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Abraham Lincoln and the First-Person Plural: A Study in Language and Leadership

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The 2009 bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth brought forth an outpouring of fresh studies of the man and his times. The new scholarship largely affirmed the longstanding consensus about the sixteenth president and his greatness. His was an almost superhuman achievement in holding the Union together, emancipating the slaves, and ultimately leading the North to victory. This study offers a novel evaluation of one key element of Lincoln's leadership. It details how Lincoln frequently and surprisingly substituted "we" for "I" in his famous addresses, as no political leader had done before him, and explores how his preference for the plural over singular first-person pronoun enabled his political ascendency in the 1850s and sustained his presidency during the war. His syntax offers a linguistic window into understanding his timely, unique, and uniquely self-conscious, style of leadership. Although not exactly a man of letters, Lincoln proved to be a great leader in large measure because of his steadfast beliefs about a union and an inclusive vision of American nationhood so powerfully expressed in his exceptional use of the first-person plural.

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It was well past 11 P.M., when the news finally arrived. The telegraph operator read Lincoln the dispatch confirming that New York's 35 electoral votes had gone to the Republicans and with them the election. Come next March Springfield's favorite son would become the sixteenth president of the United States. As much relieved as excited, Lincoln departed the telegraph office and descended onto the street, where he warmly accepted the congratulations of his friends and neighbors as news of his victory quickly spread. Around midnight, he excused himself from the unfolding festivities saying, "it was about time [he] went home and told the news to a tired woman who was sitting up for [him]."[1] Arriving at his doorstep he announced himself to his wife with the words "Mary, Mary! *we are elected*."[2]

Precisely whom Lincoln had in mind with his "we are elected" is unclear. Perhaps he was merely employing the "royal we," having made a career of playing humble servant to the people.[3] Not once during that auspicious November day had Old Abe betrayed a whit of "frivolous accomplishment" or egotistical self-satisfaction, wrote one observer.[4] Despite naturally taking a "lively interest in the election,"

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according to journalist Samuel Weed, who shadowed the candidate, Lincoln had "scarcely ever alluded to himself or his candidacy" in the course of the entire day.[5] Now elected to the nation's highest office by millions of his countrymen, Lincoln diffidently – and typically as we shall see – refrained from invoking the first-person singular. And for good reason. Beneath the modesty of Lincoln's first-person plural pronoun lay a simple truth: his "we" served as syntactical acknowledgement of the obvious, that Americans had not voted for him alone but a party ticket. Americans cast their votes for a ticket of president and vice-president. Lincoln's "we" gestured towards vice-president elect Hannibal Hamlin of Maine whose name graced every ballot that his did. In a similar vein, Lincoln's syntax acknowledged that not he alone but his party, the nascent Republican Party, had prevailed on this night. It had taken a well financed and organized political party to secure more than one and three quarter million votes spread over 23 states and many thousands of square miles. Lincoln well understood that successful Republican congressional candidates, who would make key votes for the administration in the years to come, had won impressively in contests from Maine and Michigan to California and Oregon. Not once departing Springfield during the campaign, he might well have believed that he owed the presidency to these local candidates, on whose coattails he had ridden. The president-elect joined Republicans throughout the North in celebrating a collective victory worthy of the first-person plural.

For all that, Lincoln's "we are elected" seemed aimed closer to home. Hardly destined to be the sole tenant of the White House upon his inauguration, the president would share the residence with the first lady, Mary Todd Lincoln, and their three boys, Robert, Willie, and Tad. No previous chief executive had occupied the White House with young children in tow, and this first family would make its mark on history, enduring its own private ordeals in the course of the Civil War. Although she was not on the ballot this November day, Mary was surely who Lincoln had in mind, when he spoke the words "we are elected." His syntax suggests the uniqueness of their marriage, a profound bond of wife and husband that shortly would become infamous for all its turbulence and pathos.[6]

The Lincoln marriage was also a political partnership. Lincoln acknowledged as much in self-consciously declaring "we are elected" as he returned from the polls. Mrs. Lincoln's unyielding ambition, comparable to his own "engine that knew no rest," fueled his political climb.[7] One political wag in 1861, noting Mary's sway over her husband's sartorial decisions, commented that "the country may congratulate itself that its president-elect is a man who does not reject, even in important matters, the advice and counsel of his wife."[8] Despite Mary's famous lack of self-control and emotional struggles, their marriage and progeny (in the form of three healthy boys, Eddie having died in 1850) constituted the very marrow of Lincoln's existence. His syntax that remarkable Election Night attested to his deep and abiding familial love and devotion.

Whoever exactly Lincoln had in mind with his playful "we are elected," his words merit scrutiny not for any bearing on events beyond the moment but for their suggestive, representative character. Lincoln frequently and surprisingly substituted "we" for "I" in many famous letters, speeches and addresses that punctuate his

political career and include some of the most memorable, pregnant prose in American history. Lincoln seldom speaks of himself in the singular "I," often resorting to tortured syntax and impersonal constructions to obviate the need for the first-person singular. Perhaps no American leader used the first-person plural more and more astutely than Abraham Lincoln. Certainly, none used the first-person singular more sparingly.[9] In *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* "we" appears 12,000 times. In his two greatest speeches, "I" is conspicuous by its absence. Only once in the 701-word Second Inaugural does Lincoln use it and only to conjugate the modest verb *to trust*; in the 272 words of the exceedingly economical Gettysburg Address he employs "we" 10 times and "I" not at all.

At Gettysburg in November of 1863 and elsewhere in his speeches, letters, and writings Lincoln's first-person plural sets the tone and adds immeasurably to the impact of intended meaning. The repetition of "we" in the now-canonical opening lines, "[We]are engaged in a great civil war. . . . We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field . . .," performs a critical rhetorical function in establishing common ground between speaker and listener in what Aristotle first labeled enthymeme.[10] At Gettysburg in the midst of a terrible war Lincoln's use of the first-person plural is also redolent of a broader perspective than the singular pronoun, which by definition gestures precisely at one person. Lincoln's ten-fold use of "we" recalls his "we are elected" of November 1860 in its ambiguity, an ambiguity that materially adds to its rhetorical impact. Whom does the first-person plural include? Is it speaker, audience, Union partisans? Or is it all Americans, past and present, whose fathers "brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal?" Some or perhaps all of these predicates Lincoln conjoins in a collective mission that transcends the moment and the messenger.[11]

The president's self-effacing prose at Gettysburg is both typical of Lincoln and utterly atypical of either previous presidents or political contemporaries.[12] Lincoln's singular and self-conscious syntax speaks to a specific style of leadership that was uniquely his own and, as this essay will argue, crucial to making Lincoln a great American leader. His very style of leadership hinged on substituting the plural pronoun for the singular, encapsulating the profoundest, instinctual convictions of a magnanimous leader who eschewed personal credit and never believed himself to be the primary agent of change.[13] Lincoln rarely sought to be in the vanguard, believing such a position to be impolitic in the literal sense, to be the place for idealists and dreamers but not elected representatives. Lincoln proudly and tirelessly labored, as Emerson put it, "to find what the people wanted, and how to obtain it," and very likely would have endorsed the seeming modesty, even self-effacement, suggested by the Sage of Concord's words, which to our modern ear have a servile, lapdog ring. Informed by an expansive, optimistic vision of the inherent soundness of the judgment of the people among whom he had labored as a youth, and for whom he had so often spoken in the Illinois legislature and the myriad courtrooms on the circuit, Lincoln elaborated a highly democratic definition of representation that sometimes approached the doctrine of instruction.[14] Lincoln saw nothing

paradoxical in this kind of stewardship that drove to distraction reformers, activists, and abolitionists. In his case the optimism entailed the method.[15]

Expressed in the first-person plural, Lincolnian leadership is pitched at something akin to the "lowest common denominator" of public sentiment.[16] Even at Gettysburg, the president of the United States demurred at speaking in the first-person singular and steadfastly refused to declare something like "I have a dream" or "I have seen the promised land" because he was a not a visionary called upon to morally uplift, but a leader among free and equal citizens.[17] He well understood the profound significance of the moment in November of 1863, a moment that would have its parallels a century later when Martin Luther King, Jr., so publicly and singularly offered his dream at the Lincoln Memorial. The dedication of a national cemetery in "the midst of a great civil war" seemed neither the place nor the time for individual reverie no matter how important the speaker, even if the president of the United States. This occasion of national mourning and paying tribute to others called for rededication to (some would say a reinvention of) a nation's collective moral commitments. The occasion required Lincoln's preferred pronoun, "we."[18]

The first-person plural so much more aptly expressed the president's determined if less exalted commitment to union. During a terrible civil war – a time of disunion – Lincoln achieved greatness by maintaining against all odds the unity of a disparate people, many millions of "I's" across a continent in a crucial collective enterprise. Perhaps another time and place, one of harmony, prosperity and perpetual peace, would have called for a different, more visionary leader. But in the moment of Civil War the *dis*united states did not need a King.[19] In this unparalleled crisis, when the very existence of the nation hung in the balance, when many tens of thousands would sacrifice their lives at such places as Shiloh, Chancellorsville, Chickamauga, and the Wilderness, and millions of women and men would break the bonds of slavery and gain their freedom, the Union found its leader in the improbable Abraham Lincoln, a devoted family man from the Illinois prairie who shied away from the first-person singular.

Lincoln's preference for plural over singular pronouns suggests deep ethical commitments. His use of "we" can be seen as one way of expressing moral beliefs, which gesture at acts done and not done by "our sort of people." Building on twentieth-century linguistic analysis, moral philosophers have insinuated a new chapter into the history of ethics by exploring what they call "we-intentions," by translating ethical imperatives into statements of the first-person plural.[20] In attempting to give an account of the logical structure of moral judgments – terms like "right," "good," and "ought" – and how they connect to behavior, or in Lincoln's terms, what gives right its might, philosophers like Wilfred Sellars have sought to rephrase "ought-judgments" into statements of intention.[21] Such translation provides a key tool for assimilating Lincoln's "we's" to the broader ethical implications of his statesmanship. Sellars's redescription of ethical terms as "we-intentions" enables linguistic analysis of both the action-guiding features of moral language (most of us feel obliged to act on the basis of our morals) and its intersubjectivity, where intersubjectivity gestures beyond the individual to group obligations. Moral judgments are implicitly universal calls to action. When your mother or teacher or

pastor says, "Thou shalt not steal," her words relate to action here and now, meaning something like "We intend never to steal" or "Stealing is not the thing we do" or "Our kind of people don't steal." Sellars's invocation of "we-intentions" reduces moral discourse into analyzable indicative terms while saving both its action basis and essential social character, or "groupiness."[22]

Richard Rorty is another philosopher interested in questions of ethics, but as they connect more to political than metaphysical themes. Taking his cue from Sellars, Rorty finds "we-intentions" useful in his exploration of moral progress and what he calls "solidarity." He makes two salient points about "we-intentions" that lead us back to Lincoln and the first-person plural. Firstly, he reminds us that we no longer (if we ever did) get our ethics, much less act morally, on the basis of deep philosophical reflection. Our behavior does not derive from abstract principles, as we can see by how rarely anyone consults the writings of Plato or Kant (or Rorty) for a rigorous proof of the right thing to do. Rorty joins Sellars in gesturing at culture near at hand as the source of moral uplift. "The sense of 'benevolence' that is required is not the impartial love of everybody, which is, as Kant saw, the espousal of a principle of conduct, " writes Sellars, "but the recognition of people generally as we."[23] A Tim O'Brien or Toni Morrison novel or a Barack Obama speech is more likely to move us than deciphering Aristotle's ethics or rationally reconstructing the categorical imperative. Our "we-ness" emerges less by calculation and reflection, either theological or philosophical, than by increasing our sensitivity to the particular pain and suffering of others. As we see or read about the anguish of unfamiliar sorts of people and come to sympathize with their plight, we think of them as one of us. They become we.[24]

Rorty's second – and counterintuitive – claim about "we-intentions" relates to scope. He dissents from Kantians who argue for the source of morality in "the impartial love of everybody" and a universally applicable categorical imperative. Globalized, saccharine sentiments like "all men created equal," admirable as they are, scarcely influence our behavior. "The point," Rorty urges, "is that our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as 'one of us,' where 'us' means something smaller and more local than the human race."[25] Individuals are more likely to take action when the "we" of "we-intentions" brings to mind a concrete historical entity: "our sort of people" or "Kiwis like us" or "fellow Buddhists." Saints might act on the basis of the Kantian "principle of humanity"; the rest of us do our duty for reasons much closer to home.[26]

The implications are clear if a bit unsettling. Rorty holds that the vast majority of people act on the basis of comparisons and contrasts between "us" and "them." We naturally tend to be ethnocentric.[27] Rather than decry our tribal instinct, our sense of "us-ness," Rorty instead avers it to be salutary, championing ethnocentricity as a sound basis for moral action. Solidarity of this sort, Rorty continues, need not be static and defensive, but malleable and elastic, with its elasticity constituting its silver lining, suggestive of a means for moral improvement as we use our imagination to see others like us. We imagine others like ourselves in a kind of expanding circle of intimates. Rorty points to gifted people among us, he calls them "strong poets," who use language in novel ways to provoke us to reflect more broadly about who we are.

The Diary of Anne Frank, for example, reveals Anne not as a Jew but someone like us, while Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* makes visible someone whose putative skin color rendered him invisible before. The nameless narrator becomes one of us. Our moral language and the "we" of our "we-intentions" expand through imaginative word play.[28]

Abraham Lincoln, although not exactly a man of letters, emerges as a great leader in large measure because of his beliefs about union and an inclusive vision of American nationhood. His use of language reveals these deeply held beliefs that inspired Americans fundamentally to rethink their identity at a time of sectional crisis and civil war. His evocative poetical phrases that ring through the decades reveal him to be the nation's most literary chief executive.[29] Lincoln's famous public addresses and private writings, particularly their repeated and creative use of the first-person plural, bound together disparate Americans at a moment of disunion and disarray when the meaning of union and nation and freedom was in doubt. As president, Lincoln employed the first-person plural and a style of leadership based on common aspirations in order to facilitate the reconstruction of American identity on a novel basis, one in which the distinction between "we free" and "they slaves" was losing its meaning. Lincoln refashioned the lofty nostrum of "all men created equal" so famously penned by a Virginia slaveholder into a "we-intention" meaning something like "enslaving people is not the sort of thing we Americans do."[30] His great orations between 1854 and 1860, the years of his entry into political antislavery, are of a piece, hammering home his conviction that the politics and rhetoric of proslavery had caused the nation to regress morally. "Oh, how difficult it is to treat with respect," Lincoln wrote in 1854 in his typical first-person plural, "such assaults upon all we have ever really held sacred."[31] By gerrymandering the "we" of the Declaration's "we hold these truths" to exclude blacks and, so Lincoln prognosticated, the indigent immigrants from Europe, Chief Justice Roger Taney and his proslavery allies had gravely imperiled American moral development. Lincoln's solemn pledge to reverse the race-based exclusivity of "Stephen (Douglas), Franklin (Pierce), Roger (Taney) and James (Buchanan)" on the basis of a long-established antislavery consensus propelled him into the forefront of American politics and ultimately into the White House.[32] In the last months of his presidency (and life) he similarly acted the strong poet, seeking to translate the Constitution's "we the people" into "we the white and black people." By using "we" in new ways Lincoln showed himself to be more than a politic chief executive and an adept commander-in-chief but a moral teacher as well. Lincoln proved to be the nation's "strong poet."[33]

* * *

Abraham Lincoln's unique style of leadership was forged long before he became president. His drive for consensus, so remarkably expressed in his use of the first-person plural, is the leitmotif of Lincoln's emergence as a leading Republican. To the emerging Republican Party eager to gain the presidency in 1860, Lincoln surfaced as the consensus candidate who seemed to offer the best opportunity to win swing states like Indiana and Illinois that John C. Fremont had lost in 1856. Going into

the convention, fortuitously located in Chicago, Lincoln's associates readily acknowledged their man not to be the frontrunner and in many ways a long shot to secure the nomination over the likes of William Seward, Salmon Chase, Edward Bates and Horace Greeley. "If I have any chance," Lincoln wrote to Samuel Galloway weeks before the convention, "it consists mainly in the fact that the *whole* opposition would vote for me if nominated. My name is new in the field; and I suppose I am not the *first* choice of a very great many. Our policy, then, is to give no offence to others– leave them in a mood to come to us, if they shall be compelled to give up their first love."[34] Their second love might give them the best chance to prevail in November.

Lincoln's standing among Republicans is surprising. That a former, single-term Congressman from Illinois merited consideration even as a second choice for the Republican nomination for president gave pause to the Republican leadership, particularly those from the East. His relative anonymity, as it turned out, played to his advantage, particularly in concert with his consensus-making temperament. Support for Lincoln stemmed from the considerable notoriety generated from his public speaking, the speeches from the 1858 Great Debates, collated by Lincoln himself, and his 1860 address at Cooper Union in particular. Widely disseminated in newspapers, his speeches powerfully reinforced the impression that Lincoln devoted himself to forging consensus around antislavery, rather than self-promotion. "Honest Abe" seemed to represent a stark contrast to both Chase and Seward, the former having earned the enmity of leading Ohioans in his securing election to the United States Senate, and the latter who appeared too close to the radical abolitionists.

Nowhere was Lincoln's high character and self-effacing style more on display than in his preference for the first-person plural over the singular. As evidenced in the newspapers, candidate Lincoln overwhelmingly used "we" on the hustings as a perhaps calculated, perhaps unconscious expression of a profound conviction that he spoke for a majority of antislavery folks, of Republicans, of northerners, of Americans. Lincoln explicitly avoided the first-person singular because he understood himself, and presented himself syntactically, as merely the spokesman for the collective view. Here was the candidate to unify the party. In the very first sentence of his now famous House Divided speech Lincoln invoked the first-person plural four times. His repeated "we" both served to unite the broad coalition of former Whigs and Democrats, anti-Nebraska men, Know Nothings, abolitionists and fellow travelers assembled before him and to define them by a shared core set of beliefs. "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."[35] Lincoln continued by going to the very heart of the difference between himself and Douglas; where the senator saw no need for consensus on slavery but just an amoral "yes or no," the Republicans demanded unified expression of conviction on a profound moral issue: "A house divided cannot stand." From Lincoln's ethical vantage point the American people as a people, a nation, or any one thing, must and "will cease to be divided," as his cleverly ambiguous use of the first-person plural suggested. The four-times-repeated opening "we" of the House Divided Speech hints at the speaker's ultimate conviction, which he implicitly seeks to share with his audience. Deeply moral, we Americans,

Republicans, Democrats, Northerners, Southerners, and Westerners, will unite around a collective vision of slavery as a moral evil.[36]

The address at Cooper Union on 25 February 1860 echoed similar themes and with analogous use of the first-person plural. The stunning success of Lincoln at Cooper Union, his first major speaking engagement in the East, led one recent historian to claim that it "made Abraham Lincoln president."[37] Hyperbole aside, many members of the otherwise skeptical New Yorkers in attendance testified to its impact, particularly in reference to a vague but very real sense of unity it instilled.[38] New York *Independent* editor Henry C. Bowen wrote that Lincoln "made an army of friends at once," who departed the lecture hall more devoted than ever to the Republican cause because it seemed in Lincoln's rendering less radical, more righteous and right and majoritarian than they had previously thought.[39] This had been precisely Lincoln's intention, with the man, his rhetorical style, and underlying message working as one. Like Ben Franklin and his coonskin cap in Paris, Abe Lincoln the coarse Westerner with the Kentucky twang stood before them to present the case for consensus. "He has the appearance," wrote one reporter, "of what is called in the Northeast a Western man – one who, without education or early advantages, has risen by his own exertions from a humble origin."[40] At this perilous moment just weeks on from John Brown's hanging Lincoln delivered with "absolute simplicity" what amounted to a protracted history lesson on slavery and the American founding.[41] By brilliantly transforming a political speech into an academic exercise, Lincoln in fact addressed, and soothed, the most sensitive concerns of his audience, even if their anxieties were largely unexpressed.[42]

He reminded his audience that they were neither sectional nor radical but conservatives who defined the American nation as had their forebears the previous century. Do not fret over Brown's raid and Southern accusations of Republican responsibility for the bitter sectional divisions, Lincoln suggested, as he rhetorically invoked the Southern fire-eaters in the second person as if they were present. "You say we are sectional. We deny it." Speaking to one group not present to affirm the bond with those in attendance, Lincoln employed "we" to encompass as one the speaker and audience as well as, one assumes, the entire Republican Party. More than that, the protracted historical analysis unified antislavery past and present. Lincoln's "we" transformed members of a mere political movement into a sacred partnership with America's Founders tasked to nurture the national spirit, a spirit rooted in an American antislavery birthright. With hours of archival research on display Lincoln demonstrated how the Founders had enshrined antislavery principles in the Constitution and had voted many times on the belief that slavery was at best a necessary evil. The Founders' principles, he continued, were identical to those held so dearly by the assembled gathering at Cooper Union on that cold February night. "Slavery is not the kind of thing we Americans have ever countenanced," Lincoln seemed to be saying. Republicans were nationalist and conservative.

Passionate about consensus, Lincoln hesitated to cast anyone beyond its bounds. Despite implicitly contrasting the "we" assembled at Cooper Union with the absent Southerners he rhetorically addressed, Lincoln still held out hope that even the unregenerate, such as his longtime friend and Kentucky native Joshua Speed, in time

might (re)join the antislavery majority. The problem lay with their being misinformed. The evidence of the Founders' antislavery sentiments, as expressed in their voting records, seemed so unimpeachable that the astute Stephen Douglas in his long essay in *Harper's Magazine* (to which Lincoln was responding) had engaged in willful misreading that served an immediate political expediency only. Douglas and the radicals in the Democratic Party, despite their break over Lecompton and slavery in Kansas, together comprised the extreme element in American politics, intentionally gerrymandering the past for short-term selfish gain. As for the great majority of non-slaveholding Southern citizens, they deserved better from their leaders. Lincoln implied that they constituted his real audience, precisely as he had metaphorically addressed the citizens of Kentucky while speaking across the Ohio River in Cincinnati months earlier, when he noted: "We mean to remember that you are as good as we; that there is no difference between us other than the difference of circumstance."[43] If Southerners would but listen to or read his remarks, they would recognize the balance, justice and essential moderation of the Republican message, a message around which those physically in attendance had long ago forged a genuine if often unarticulated consensus. If their southern neighbors were present to hear his words, they might go so far as to join antislavery conservatives fighting the radical proslavery ideologues. This publicly proclaimed, ultimately mistaken faith in ordinary Southerners would lead Lincoln to overestimate southern Unionism, a miscalculation that perhaps more than anything else blinded him to the extent of the forces working towards disunion and war.[44]

Lincoln never once considered himself a radical. Quite the inverse, his self-image was that of a conservative, who defined his politics in opposition to radicalism of every sort, whether that of Stephen Douglas, Frederick Douglass, John Brown, Wendell Phillips, and William Lloyd Garrison, even William Seward and Salmon Chase. Nowhere does Lincoln express his conservatism more forcefully than in his concluding rhetorical flourish of the Cooper Union Address. "Wrong as we think slavery is, we can yet afford to let it alone where it is," Lincoln asserted in his trademark first-person plural,

> because that much is due to the necessity arising from its actual presence in the nation; but can we, while our votes will prevent it, allow it to spread into the National Territories, and to overrun us here in these Free States? If our sense of duty forbids this, then let us stand by our duty, fearlessly and effectively. . . . Neither let us be slandered from our duty by false accusations against us, nor frightened from it by menaces of destruction to the Government nor of dungeons to ourselves. 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.[45]

This forceful inversion, "right makes might," often misread as radical, speaks of a deep and abiding conservatism.[46] It testifies to a kind of gradualism at the heart of Lincoln's drive for consensus and about which he had spoken earlier in the address by urging his audience to "do nothing through passion and ill temper."[47] Lincoln brilliantly situated the Republican cause between the two extremes of Stephen Douglas's amoral "popular sovereignty" and John Brown's violent interventionism.

Lincoln's famous finishing flourish at Cooper Union betrays the confidence of a monist, teleological view of history, where right makes might, as well as the passion of someone who had been awakened abruptly from complacency.[48] Lincoln tasked his audience to act alongside him, to do their common duty, with discernment and faith that their fellow Americans would not be fooled by proslavery ideologues and their apologists. Voting on the basis of a moral repugnance to slavery, which was no more than doing one's duty under the Constitution, would suffice to eradicate chattel slavery by putting it, as he had said in 1858 in Illinois, "on the course of ultimate extinction."[49] With Lincoln for the defense and the American people as jury, slavery was sure to die, albeit gradually.

Of all the Republicans vying for New York's support, Lincoln was the only one with connections to the South. He repeated many times and in many places "that there is no difference between us (Northern and Southern) other than the difference of circumstance," words never expressed by Seward or Greeley or Chase. Yet it is easy to overlook Lincoln's ties to the South and their impact on his ideas about slavery and race. Born in Kentucky, he never lost the border state twang so characteristic of the region and that so startled his auditors at Cooper Union when he addressed the master of ceremonies as "Mr. Cheerman."[50] Living until seven years of age in the slaveholding South and 14 years more in Indiana, Lincoln moved to Illinois only as a young man. That his wife Mary Todd Lincoln and longstanding friend Joshua Speed hailed from prominent Kentucky families ensured a vital and enduring connection with the Bluegrass State throughout his life. Lincoln twice visited Kentucky for extended periods and on each occasion was waited upon by any number of slaves in the Speed and Todd households. In a world in which many northerners routinely hired white servants, including the Lincolns in Springfield, perhaps it is not surprising that Lincoln nowhere expressed reservations about eating "the bread that Sambo is earning in the burning sun," as he expressed it in 1858 in an altogether different context.[51] This great admirer of Henry Clay was not averse to representing slaveholders in court. In the 1847 Matson case, "Kentucky's noble son," as he was occasionally called, sought a legal judgment returning to slavery in the Bluegrass State the human property called Jane Bryant and her four children.[52] Abolitionists not surprisingly wondered how such actions put slavery on any road towards extinction. Apparently, Lincoln's sympathy extended less to slaves than their masters, whom he occasionally argued had only inherited an inconvenient labor arrangement and were stuck with its unfortunate consequences. Not once before his speech at Peoria in 1854 did Lincoln publicly proclaim the inherent injustice of slavery for those held in bondage. With his typical sympathetic first-person plural inclusiveness, Lincoln often invited Northern audiences to identify, as he did, not with the slaves but instead with the unfortunate masters, who "are just what we would be in their situation."[53] It is hardly surprising, then, that Lincoln easily related to the residents of Sangamon County among whom he lived and worked his entire adult life and who by most accounts were "more negrophobic than the Illinois average."[54] They collectively sympathized for their white Southern brothers who held slaves.

Just south and east from Lincoln's hometown of Springfield sits the town of Charleston, Illinois. On 18 September 1858 in this bustling prairie community

Senator Stephen Douglas and his Kentucky-born rival met for their fourth great debate. On a hot, clear afternoon under a Democratic banner declaring "This government was made for white men – Douglas for life," Lincoln chose to offer his personal views on race.[55] He portentously opened the debate by eschewing his habitual first-person plural, instead using "I" ten times in his initial remarks.

> While I was at the hotel to-day an elderly gentleman called upon me to know whether I was really in favor of producing a perfect equality between the negroes and white people. While I had not proposed to myself on this occasion to say much on that subject, yet as the question was asked me I thought I would occupy perhaps five minutes in saying something in regard to it. I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races, that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will for ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.[56]

Precisely why here in Charleston he refrained from speaking of "we" begs for explanation, as the first-person plural is ideally suited to tying together in rhetoric both speaker and audience. Lincoln readily identified with this assembly, many of whom were southern-born and like him spoke with southern or Hoosier accents. These were his friends and he addressed them colloquially. Yet attacking blacks had long been the initiative of the Democrats who, Lincoln remarked in an earlier Springfield speech, "deny his manhood; deny, or dwarf to insignificance, the wrong of his bondage; so far as possible, crush all sympathy for him, and cultivate and excite hatred and disgust against him."[57] Democratic candidates pandered to popular tastes by race-baiting, Senator Douglas being their champion, as the banner above the speakers attested. By "a law of humanity, a law of civilization," Douglas famously asserted, "the negro race, under all circumstances, at all times and in all countries, has shown itself incapable of self-government."[58] That blacks were few on the Illinois prairie mattered little; their metaphorical sacrifice at the altar of white supremacy was a staple of central and southern Illinois politics. Lincoln needed to distinguish himself from the Douglas Democrats while identifying with the Charleston audience.

Lincoln's choice of the singular pronoun was not accidental. It resonated with the guarded tone of his remarks generally. Racist to be sure in their explicit discussion of physical differences, Lincoln's comments nevertheless seem mild and tentative in comparison to the race-baiting of his opponent, whose assertions were categorical. Lincoln countered Douglas's absolutes with contingency and caution, cleverly seeking to reassure the gathered throng of his racial *bona fides* by means of his colloquial invocation of the elderly gentleman with his skeptical inquiry. His rhetorical question, whether Lincoln was "really in favor of" equality, implied that discussing race represented little more than a distraction and that Douglas was playing politics by disingenuously distorting Lincoln's well-known position, so well-known in fact that Lincoln would not have deigned to address the matter but for the gentleman's

query. Where Douglas tried to stir up the crowd with emotional appeals to race Lincoln sought to mollify them with levity. By emphasizing "really" Lincoln straightaway made his putative point. How could a sentient citizen ask such a question? *Really*?

Yet having put the question, he felt obliged to speak to it "for perhaps five minutes." Here his rhetorical choices, including the first-person singular, intimate his desire to placate his negrophobic audience, whose support he sought, without egging them on. Lincoln used conditional and qualified language, speaking not of equality but "a perfect equality," which no one had proposed and few imagined anywhere in the United States, much less on the Illinois prairie. He continued tentatively in the first person with "I will say," "I believe," and "I as much as any other man," constructions which are hardly unyielding in their force and possess nothing like the power of using the first-person plural. Lincoln on this occasion chose not to use the inclusive "we" to bind together his racial peccadilloes and the unvarnished racism of the Charleston audience. In *Lincoln and Black Freedom*, LaWanda Cox defended Lincoln's Charleston speech with the suggestion that "his phraseology was a formulation that accepted rather than championed white dominance."[59] As clearly racist as these public, well-documented statements of record appear, they seem about as moderate and guarded as a politician currying favor with voters could have made them that September day. Neither a slave to public opinion nor a charismatic seeking to challenge deeply-held prejudices, Lincoln simultaneously aligned himself with the ubiquitous negrophobia of downstate Illinois and yet hinted at some rhetorical space for change and doubt. His use of the first-person singular attested to the fact he was expressing personal beliefs. Popular as they might be, they were only opinions and, as one person's opinions, could not be constructed as eternal verities. They might just be wrong.

Abolitionists never doubted Lincoln's southern roots and sentiments. His sympathy for slaveholders and lap-dog defense of their constitutional rights incurred their deepest hostility, expressed so acidly by Wendell Phillips's sobriquet for old Abe as "the Slave-Hound of Illinois."[60] Lincoln hardly saw eye-to-eye with the abolitionists, although he did not return their animus, saying in 1837 only that "the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends rather to increase than to abate its evils."[61] He readily acknowledged the accuracy of their portrait of him as in no way an abolitionist. Lincoln wrote in an 1855 letter to his boyhood friend Joshua Speed that he would never demand that Speed "yield your legal right to the slave," even though he believed slavery a moral evil. "I also acknowledge *your* rights and *my* obligations, under the Constitution, in regard to your slaves."[62] Lincoln earned the enmity of abolitionists for refusing to sit in judgment of Speed or the thousands of other slaveowners, just so long as they defended slavery from contingency alone, without recourse to any claim to some positive good that might then justify the expansion of the institution beyond its current bounds. In stark contrast to the abolitionists, the conservative Lincoln believed the battle all but won if slaveowners argued solely from necessity.[63] "Let us turn slavery from its claims of 'moral right,' back upon its existing legal rights, and its arguments of 'necessity,'" Lincoln had declared the prior year at Peoria in his customary first-person plural that signaled the strength of his convictions. "Let us return it to the position our fathers gave it; and

there let it rest in peace."[64] Owning slaves was a personal choice, Lincoln wrote to Speed. "I leave that matter entirely to yourself." So long as slavery would eventually "rest in peace" and the public mind was secure in that knowledge, slaveowners deserved pity instead of scorn. Lincoln expressed sympathy for those who "have an immediate and palpable and immensely great pecuniary interest" in slave property, while admonishing abolitionists for whom slavery was "merely an abstract question of moral right, with only a slight and remote pecuniary interest added."[65]

Sympathy also entailed cooperation. Nothing was more anathema to Lincoln than the abolitionist doctrine of "no union with slaveholders." Ever the consensus seeker, Lincoln sought to forge links with slaveholders, who of their own accord, with the promise of compensation and a practicable scheme of colonization, would themselves close this sorry chapter in the history of the nation. One such link was a historical, shared responsibility. All Americans were party to a colonial past that witnessed slavery in all the colonies, North as well as South, from as far back as 1619. To advocate in antebellum America, and oh-so-contemptuously, a unilateral separation from slavery, as some abolitionists did, was tantamount to denying one's own history. Uncharitable in the extreme, the doctrine exempted non-slaveholding northerners from responsibility for a more than two-centuries-old national affliction. Even after 11 slave states had seceded and in the midst of the terrible Civil War, President Lincoln spoke collectively, in the first-person plural, when apportioning guilt for the peculiar institution: "we of the North as well as you of the South shall pay fairly for our complicity in that wrong," he wrote to a Kentucky newspaperman.[66] Always one to assume responsibility, Lincoln looked askance at those who shunned it.

The basic abolitionist distinction between "good us" and "bad them" contradicted the very notion of first-person plural leadership. For as long as Lincoln could recall he had believed "we" a more effective construction to effect change than "I" or, in this case, "you" and "them." While he never addressed abolitionists and their tactics directly, as far back as 1842 Lincoln had implicitly critiqued abolitionism by sharply attacking the zealotry of the temperance movement. In stating his hope that "there shall be neither a slave nor a drunkard on the earth," the speaker alluded to his conjoined view of temperance and abolitionism. Scholars have long noted how they overlapped geographically, drew support from similar communities that John Quincy Adams had called "the universal Yankee nation," and together forged reciprocal ties to evangelical religion.[67] The greatest overlap – and the focus of Lincoln's Temperance Address – resided in their frequent display of a paternalistic, condescending attitude, respectively, towards the reprobate slaveholders and topers, as well as their abettors. Put off from his youth by the judgmental, holier-than-thou posture of Christian circuit riders, Lincoln here ridiculed his zealous reforming hosts by analogizing them with the divine.[68] "The *lordly Judge*," he dramatically began,

> groups together all the crimes of the felon [distillers and shopkeeper's] life, and thrusts them in his face just ere he passes sentence of death upon him, that *they* were the authors of all the vice and misery and crime in the land; that *they* were the manufacturers and material of all the thieves and robbers and murderers that infested the earth; that *their* houses were the workshops of the devil; and that *their persons* should be shunned by all the good and virtuous, as moral pestilences.

Lincoln instinctively recoiled from such judgmental posturing, instead urging reformers to speak as "erring man to an erring brother." Lincoln continued, "In my judgment, such of us as have never fallen victims, have been spared more by the absence of appetite, than from any mental or moral superiority over those who have." Speaking to a gathering of reformers who had extended him the invitation, the famously abstemious Lincoln, much to his hosts' chagrin, identified instead with those who had fallen off the wagon. "When all such as us," the teetotaler Lincoln stated, "first opened our eyes on the stage of existence, we found intoxicating liquor." Some were lucky enough to refrain from imbibing, others were not, but they remained brothers nevertheless.[69] In all of Lincoln's writings nothing illustrates better his empathic style of leadership and why he adamantly preferred first-person plural constructions over reformers' and abolitionists' judgmental contrast of "us" and "them."[70] Twenty years later, at the moment of the nation's deepest crisis, Lincoln would movingly invoke this deep-seated magnanimous notion of collective guilt and responsibility in his Second Inaugural Address.

Lincoln and the abolitionists differed more as to means than ends, or so Lincoln always believed. He respected their devotion to ideals, even if such strong sentiments were alien to his very being. As James Oakes astutely observes in his comparative study of Lincoln and Douglass, by the war's end each understood the vital role the other had played in securing emancipation. Lincoln never sought to be charismatic, relying on the likes of Garrison, Phillips, Douglass, and Sojourner Truth to agitate, unnerve, take risks, and articulate the highest ideals and aspirations of the nation. Their job was to excite public opinion; Lincoln's was altogether different if no less crucial. A consensus-builder, he held the center while crafting policy step-by-step from the majority viewpoint. Dedicated to achieving the possible, Lincoln ultimately earned the admiration of many abolitionists, including Garrison who in 1864 confessed that the president "could not have gone one hair's breadth beyond the point he has reached by a slow and painful process, without inciting civil war at the North, and overturning the government."[71] Years later Frederick Douglass captured the ambiguous nature of the relationship between the man of prudence (in Greek *phronesis*), Lincoln, and the speakers of truth (*parrhesia*), the abolitionists. "Viewed from the genuine abolition ground," said Douglass, "Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent; but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined."[72]

* * *

Did Lincoln's repeated use of the first-person plural extend to include African Americans? Did he reach out as "erring man to erring brother" to the free blacks of the North or their enslaved sisters and brothers? Candidate Lincoln spoke hopefully in asking a Chicago audience in the summer of 1858 to "discard all this quibbling about this man and the other man – this race and that race and the other race being inferior, and therefore they must be placed in an inferior position – discarding our standard that we have left us. Let us discard all these things, and unite as one people throughout this land, until we shall once more stand up declaring that all men are

created equal."[73] His contrary remarks a month later at Charleston militate against reading such biracial aspirations into the Chicago address, as do his some private notes from the same time in which he declared: "Negro equality! Fudge!! How long, in the government of a God, great enough to make and maintain this Universe, shall there continue knaves to vend, and fools to gulp, so low a piece of demagougeism as this?"[74] Assimilating Lincoln's diverse, "hopelessly contradictory" statements on race is well nigh impossible.[75] Lincoln never set out his views in one place. Obsessed with consensus, he often spoke guardedly on divisive issues and couched his arguments in terms of the biases of the audience at hand.[76] His views changed over time, largely meliorating through contact with eastern antislavery politicians and exposure to highly intelligent and able African Americans.[77] The same politician who had spoken of physical differences forever separating the races Frederick Douglass described as having treated him in several White House meetings with cordiality, civility and "like a man." Nevertheless, Lincoln was clear and consistent on certain core principles, the touchstones of which he located in the preambles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and their opening first-person plural pronouns: "we hold these truths" and "we the people." For most of his life Lincoln held that these pronouns referenced two distinct communities, the former being human beings, the latter citizens of the United States. African Americans unequivocally belonged to these first but not necessarily to the second.[78]

Lincoln believed that he followed the Founders in including African Americans in the "we" of "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal," that blacks were humans, possessing inalienable rights which, despite the Dred Scot ruling, whites were bound to respect. "The negro is included in the word 'men' used in the Declaration of Independence," Lincoln said many times as he sought to contrast his view with those of Douglas Democrats who "deny his manhood" and place him "among reptiles and crocodiles."[79] On the basis of this bedrock essential definition rooted in natural law, Lincoln asserted that slavery was a moral outrage and that owning persons as property was a practice done only out of the barest necessity and self-interest. It was not the sort of thing those who "hold these truths to be self-evident" chose to do. "There is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."[80] If blacks are men as conceived by the Declaration, then slavery is despotism and no moral claim could exist to justify owning black slaves.

At the other extreme was the collective "We the people" of the Constitution, which expressed positive law, albeit based upon and beholden to immutable natural laws. As positive law, the Constitution reflected contingency and embraced slavery, although not in name, as the price to be paid for union, a price that at least white Americans thought bearable provided slavery would be treated as a temporary, necessary evil only.[81] Nothing in American history or character necessitated reading blacks as "we citizens" or "one of us Americans," according to Lincoln, and therefore deserving by right the privileges of citizenship. Speaking of the territories in 1858, Lincoln averred that favoring non-extension of slavery in no way entailed extending citizenship rights to blacks. "But it does not follow that social and political equality

between whites and blacks, *must* be incorporated, because slavery must *not*. The declaration does not so require."[82] If the Declaration did not stipulate equality, then certainly the Constitution did not. That Americans in 1787 created a frame of government implicitly incorporating racial exclusivity might seem odd and capricious and based on racial sentiments simply, but this mattered little to Lincoln because formulating national government on the basis of race violated no natural law and, Lincoln sometimes seemed to express, might even accord with nature.

Ever the consensus seeker, Lincoln thought his views corresponded to those held by the vast majority of Americans. Like him, most Americans sought what at the time seemed to be the middle ground on race, with Roger Taney in the Dred Scott case and the radical abolitionists occupying opposing extremes. The vast middling majority believed it right that whites accord to blacks all the rights of the Declaration, while in no way compelling the extension of citizenship rights under the Constitution. In 1857 very few Americans thought the Constitution's Preamble meant "we the white and black people." Certainly Lincoln did not. The eventual signer of the Emancipation Proclamation, who spoke in the 1850s of a physical difference separating the races, was not about to suddenly reinvent himself as a charismatic leader dedicated to dispelling deeply-ingrained popular prejudices that he himself shared. Few Americans were more in touch with racial opinions than Lincoln. His personality, political convictions and style of leadership were predicated on following public opinion. "A universal feeling, whether well or ill-founded, can not be safely disregarded," Lincoln had declared at Peoria.[83] So it was on matters of race. Lincoln acknowledged and worked within a race-based system.

Sentiments of racial prejudice translated into actions of racial discrimination. As a state legislator, Lincoln had been party to discriminatory law in Illinois, although never its champion. He had voted against a bill outlawing interracial marriage while a state legislator in the 1840s, but had offered no objection when his erstwhile colleagues voted a decade later to restrict blacks' entry into the state. He offered no succor to Illinois Republicans who in 1857 and 1858 sought to overturn state bans on black testimony in courts of law and admission to public schools. As president of the United States Lincoln said little about discrimination, which he viewed overwhelmingly as a state and local concern. Always one to defer to precedent, to the Constitution and to public opinion, Lincoln held that when it came to discriminatory law, states were free to follow the popular will in their "domestic" affairs. It remained Lincoln's abiding faith that states had the authority to discriminate against blacks and that in so doing they did not violate the self-evident truths of the Declaration.[84]

Until secession, there seemed little call for Lincoln or other political figures to theorize national citizenship. The recruitment of black soldiers into the Union army changed everything, though not overnight. Always one to progress deliberately, Lincoln did not speak of discrimination as a matter of justice or injustice until blacks entered the military. Only then, and of necessity, was the president compelled to deal with or explain away discrimination based on race. He did so with great reluctance and reticence, and with his usual sensitivity to public opinion. Lincoln resisted the recruitment of blacks into the army albeit as a "concession to prejudice"; likewise he excused unequal pay on a similar basis while assuring Frederick Douglass in a

meeting in August of 1863 that "in the end they shall have the same pay as white soldiers."[85] In essence the president was especially loath to challenge the racial prejudices of the army. Pushed by events, Lincoln needed no greater motivation to act against discrimination in the military than that supplied by the Confederates, who treated captured black soldiers as runaway slaves subject to capital punishment.

Lincoln consistently looked to colonization as an alternative to a biracial United States. He had done so for years and continued to hold out hope for transporting blacks out of the nation until very late in the war.[86] Colonization accorded perfectly with his belief that blacks, despite being "created equal," were not part of "we the people." Like Thomas Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Lincoln argued from contingency. Even if blacks might be entitled to citizenship, white racism would not allow it, and even if it would, then surely blacks would prefer a nation of their own somewhere else. Again like Jefferson, Lincoln worried about blacks' "love of country," their *amor patriae*, for a nation and people that had held them in bondage and practiced racial discrimination of every type. But unlike Jefferson, who seems not to have changed his views at his death in 1826, Lincoln disabused himself of this notion in the course of the Civil War. Blacks had no intention of emigrating despite discrimination and considered the United States home. "Pray tell us," Frederick Douglass declared in 1862, "is our right to a home in this country less than your own?" Just as soon as blacks proved their mettle in the Union army the bugbear of love of country evaporated. Witnessing black soldiers serving and dying for their country at "Milliken's bend, Port Hudson, and Fort Wagner" wrought a revolution in Lincoln's thought.[87] As some whites dodged or deferred service, blacks enlisted and died for the Union. Could there be greater proof of loyalty for and love of country? Jefferson had been dead wrong in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, and if Lincoln had written on the topic before the war, he would likely have expressed similarly erroneous sentiments. By the war's conclusion, by their military service blacks had staked their claim as members of "we the people." By their sacrifice African Americans moved Lincoln towards seeing race as less important than a shared black and white devotion to their country of common birth.

* * *

Lincoln's rhetorical use of the first-person plural reached its apotheosis in his two greatest addresses, at Gettysburg in November of 1863 and in the Second Inaugural in March of 1865. Both testify to the vision of a unique leader whose style is reflected in the inclusive, unifying, collective pronoun "we." The president of the United States, the personification of a nation of tens of millions, Lincoln only once spoke in the singular "I." He preferred the plural "we" that so much better captured many critical elements of the man: his modesty and lack of prepossession; his perspective; his sense of a higher power at work, what the philosopher Hegel called the "cunning of history"; his magnanimity and sense of responsibility; his obsessive drive for consensus and his love of the Union, which like "we" was a word of multiple meanings in the 1860s. All of these elements Lincoln expressed through his brilliant rhetorical substitution of the plural for the singular pronoun.

At Gettysburg Lincoln was hardly the featured speaker. It remains unclear precisely when he was invited and in what capacity.[88] Edward Everett, the famous orator of the day, was to give the address, while Lincoln would only offer a few words, the occasion not being political. So incidental were his remarks intended to be that a mythology materialized around them to the effect that Lincoln composed the now famous 272-word address *en route* to the ceremony. In truth, he had been cobbling together fragments of the address for some time and only awaited a suitable forum for their dissemination. The president needed no reminding that his was only a bit part; indeed, he would not have accepted a greater role. Acutely sensitive to the task at hand, Lincoln got almost everything right that November day. Only one point proved utterly wrong, when he noted that posterity would "little note, nor long remember what we say here." No one recalls Everett's ponderous speech, but every American recalls Lincoln's words, which have all the tone, perspective, poetry and pathos of Shakespearean drama.

"Four score and seven years ago our forefathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation" the address begins. Lincoln cleverly invokes the past – "our forefathers" – to gesture at a broad perspective that unites those present not only in their current collective purpose but in continuing the unfinished business of the American founding generation. And it does so with no mention of Lincoln or any single person or from an individual perspective. Lincoln's rhetoric speaks from some lofty vantage point where the battle at Gettysburg, and even the Civil War, forms only one act of some larger drama begun in the distant past, on a continental scale and dedicated to the eternal truth that "all men are created equal." From this perspective, which Lincoln would again draw upon in the Second Inaugural, the singular "I," even in reference to the president of the United States, shrinks to the point of irrelevance and invisibility. The nation began as a collective endeavor, and the Civil War likewise represents a national struggle, which the death of individuals cannot impede. It is their collective duty to toil on together; in Lincoln's words, "that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom."

Despite his exclusive use of the first-person plural Lincoln did not fail to call attention to the awesome and awful divide, so evident to those gathered together that November day, between "we the living" and "the honored dead." It would be a cold act of ingratitude and betrayal to link together himself and his mundane toils with those who "gave the last full measure of devotion" in mortal combat the previous July. Lincoln understood this striking contrast and gave it powerful expression. "But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate – we cannot consecrate – we cannot hallow – this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract." They are dead and he lives, and in this flesh-and-bone world there can be no greater distinction. Even as the president distinguished himself and his poor powerlessness from the brave soldiers who fought at Gettysburg, Lincoln made no mention of antagonists or enemies. Nowhere did he differentiate Union from Confederate among the "brave men" who fought and died on the battlefield, his phrase referring equally to blue and gray. It would seem impossible to discriminate colors from the cosmic perspective Lincoln invokes, with

no names, dates or individuals mentioned at all. Lincoln's words at Gettysburg bring to mind his actions a year earlier when visiting the wounded at a field hospital at Antietam, where several observers noted the president's solicitude for the Confederate wounded. Lincoln's actions and rhetoric imagined a future when no one would speak of Confederates and Yankees as anything other than Americans tragically fighting each other. Neither the Gettysburg Address nor the Second Inaugural displays a whit of blame or vindictiveness.

Lincoln concluded at Gettysburg by reminding his audience that his words mattered little, that there was only one way to consecrate and hallow the ground, to do honor to the dead. "It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced." The immediate task was winning a war whose victory lay many months and many thousands of lost lives in the future, while implicitly there remained the "unfinished business" alluded to in the phrase "a new birth of freedom," Lincoln's unambiguous reference to emancipation. For those present at Gettysburg who would never actually fight in the battles and have no direct role in emancipation, they nevertheless had a vital part to play. With Lincoln and his suggestive use of the first-person plural they must begin thinking of "we" Americans in a new way, not as "we whites" but as all Americans, blacks and whites together comprising the "we the people" of the Constitution. These phrases are the work of Rorty's "strong poet" hinting of the promise of a new American solidarity.

Much of the rhetorical strategies of the Gettysburg Address are echoed in the Second Inaugural. The Second Inaugural of 4 March 1865, stands as Lincoln's final remarks about the Civil War, as Lee's surrender at Appomattox a month later occasioned no formal ceremony presided over by the president. In contrast to the Gettysburg Address, which was delivered in the midst of a terrible war and at the behest of others as a brief ceremonial act, the Second Inaugural presumably represented the president's moment of triumph. Inaugurations celebrate a personal accomplishment, and a second such victory at the end of a terrible war marked a singular occasion in the life of the president and the nation.[89] Lincoln could be forgiven for expressing in public his sense of personal vindication, having emancipated the slaves, prosecuted the war virtually to victory and gained reelection to the nation's highest office. But such was not the case. As with the address at Gettysburg, the Second Inaugural betrays no hint of self-satisfaction and almost no self-identification. Selfless to an extraordinary degree, Lincoln does not exult.[90] A single time only does he speak in the first-person singular, and even then, in keeping with the tenor of the address, his "I trust" of the first paragraph serves to mitigate an already modest claim and is tucked away in a dependent clause. The rhetoric of the opening paragraph speaks volumes, its convoluted, passive constructions so awkward as to beg for rewriting by a freshman English instructor.

> At this second appearing to take the oath of the presidential office, there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then a statement, somewhat in detail, of a course to be pursued, seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every

> point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the attention, and engrosses the energies [*sic*] of the nation, little that is new could be presented. The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself; and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.[91]

No sentence in the history of the nation could seem to demand more an active first-person construction than "no prediction in regard to it is ventured." But not from Lincoln, who uses only the plural, invoking all Americans with his "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray" for the end of the war. This first-person plural leader, so doubted by so many during the war, persevered as did the Union at least in part because of his utterly uncharismatic style of leadership, which in turn reflected an unswerving devotion to union and the collective endeavor he believed it represented. The text of the Second Inaugural, its impersonal, passionate tones so expressive of a perspective from which petty vindictiveness becomes an utter impossibility, catapulted Lincoln from sectional leader to national martyr. No people ever defeated in battle could have hoped for less rancor in their putative conqueror.[92] After a long, bitterly contested, terrible civil war, Lincoln articulated a vision of consensus in which the adversaries share a common vantage point before, during and after the war. At the outset of hostilities "neither party expected the war . . . neither anticipated that the *cause* of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease." Conjoined again in the middle of things, both "read the same Bible, and pray to the same God"; and again at the conclusion of the war Lincoln suggests that both sides together fervently hope and pray for a quick end to the bloodshed. The single great difference between North and South to which Lincoln gestures, again not couched antagonistically as "I" and "you," relates to slavery, already hinted at as the cause of the conflict. "It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces," Lincoln somberly pronounces, only to check himself lest he be speaking imprudently: "but let us judge not that we be not judged."[93] Only the Almighty, who "has His own purposes," possesses the power to distinguish between the two sides. The very inverse of vindictive, Lincoln assumes for himself and the Union an estimable portion of responsibility for the great war and the horrific loss of life. "He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offense came . . . " Not southern slavery but "American slavery" gave great offense to the divine will. To Congress Lincoln had made an argument along similar lines in his 1862 Annual Message in defense of his compensated emancipation scheme; both sides had a bill to pay for the national sin. Now in 1865 with the war almost over, the president again spoke only in terms of a collective American future.

> With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to 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 a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

Only weeks later while attending the theater with his wife on the evening of Good Friday, Lincoln was shot point blank in the back of the head by John Wilkes Booth. He never recovered consciousness. Early in the morning of April 15 the president died from his wound. His single disjunction in the Gettysburg Address between "us the living" and the unfortunate dead in an instant had become moot. Abraham Lincoln now had joined the brave soldiers buried at Gettysburg who "gave the last full measure of devotion" to the Union.

The outpouring of emotion following Appomattox and the tragic assassination of the President ensured Lincoln's elevation to martyr status. He quickly became the American Moses, the Great Emancipator denied entrance to the promised land. So suddenly "a man for the ages," as Edwin Stanton put it in the early morning hours of 15 April 1865, Lincoln's peculiar, singular style of leadership has been necessarily obscured by his tragic exit. This study seeks to recover some key aspects of Lincolnian leadership by detailing Lincoln's choice of pronouns. His frequent, fascinating employment of the first-person plural represents a novel, meaningful, and self-conscious masterstroke in leadership. The core of his political ethos hinged on substituting the plural pronoun for the singular, a substitution that encapsulated his profoundest, instinctual convictions. Lincoln eschewed taking personal credit for political successes and believed himself never to be the primary agent of change.[94] Informed by an expansive, optimistic vision of the inherent soundness of the judgment of his fellow citizens, Lincoln elaborated a highly democratic understanding of representative leadership. Indeed, embedded in Lincoln's "we's" is a set of deeply held beliefs about American history and the collective nature of the polity and its people. His repeated, inventive use of the first-person plural reflected both his sense of genuine identity with so much of America, South and North, as well as his broader sense of American unity. Perhaps more than any antebellum leader, Lincoln held fast to an expansive vision of the American nation that he expressed so eloquently in his inspired use of the first-person plural.

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Notes

1. Samuel R. Weed, "Hearing the Returns with Mr. Lincoln," *New York Times Magazine*, 14 February 1932. This line is also cited in Don E. Fehrenbacher and Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln*, 460, and in Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln*, 677. Weed's account is the fullest of election day in Springfield, although only composed in the 1880s and published many decades later.
2. Lincoln's words were cited by the *Independent* reporter and proprietor Henry C. Bowen, who quoted Lincoln after an interview "during the week of his inauguration" at the Soldier's Home in Washington, DC. See his "Recollection of Abraham Lincoln," in Ward, *Abraham Lincoln*, 31–2.

3. The technical term for using the "Royal we" for oneself is "nosism," as when Queen Victoria stated: "We are not amused." Mark Twain suggested with tongue in cheek that nosism be restricted to "kings, presidents, editors, and people with tapeworms."
4. Emerson, "Abraham Lincoln," *Miscellanies*.
5. Weed, "Hearing the Returns," 9.
6. Other first couples might grace the pages of American history including the intimates Martha and George Washington, the intellectuals Abigail and John Adams, and the elegant Jacqueline and John Kennedy. Yet none comes close to sparking the enduring, lurid curiosity as Mary and Abraham Lincoln. See Daniel Mark Epstein, *The Lincolns*, and Catherine Clinton, "Abraham Lincoln: The Family that Made Him, the Family He Made," in Foner, *Our Lincoln*. Contrast the portrayals of the Lincoln marriage in Clinton, *Mrs. Lincoln* and Burlingame, *A Life*. Two other recent works that weigh in on the Lincoln marriage are Emerson, *The Madness of Mary Lincoln* and Winkle, "The Middle-Class Marriage of Abraham and Mary Lincoln."
7. This is Herndon's famous line. Legend has it that the precocious teen-age Mary Todd had announced her intention to marry a future president, as indeed she would. Complementing her elemental drive were political instincts that in a later era might have inspired her own run for public office.
8. *New York Times*, February 19, 1861, 1.
9. Emerson, among others, called the romantic age "the age of the first person singular" in a journal entry from 1827. Historians follow Emerson in thinking of the age as obsessed with self: "self-reliance," self-improvement, self-interest, and more. See Howe, *Making the American Self*, and Masur, "Age of the First Person Singular."
10. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, ch. 2, 1395b. See also Kenneth Burke's updated terminology, particularly his use of "Consubstantiality," in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 20–3.
11. See Fornieri, *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith*, 6.
12. Compare for example the inaugural addresses of the previous fifteen presidents. Only Thomas Jefferson's 1801 oration is remotely comparable. The great speeches of Daniel Webster in his debates with Robert Y. Hayne and the great oration of Henry Clay and John Calhoun are redolent with singular pronouns, as is Edward Everett's Gettysburg peroration of November 1863 to which Lincoln so famously appended his brief "Address." Lincoln's exceptional use of "we" was noted by the reporter from the *New York Tribune* (November 25, 1863) who wrote that in contrast to the president, Edward Everett had said "I" multiple times in his speech.
13. David Donald wrote insightfully of "the essential passivity of his nature." See Donald's introduction to his *Lincoln*.
14. About representation as instruction see Lincoln's idol Henry Clay and his "On the Doctrine of Instruction" (speech before the United States Senate, January 14, 1839), *The Life and Speeches of the Hon. Henry Clay*, vol. 2, 350–4.
15. Daniel Walker Howe offers the most insightful reading of Lincoln as a typical Whig insofar as he combined a reverence for public opinion as the ultimate arbiter in politics with a paternalistic vision of the importance of self-improvement. See *The Political Culture of the American Whigs*, 263–98.
16. For a review of the recent literature on Lincoln and his leadership, see Field, "Our Character is Our Fate: Abraham Lincoln at 200."
17. A veritable cottage industry emerged last century about what Lincoln meant when he spoke of equal citizens and waxed eloquent over the Declaration. Harry Jaffa and M.E. Bradford spilled a great deal of ink debating the merits of invoking and acting upon the ideal of equality. See Deutsch and Fornieri, *Lincoln's American Dream*, 71–130.
18. The various jottings in Lincoln's hand of elements of the address "are evidence of a serious literary craftsman laboring to perfect an important work." Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 225.
19. Or a Frederick Douglass. See Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican*, and Stauffer, *Giants*.

20. Sellars illustrates the philosophical turn from ideas and minds to the study of language this way: "all awareness of *sorts, resemblances, facts*, etc., in short all awareness of abstract entities – indeed, all awareness of particulars – is a linguistic affair." Wilfred Sellars, sec. 29, as quoted in Rorty's Introduction to Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 4. See also Solomon, "Ethical Theory," in *Synoptic Vision*.
21. This is a paraphrase of the last lines of the Cooper Union Address of 1860 in which Lincoln famously states "let us have faith that right makes might."
22. Sellars also notes that speaking of "we-intentions" closes the logical gap between what most people should do to make a society moral and what one person should do. The inconsistency in the notion that "stealing is wrong, but I can steal without damaging society just so long as the vast majority of others do not" becomes incoherent. "There is no logical place for a compromise between benevolence and self-love," writes Sellars, "where 'benevolence' is understood as the consciousness of oneself and one's fellow men as we." See his *Science and Metaphysics*, 215–18 and *passim*, as well as in "Imperatives, Intentions, and the Logic of 'Ought.'"
23. Sellars, "Imperatives, Intentions, and the Logic of 'Ought,'" 210. Other studies of "we-intentions" include Tuomela and Miller, "We-Intentions," and Tuomela, "We Will Do It: An Analysis of Group-Intentions."
24. For the classic Enlightened discussion of the relation of sympathy to morality, see Adam Smith's 1759 *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in which Smith eloquently relates ethical behaviour to something in between ethical rationalism and animal self-interest. My interpretation of Lincoln's language owes much to Smith.
25. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 192.
26. Aristotle made a similar claim 25 centuries ago when critiquing Plato's communal arrangements as described in Book V of *Republic*. "Each of the citizens," wrote Aristotle, "comes to have a thousand sons, though not as an individual, but each is in a similar fashion the son of any of them; hence all will slight them in similar fashion." See *The Politics*, Book II, 1262a1, 57.
27. A good "postmodern bourgeois liberal," as he calls himself, Rorty also worries about characterizing anyone as "other." Ameliorating his concerns is a belief that Americans tend to be highly reflective; they worry about being the kind of people who are ethnocentric.
28. Rorty notes that irony plays an important part in our development of solidarity, as we come to understand what he calls our "final vocabularies" as subject to revision and doubt.
29. Lincoln's greatness and his use of language are more intertwined than any other American president or political leader. Jefferson's lofty ideals as expressed in the Declaration are too intellectual for a politician and were written decades before he became chief executive. Another gifted writer-president, Woodrow Wilson was just too professorial in his tone and his greatness as a writer stems from his tenure in academia prior to the presidency. Theodore Roosevelt approaches Lincoln in the union of his literary persona and leadership style. Although Roosevelt authored more books than any other American president, neither his "talk softly but carry a big stick" nor any other lines move us they way Lincoln's poetics do to this day. On Lincoln as the Twain of American politics, see Kaplan, *Lincoln*, ch. 5 in particular.
30. Building on twentieth-century linguistic analysis, moral philosophers have insinuated a new chapter into the history of ethics by exploring what they call "we-intentions," by translating ethical imperatives into statements of the first-person plural. In attempting to give an account of the logical structure of moral judgments – terms like "right," "good," and "ought" – and how they connect to behavior, or in Lincoln's terms, what gives right its might, philosophers like Wilfred Sellars have sought to rephrase "ought-judgments" into statements of intention. Such translation provides a key tool for assimilating Lincoln's "we's" to the broader ethical implications of his statesmanship. See Sellars, *Science and*

Metaphysics, 215–18 and *passim*, as well as in "Imperatives, Intentions, and the Logic of 'Ought,'" 201–16.
31. Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria," 251.
32. See the debates in Lincoln, *Collected Works*, vol. 3.
33. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 192.
34. Lincoln, "Letter to Galloway," 35.
35. Lincoln, "House Divided Speech," 462.
36. For a penetrating view sizing up American nationalism and the sectional conflict, see Grant, *North Over South*, esp. ch. 6.
37. Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union* is subtitled "The Speech that made Abraham Lincoln President."
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. *Cincinnati Enquirer*, September 18, 1859.
41. Holzer, *Cooper Union,* 145.
42. The Address in theory was to be non-political, or at least non-partisan, as Seward and Greeley were supposed to be New York Republicans' preferred candidates for the nomination.
43. Lincoln, "Speech at Cincinnati, Ohio," 454.
44. David Potter speaks to this blindness in *Lincoln and his Party in the Secession Crisis.*
45. Lincoln, "Address at Cooper Institute, New York City," 550.
46. A striking comparison can be made with Henry David Thoreau and his "Essay on Civil Disobedience," which addresses a similar topic with different conclusions.
47. Lincoln, "Address at Cooper Institute, New York City," 547.
48. The fanatical abolitionism of John Brown Lincoln feared every bit as much as the lynch mobs and anti-abolition gangs that he had decried in his first public address at the Springfield Lyceum in 1838.
49. Lincoln, "House Divided Speech," 462.
50. Ken Burns significantly chose Sam Waterston to be the voice of the sixteenth president in his documentary series on the Civil War, thus reinforcing the misconception. Similarly, novelist E.L. Doctorow has it wrong when he has his Dr Sartorius overhear Lincoln's baritone voice from the adjoining room in *The March*. See also Burlingame, *Life*, vol. 1, 585.
51. Lincoln, "Fragment on Proslavery Ideology," 205; see also the Second Inaugural where Lincoln suggests that it "may seem strange that any man should dare ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces."
52. Lincoln did not win the case. Quoted in Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 174.
53. Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria," 256.
54. Burlingame, *Life*, vol. 1, 154.
55. Quoted in ibid., vol. 1, 517.
56. Lincoln, "Fourth Debate with Douglas, at Charleston," 145–6.
57. Lincoln, "Speech at Springfield," 410.
58. Speech of Stephen Douglas in New Orleans, December 6, 1858.
59. Cox, *Lincoln and Black Freedom*, 21.
60. Phillips in the *Liberator* XXX, 99 (June 22, 1860).
61. Lincoln, "Protest in Illinois Legislature on Slavery," 75
62. Lincoln, "Letter of Joshua Speed," 321.
63. Thus Jefferson and Clay could, and did, remain political heroes for Lincoln.
64. Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria, 276.
65. Ibid.
66. Lincoln, "Letter to A.G. Hodges," 282.
67. Ford, *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, vol. 7, 71.
68. See Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln*, 314.

69. Lincoln, "Temperance Address," 275.
70. The gauntlet Lincoln had thrown down before the reformers was not lost on his audience, who Herndon claimed "were open in their expression of displeasure." Herndon and Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln,* 206.
71. Reprinted in *National Anti-slavery Standard*, October 8, 1864.
72. Frederick Douglass, "Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln" (1876 at the dedication to a freedmen's monument in Washington, DC).
73. Lincoln, "Speech at Chicago," 501.
74. Lincoln, "Fragments: Notes for Speech," 399.
75. Oakes, "Natural Rights, Citizenship Rights, States' Rights, and Black Rights: Another Look at Lincoln and Race," in Foner, *Our Lincoln*, 109–10.
76. Douglas vilified Lincoln for slanting his arguments towards different audiences during the 1858 debates.
77. Joshua Giddings while in the House of Representatives and William Seward while campaigning for Taylor in New England in 1848.
78. I thank Eric Foner for sharing his manuscript of *The Fiery Trial* with me and for his many discussions on the subject of Lincoln and race.
79. Lincoln, "Speech at Columbus, Ohio," 425.
80. Ibid., 403, for example.
81. At Peoria, Lincoln called slavery a "GREAT evil" and the destruction the democratic experiment that was the United States a "GREATER one." Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria," 271.
82. Lincoln, "Letter to James N. Brown," 329.
83. Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria," 256.
84. See Oakes, "Lincoln and Race," in Foner, *Our Lincoln*, 131, and Fredrickson, *Big Enough to be Inconsistent.*
85. Quoted in Fehrenbacher and Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words*, 144–5.
86. Eric Foner offers a fine treatment of this topic in his "Lincoln and Colonization," in Foner, *Our Lincoln*, 135–66.
87. Quoted in Fehrenbacher and Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words*, 144.
88. See Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 209–12.
89. Americans had not witnessed a Second Inaugural in more than 30 years, since 4 March 1833.
90. Not all agree on this point; certainly M.E. Bradford reads Lincoln's prose as anything but self-effacing. Lincoln need not mention himself, says Bradford, because he has become one with the deity. From God's mouth to Lincoln's ears.
91. Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address," 333.
92. Gabor Borritt makes a similar observation about Lincoln's magnanimity in his *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech that Nobody Knows.*
93. The religious tone of Lincoln's remarks has drawn considerable interest from scholars. M.E. Bradford called Lincoln "a dangerous man" in large measure because Lincoln joined others in reaching for a foolish Gnosticism. See "Dividing the House: The Gnosticism of Lincoln's Political Rhetoric," 20–1.
94. David Donald wrote insightfully of "the essential passivity of his nature." See Donald's introduction to his *Lincoln.*

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