the connotation of “prude”—a person of overexaggerated caution, bland temperance, hesitation, a lack of imagination and will, fearfulness, and a bad case of mincing steps. This would have surprised the classical philosophers, who thought of prudence as one of the four cardinal virtues and who linked it to shrewdness, exceptionally good judgement, and the gift of *coup d’oeil*—the “coup of the eye”—which could take in the whole of a situation at once and know almost automatically how to proceed.

Aristotle called prudence “practical wisdom” in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and contrasted it with “intuitive reason,” the natural endowment Aristotle thought some people had for understanding what was ultimately right and what was ultimately wrong. Intuitive reason marked out “the ultimates in both directions,” while prudence “makes us take the right means.” The link which prudence provides between seeing and act-

ing is what distinguishes it from simple discernment, which is a function of reason. It is the roadbuilder toward the goals marked out by the reason.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas Aquinas chalked out an even more critical role for prudence, since he regarded prudence as “an intellectual virtue” which performs two vital tasks.

*First*, it was the nail head which fastened the intellectual and moral virtues together.

*Second*, because it was housed in the reason, prudence acted as a restraint on “impulse or passion.” It was “right reason about things to be done.”

Prudence, moreover, was characterized by the possession of a good *memory* (so that someone always had on call a mental encyclopedia of material with which to compare current situations); an *understanding* of the present (being able to understand what a given situation really meant); and *foresight* of the future so that a prudent person always could see several jumps ahead to where any actions were likely to lead. Aquinas was not trying to say what moderns usually say about prudence: that it is an expression of *moderation*, or the attitude of moderates in action, or an instinct for the middle of the road. It was actually the other way round: Prudence might resort to moderation for a solution, but not always.<sup>3</sup>

What separates prudence from moderation is that “moderation” is an attitude preoccupied with the integrity of means but not ends in political action. Moderation is a tragic attitude, because it understands only too well the constraints imposed by limited human resources and by human nature.

<sup>1</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Communication to the People of Sangamo County,” March 9, 1832, and “Annual Message to Congress,” December 3, 1861, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), Vol. 1, p. 8 and Vol. 5, pp. 24, 36, 49; Charles S. Zane, “Lincoln As I Knew Him,” *Sunset Magazine*, Vol. 29 (October 1912), pp. 430–438; Ethan Fishman, “Under the Circumstances: Abraham Lincoln and Classical Prudence,” in *Abraham Lincoln: Sources and Style of Leadership*, ed. Frank J. Williams *et al.* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), pp. 3–15; Ralph Lerner, *Revolutions Revisited: Two Faces of the Politics of Enlightenment* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 107–111.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book Six, Chapters 11 and 12.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-I, Q. 57, 65.

This is why “moderation” so often becomes paralyzed and snarled in an effort to placate competing moral demands or to insist on pragmatic process without regard to what the process is producing. Being wise “does not mean that prudence itself should be moderate, but that moderation must be imposed on other things according to prudence.” Daring, which “leads one to act quickly,” might also be the work of prudence, provided that “it is directed by reason.” Prudence, then, does not avoid action; if anything, it demands action of a particular kind.

Aquinas also found another difference between prudence and moderation in *foresight*. Moderation is blind, which is why it necessarily leads people to grope forward slowly. Prudence, however, is based on foresight, which yields a discerning and dependable estimate of the way things are going. “Foresight is the principal of all the parts of prudence, since whatever else is required for prudence, is necessary precisely that some particular thing may be rightly directed to its end.” This only made sense, since the term prudence (*prudentia*) was itself derived from providence (*providentia*), the providing-ahead for things.

Aquinas, in fact, introduces a discussion of prudence for the first time in the *Summa Theologica* at the point where he begins his *quaestio* on the providence of God, “for in the science of morals, after the moral virtues themselves, comes the consideration of prudence, to which providence would seem to belong” because both providence and prudence are concerned with “directing the ordering of some things towards an end.” Prudence occupied so large a place in providence that one might as well concede that “the perfection of divine providence demands that there be intermediary causes as executors of it.”<sup>4</sup>

At the other remove from prudence stands absolutism, which is about the integrity of ends without sufficient attention to the integrity of means so that it invests its servants with the attitude of disdain and certainty.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 23, II-I, Q. 47, 57, II-II, Q. 49, 127; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III-I, Ch. 76 (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), Vol. 4, p. 260.

This is the universe where it is supposed that wills are free from ultimate constraints and that only willing and power are lacking to attain a good end.

Prudence, however, pays equal attention to the integrity of ends and of means. Prudence is an ironic rather than a tragic attitude, where the calculus of costs is *critical* but at the same time neither *crucial* nor *incidental*. Prudence prefers incremental progress to categorical solutions and fosters that progress through the offering of motives rather than expecting to change dispositions. Yet, unlike “moderation,” prudence has a sense of purposeful motion and declines to be paralyzed by a preoccupation with process, even while it remains aware that there is no goal so easily attained or so fully attained that it rationalizes dispensing with process altogether.<sup>5</sup>

So, if we were to create a palm-card for prudence, it would contain the following elements:

- Balancing the integrity of means and ends in political life;
- Accepting reciprocity, imperfection, and concession rather than demanding resolutions;
- The predominance of reason among the faculties;
- Waiting on providence rather than affirming free will;
- The ironic viewpoint rather than the comic, tragic, or didactic.

## PRUDENCE AND ROMANTICISM

What broke over the boundary between classical prudence and the shrinking-violet image that prudence became saddled with was Romanticism. In their rage against the restraints of Enlightenment reason, the Romantics of the late 18th century and 19th century—Herder, Hamann, Fichte, Schiller, Goethe—glorified the passionate, the willful, the sublime, and all the fearful and monstrous qualities which the Enlighten-

ment had tried to banish from the human imagination. And at no point was a greater opening offered for the exercise of the Romantic virtues than in the ethics of Immanuel Kant.

Kant is a hinge figure in European intellectual history, with one face pointing backwards to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and one facing forward toward the Romantics. Kant’s fundamental problem was the one Locke had left unaddressed in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and which Hume exploited with such genteel ruthlessness, and that is how (given Locke’s premises about the source of all knowledge being in sensation) the mind can be aware of relations and connections (like causality) which have no phenomenal or sensation-triggering reality.

Kant’s reply to Hume was an acknowledgment that Hume had gotten things partly right—that minds had no way of directly apprehending non-empirical relationships (like causality) between phenomena—and partly wrong in that Hume had missed the active role played by the mind itself in knowledge. Minds came equipped with their own hard-wired categories, which govern the knowledge of phenomena and their relations, and causality was one of the mind’s necessary categories, even if there was no direct apprehension of the essence (*noumena*) of the objects themselves.<sup>6</sup>

What this did for the creation of a Kantian ethic was to establish the dominance of a “categorical imperative” which is not known by the senses but which, when applied to ethical dilemmas, yields an absolute and universal answer. “We do not need science and philosophy to know what we should do to be honest and good, yea, even wise and virtuous,” argued Kant in his *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*. What we need to do is obey the imperative:

There is an imperative which commands a certain conduct immediately, without having as its

<sup>5</sup>William Lee Miller, *Lincoln’s Virtues: An Ethical Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2002), pp. 222–223; Thomas Sowell, *The Vision of the Anointed: Self-Congratulation as a Basis for Social Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 105.

<sup>6</sup>Isaiah Berlin, “The Restrained Romantics,” in *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 68; Ralph C.S. Walker, *Kant* (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 151–164.

condition any other purpose to be attained by it... It concerns not the matter of the action, or its intended result, but its form and the principle of which it is itself a result; and what is essentially good in it consists in the mental disposition, let the consequences be what it may.<sup>7</sup>

This sort of immediate absolutism in ethics could not have sat at greater distances from the rational metaphysics of Aquinas, and it started prudence on its long roll downwards from its ancient status as virtue toward its modern status nearer to vice. In America, it played directly to Romantics like Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose essay on “Prudence,” from 1841, describes prudence unflatteringly as “the virtue of the senses; it is the science of appearances,” other than which nothing could be of less consequence for Kantian ethics. “The world is filled with the proverbs and acts and winkings of a base prudence,” Emerson complained, “a prudence which adores the Rule of Three, which never subscribes, which never gives, which seldom lends, and asks but one question of any project,—Will it bake bread?”

But what gave the assault on prudence its moving power was the intersection of the Romantic ethics with America’s own homegrown version of ethical absolutism in the religion of the Evangelical Awakeners. “There can be nothing to render it, in any measure, a *hard* and *difficult* thing, to love God with all our hearts,” wrote Joseph Bellamy, the pupil of Jonathan Edwards, in 1750, “but our being destitute of a *right* temper of mind...therefore, we are *perfectly inexcusable*, and altogether and *wholly* to *blame*, that we do not.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, ed. T.K. Abbott (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1932), pp. 20, 33; John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Barbara Herman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 156.

<sup>8</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Prudence” [Essays: First Series, 1841], in *Selected Writings*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 1940), pp. 237–248; Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated, or, Experimental Religion as Distinguished from Formality and Enthusiasm* (1750; Morristown, N.J.: Henry P. Russell, 1804), p. 100;

## ABOLITION OR EMANCIPATION?

These two streams of absolutism met in the abolitionists, who combined Romantic ethics with evangelicalism in a fiery blend of German idealism and John the Baptist. But it was exactly this blending which alienated Abraham Lincoln from their ranks. Born at the very end of the so-called long Enlightenment, Lincoln had no reservations about being guided by “Reason” or making reason the instrument preferred to passion.

In one of his earliest speeches, from 1838, Lincoln warned that the pillars of the republic must fall “unless we, their descendants, supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason. Passion has helped us; but can do so no more. It will in future be our enemy. Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defence.” Twenty-one years later, as he stood on the east portico of the Capitol to take the presidential oath, Lincoln was still warning that “Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.”<sup>9</sup> On those terms, Lincoln had no shame in being known as prudent.

The most obvious example of Lincoln’s prudence at work can be seen through his handling of slavery and emancipation. It has become common—and *was* common in Lincoln’s own day among the abolitionists—to denounce Lincoln as “an equivocating, vacillating leader” whose chief aim was “the integrity of the Union and not the emancipation of the slaves; that if he could keep the Union from being disrupted, he

James Hoopes, *Consciousness in New England: From Puritanism and Ideas to Psychoanalysis and Semiotic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 121; Lerner, *Revolutions Revisited*, pp. 95–98.

<sup>9</sup>Abraham Lincoln, “Address Before the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield,” January 27, 1838, and “First Inaugural Address,” March 4, 1861, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, p. 115, and Vol. 4, p. 271; James Jasinski, “Idioms of Prudence in Three Antebellum Controversies: Revolution, Constitution, and Slavery,” in *Prudence: Classical Virtue, Postmodern Practice* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 2003), pp. 168–176.



would not only allow slavery to exist but would loyally protect it.”<sup>10</sup>

The standard of judgement being applied (in this case by W.E.B. DuBois) is a standard based upon immediatism. But consider what Lincoln’s options for emancipation really were: In an era before the Fourteenth Amendment’s incorporation of civil rights into the federal Constitution, civil rights (and that included even the definition of citizenship) were state prerogatives and were protected by a jurisprudential firewall from federal review. Much as he “was himself opposed to slavery,” he could not “see how the abolitionists could reach it in the slave states.”

Demands for immediate abolition might satisfy some Romantic yearning for justice over law, but as long as slavery was a state, not a federal, institution, any attempt on Lincoln’s part to emancipate slaves by executive order would be at once challenged by the states in the federal courts—and the federal judiciary, all the way up to the Supreme Court, had shown itself repeatedly and profoundly hostile to emancipation. Abolitionists, Lincoln complained, “seemed to think that the moment I was president, I had the power to abolish slavery, forgetting that before I could have any power whatsoever I had to take the oath to support the Constitution of the United States as I found them.”

On the other hand, immediate abolition was not the only avenue to emancipation. The federal government might have no *direct* power to interfere in state matters, but it did have considerable fiscal powers with which it could tempt slave states to abandon slavery by legislative action and embrace a federally funded buyout.

Within six months of his inauguration, Lincoln had initiated a campaign for legislative emancipation, beginning with Delaware, the weakest of the four slave states that remained loyal to the Union. This leg-

<sup>10</sup>Lerone Bennett, in “Differing Perspectives on Abraham Lincoln,” in *Booknotes: Stories from American History* (New York: Perseus Books, 2001), pp. 115–117; W.E.B. DuBois, “Abraham Lincoln,” May 1922, and “Lincoln Again,” September 1922, in W.E.B. DuBois: *Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986), 1196, 1197–1198.

islative option was based “upon these conditions: First, that the abolition should be gradual. Second, that it should be on a vote of the majority of the qualified voters of the District; and third that compensation should be made to unwilling owners.” Handled this way, emancipation would set up what he expected would be a domino effect among the slave states for emancipation and would cost infinitely less than the blood and treasure to be expended on civil war.<sup>11</sup>

Unhappily for Lincoln, the loyal slave states threw his offer back in his face. So, in the summer of 1862, he turned instead to a military order that freed the Confederacy’s slaves—what we now know as the Emancipation Proclamation. But because the Proclamation was only a military order, prudence dictated that he limit its application to those slave states in actual rebellion against the Union. And since little (if any) legal precedent existed for the use of presidential “war powers” in this way, he continued to back a legislative strategy, parallel to his “war powers” Proclamation, and in the end, it was that legislative strategy which bore the ultimate fruit of black freedom in the Thirteenth Amendment.

Between these two strategies, legislative and military, Lincoln saw no conflict. He told federal judge Thomas Duval that “he saw nothing inconsistent with the gradual emancipation of slavery and his proclamation.” Lincoln’s procedure was at every step a model of prudence: It made use of *memory* (a knowledge of constitutional process); an *understanding* of the present (the limitations his position placed upon his ability to move in certain directions); and *foresight* (his confidence that he knew what the results of his actions, military and legislative, were likely to be).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Henry W. Blodgett, in *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln*, eds. Don and Virginia Fehrenbacher (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 34; Francis B. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1867), p. 76; Abraham Lincoln, “To John Hill,” September 1860, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 106–107; Joseph R. Forniari, “Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation: A Model of Prudent Leadership,” in *Tempered Strength: Studies in the Nature and Scope of Prudential Leadership* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2002), pp. 125–149.

<sup>12</sup>Thomas Duval, in *Recollected Words*, p. 146.

## INVOKING PROVIDENCE

No characteristic of Lincoln's prudence on emancipation, however, was more remarkable than his invocation of Providence. "Mr. Lincoln," wrote William Henry Herndon, Lincoln's law partner, in 1866, "had faith...that Providence rules the universe of matter and substance, mind and spirit. That a law enwraps the universe, and that all things, beings, minds, were moving to their appointed end."<sup>13</sup>

This may not have been a particularly shocking revelation, since a good deal of the Victorian world was consumed by a passion to believe in an intelligent, direction-giving, and preserving power, whether in physical nature or supernaturally sovereign over human nature or both. In Lincoln's own time, providence had come to be an expression of the Enlightenment's confidence in the mechanical regularity of physics and its hope that the same pattern of regularity crossed over into human nature.

Joseph Fourier published the first statistics on suicide in Paris in the 1820s, accompanying them with the almost triumphal announcement that "One observes, year after year, within one or two units, the same number of suicides by drowning, by hanging, by firearms, by asphyxiation, by sharp instruments, by falling or poisoning." There was, in other words, a pattern if one but stopped to look, and Fourier's tentative pleasure in observing this required only time and the methods of Andre-Michel Guerry and Adolphe Quetelet to yield a new faith in a physics of human action that looks like nothing so much as a naturalized predestination. "We know in advance," wrote Quetelet, "how many individuals will dirty their hands with the blood of others, how many will be forgers, how many poisoners, nearly as well as one can enumerate in advance the births and deaths that must take place."

Or perhaps the Victorian passion for providence was better captured by the literati, who yielded to the grim inevitability of Quetelet's predictions, but resignedly. "If you look closely into the matter, it will be seen that whatever appears most vagrant, and utterly purposeless, turns out, in the end, to have been impelled the most surely on a preordained and unswerving track," concluded the Puritan-haunted Nathaniel Hawthorne, and even as irreligious a humorist as Mark Twain was preoccupied with free will and determinism, on one occasion sitting up half the night arguing with William Dean Howells about whether there was a controlling providence in the universe. In his final years, it was almost the primary obsession of his writing. If we find Lincoln ruminating similarly, there is nothing in that which forces us to see his providentialism as necessarily religious.<sup>14</sup>

Except, of course, for the way that Lincoln felt compelled to use providence as a living political notion rather than just a metaphysical one. Certainly, no one who knew Lincoln needed to question the frequency with which he drew providence into both public and private discourse and spoke of it as a power exerted by a divine personality on both individuals and in general. "I know that Mr. Lincoln was a firm believer in a superintending and overruling Providence," wrote Orville Hickman Browning, briefly an Illinois senator and one of Lincoln's oldest personal and political friends. "He believed the destinies of men were, or, at least, that his own destiny was, shaped, and controlled, by an intelligence and power higher and greater than his own, and which he could neither control or thwart."

Out of his own mouth, Lincoln placed "my reliance for support" on "that Divine assistance without which

<sup>13</sup>Woodrow Wilson, "Abraham Lincoln: A Man of the People," in *Abraham Lincoln: The Tribute of a Century, 1809-1909* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1910), p. 30; David Donald, "Getting Right with Lincoln," in *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era* (New York: Vintage, 1960), p. 17; William Henry Herndon, December 3, 1866, in *The Hidden Lincoln: From the Letters and Papers of William H. Herndon*, ed. Emanuel Hertz (New York: Viking, 1938), p. 43.

<sup>14</sup>Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 77-78, 105; Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun, or the Romance of Monte Beni* (1860; Boston, 1901), p. 333; Paul F. Boller, *Freedom and Fate in American Thought* (Dallas, Tex.: Southern Methodist University Press, 1978), p. 189; Alfred Kazin, *God and the American Writer* (New York: Knopf, 1997), pp. 188-193.

I cannot succeed, but with which success is certain," and he told well-wishers in a speech in Newark, on his way to his inauguration in 1861, "I cannot succeed, without the sustenance of Divine Providence." In 1862, a delegation of Pennsylvania Quakers, headed by the famous helper of fugitives Thomas Garrett, waited on Lincoln to urge him to deal with slavery, but Lincoln, speaking off the cuff, turned his reply in a curiously providential direction. "The President responded [that] he had sometime thought that perhaps he might be an instrument in God's hands of accomplishing a great work."<sup>15</sup>

The problem is that this is admirable only up to a point. Holding private consultations with the Ancient of Days on matters of policy has never recommended itself to the American people as proof of presidential greatness. And yet, as he explained to the Cabinet on September 22, 1862, his decision to issue an Emancipation Proclamation was the direct consequence of "a vow, a covenant" he had made "that if God gave us the victory" in the battle that resulted at Antietam on September 17,

he would consider it an indication of divine will and that it was his duty to move forward in the cause of emancipation. It might be thought strange that he had in this way submitted the disposal of matters when the way was not clear to his mind what he should do. God had decided this question in favor of the slaves. He was satisfied it was right, was confirmed and strengthened in his action by the vow and the results.

This, coming from a man with as minimal a religious profile as Lincoln's, was so surprising that Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase asked Lincoln to repeat

<sup>15</sup>Orville Hickman Browning to Isaac Arnold, November 25, 1872, in Isaac Arnold Papers, Chicago Historical Society; Abraham Lincoln, "Farewell Address," February 11, 1861, "Remarks at Newark, New Jersey," February 21, 1861, and "Remarks to a Delegation of Progressive Friends," June 20, 1862, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 190, 234, and Vol. 5, pp. 278–279.

himself, and Lincoln, "in a manner half-apologetic," conceded that "this might seem strange."<sup>16</sup>

But providence had always played a major role in the constitution of Lincoln's prudence. He told the journalist Noah Brooks that he thought it "wise to wait for the developments of Providence; and the Scriptural phrase that 'the stars in their courses fought against Sisera' to him had a depth of meaning."<sup>17</sup> John Todd Stuart, who had been Lincoln's mentor in Illinois law and who served in the 38th Congress, pressed Lincoln with the assertion: "I believe that Providence is carrying on this thing." Lincoln replied "with great emphasis": "Stuart, that is just my opinion." And "considering our manner of approaching the subject" and "the emphasis and evident sincerity of his answer," Stuart was "sure he had no possible motive for saying what he did unless it came from a deep and settled conviction."<sup>18</sup>

That conviction, instead of puffing Lincoln up with personal hubris, forced him into an admission that he knew entirely too little about the ways of providence. Clear as his reliance on providence was, what is equally impressive is how Lincoln made no claims to knowing the precise road that providence had ordained for him. "Certainly there is no contending against the Will of God," Lincoln wrote in a set of notes he prepared during the Lincoln–Douglas debates in 1858, "but still

<sup>16</sup>Salmon P. Chase, diary entry for September 22, 1862, in *Inside Lincoln's Cabinet*, ed. David Donald (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1954), p. 150; on Chase asking for the repeat of the "vow," see Isaac Arnold, *The History of Abraham Lincoln and the Overthrow of Slavery* (Chicago: Clarke & Co., 1866), pp. 295–296; Gideon Welles, diary entry for September 22, 1862, in *Diary of Gideon Welles*, ed. John Torrey Morse (Boston: Houghton & Mifflin, 1911), Vol. 1, p. 143; Gideon Welles, "History of Emancipation," in *Civil War and Reconstruction: Selected Essays by Gideon Welles*, ed. Albert Mordell (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1959), p. 248.

<sup>17</sup>Noah Brooks, "Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln," in *Lincoln Observed: Civil War Dispatches of Noah Brooks*, ed. Michael Burlingame (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 216.

<sup>18</sup>John G. Nicolay, "Conversation with Hon. J.T. Stuart," June 24, 1875, in *An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln: John G. Nicolay's Interview and Essays*, ed. Michael Burlingame (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), pp. 14–15.

there is some difficulty in ascertaining, and applying it, to particular cases.”

When a delegation of Chicago ministers presented him with a brace of resolutions from a citywide anti-slavery meeting in September 1862, Lincoln warned them against presuming to know what the direction of providence was. “These are not...the days of miracles, and I suppose it will be granted that I am not to expect a divine revelation. I must study the plain physical facts of the case, as certain what is possible and learn what appears to be wise and right.”<sup>19</sup> The result was that Lincoln believed “we are all agents and instruments of Divine providence” (as he told Senate chaplain Byron Sunderland) but not in the egoistic sense; that God had invested a special interest in the Union cause but in the sense that, North and South alike, “we are working out the will of God.”

Moreover, the government of *providence* was universal in both time and space. The Civil War was a “struggle...for a vast future” that required “a reliance on Providence, all the more firm and earnest” so that Americans may “proceed in the great task which events have devolved upon us.”<sup>20</sup>

Providence was also a means for balancing respect for a divine purpose in human affairs with the candid recognition that it was surpassingly difficult to know what specific purposes God might have or who should speak for those purposes. Providence is a sun best observed generally and through a glass darkly; but its most ardent observers tend to come in very specific and confident flavors—Methodist, Baptist, Zoroastrian, and so forth—and they present the problem of how to speak of religion in public without also seeming to

endorse just one of those very specific or exclusionary flavors.

In his long years as a Whig, Lincoln had learned the importance of recognizing the fundamentally secular structure of the American federal government without surrendering entirely to the notion that it was *totally* secular—“that shallow doctrine of the Monticello School,” as a Whig journal put it in 1846—or that the power of religious belief in society had to go untapped by civil government in its avoidance of seeming to establish a civic religion. A totally secular state was, of course, a possibility but not an attractive one, if only because the tendency of secularity is to debase and dispirit democracy.

Tocqueville worried that the great flaw of democracy was its inability to offer good reasons for its own virtues; it had no transcendent sanction. By attaching the Emancipation Proclamation to his “vow” to God, Lincoln demonstrated what James C. Welling, the editor of Washington’s flagship newspaper during the Civil War, called “that prudent and reverent waiting on Providence” which allowed Lincoln to fend off “the danger of identifying the proclamation in the popular mind with a panic cry of despair.”<sup>21</sup>

Prudence is not a matter of looking for guidance from voices from the sky; it is also not about ignoring them, either. The Proclamation was “warranted by the Constitution,” but in its final form on New Year’s Day, 1863, it was also designed to enjoy “the gracious favor of Almighty God.” Lincoln rooted human dignity in God and natural law; Kant, as one modern commentator quips, “makes us out to be gods ourselves.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Fragment on Pro-slavery Theology,” October 1, 1858, and “Reply to Emancipation Memorial Presented by Chicago Christians of All Denominations,” September 13, 1862, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 204, and Vol. 5, p. 420; W.W. Patton, *President Lincoln and the Chicago Memorial on Emancipation* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1888), pp. 19–20.

<sup>20</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Annual Message to Congress,” December 3, 1861, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, p. 53; Abraham Lincoln to Sunderland, in *Recollected Words*, p. 436; William E. Barton, *The Soul of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: George H. Doran, 1920), p. 332.

<sup>21</sup>James C. Welling, in Allen Thorndike Rice, *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time* (New York: North American Publishing, 1886), p. 530; Stewart Winger, *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), p. 111.

<sup>22</sup>Robert Hariman, “Theory Without Modernity,” in *Prudence: Classical Virtue, Postmodern Practice*, p. 31; Herman Belz, “The ‘Philosophical Cause’ of Free Government: The Problem of Lincoln’s Political Thought,” in *Abraham Lincoln, Constitutionalism, and Equal Rights in the Civil War Era* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), pp. 56–57; J. Budziszewski, *The Revenge of Conscience: Politics and the Fall of Man* (Dallas, Tex.: Spence, 1999), pp. 53, 93–94.



## INTRUSION OF THE KANTIAN ETHIC

Part of what makes our understanding of Lincoln and prudence so difficult is the intrusion of the Kantian ethic into American political thought, an intrusion now grown into dominance through the work of John Rawls. The Rawlsian notion of the “original position” is not one which grows from memory or understanding, much less foresight; it is, on the contrary, a purely theoretical construct.

“The original position is not,” Rawls admitted, “thought of as an actual historical state of affairs”; it is, in fact, a cutting-off of the theorist from the “contingent advantages and accidental impulses from the past.” Unlike prudence, it is predicated on a “veil of ignorance” which allows the theorist to debate justice without the admixture of concrete realities or concrete probabilities. “Certain principles of justice are justified because they would be agreed to in an initial situation of equality,” Rawls argued, in precisely the same spirit that Kant argued for the mandate of the categorical imperative as a way of nullifying “the effects of specific contingencies.”<sup>23</sup>

Lincoln understood emancipation not as the satisfaction of a “spirit” overriding the law, nor as the moment of fusion between the Constitution and absolute moral theory, but as a goal to be achieved through prudential means so that worthwhile consequences might result. He could not be persuaded that emancipation required the headlong abandonment of everything save the single absolute of abolition, or that purity of intention was all that mattered, or that the exercise of the will rather than the reason was the best ethical foot forward.

“Kant,” remarks Robert Kaplan, “symbolizes a morality of intention rather than of consequences, a morality of abstract justice rather than of actual result.”<sup>24</sup> For Lincoln, the integrity of *intention* (in the

form of the Constitution and the rule of law) and the integrity of *consequences* (the abolition of slavery) were complementary rather than conflicting actors—the one possessed moral claims fully as much as the other. “To those who claim omnipotence for the Legislature, and who in the plenitude of their assumed powers, are disposed to disregard the Constitution, law, good faith, moral right, and every thing else,” Lincoln declared in one of earliest speeches to the Illinois legislature, “I have nothing to say.”

In this, Lincoln struggled to be true to the two souls of American culture. The one soul is the spirit of the Puritans: self-denying, evangelical, radical, and providential to the point of confidently identifying precisely who and what represent the operations of providence. The other is the spirit of the Enlightenment: secular, commercial, self-interested in the enlightened sort of way. These two have often been locked in combat, only to withdraw from the combat after a brief battering reminds them that in America they have no choice but to coexist.

Providence and prudence together are thus joined at the head, if not the heart, of American politics. The Kantian imperative, however, is a threat to both, not because it takes the side of one against the other, but because it dispenses with the virtues of both.

In Lincoln, we have a glimpse of prudence in a liberal democracy; but it is also our best glimpse of it, and perhaps our best hope for understanding and recovering it, and our best hope for the possibility of statesmanship in an age of the partisan absolute, *where ignorant armies clash by night*.

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<sup>23</sup>John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 12, 21, 136, and *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 23.

<sup>24</sup>Robert Kaplan, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 113; Abraham Lincoln,

“Speech in the Illinois Legislature Concerning the State Bank,” January 11, 1837, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, p. 67.