ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Words of Lincoln

By **Harold Holzer,** Metropolitan Museum of Art

More than one million of his words survive in print—and more, astonishingly, are being unearthed every week.

For years, scholars assumed that the canon was complete: all, that is, save for Abraham Lincoln's legendary "Lost Speech" of 1856, allegedly extemporaneous, and supposedly so hypnotic that stenographers put down their pencils to listen, too enthralled to record it.

But since 2004 or so, the Abraham Lincoln Papers Project in Springfield, Illinois, has been conducting an exhaustive new search in archives small and large, central and remote, in a renewed effort to find the last unseen, surviving scrawls. To the surprise of many historians, they have found a trove of new curiosities. When the research team has concluded its efforts to locate and scan every known document in the nation (and abroad), they will publish the complete survey in a web version of the long-outdated *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. Originally published between 1953 and 1955, and only marginally expanded by supplements in 1974 and 1990, the seven volumes, always inadequate, now seem hopelessly passé, crying out for this long-needed overhaul. Meanwhile, researchers scouring and scanning the military records of the National Archives have found countless Lincoln "endorsements"—instructions and comments Lincoln wrote on the back of incoming correspondence.

Not that the interested reader lacks for inspiring existing material. And what we have—what is left to us in manuscript and transcript alike—constitutes nothing less than the most accomplished writing any American politician has ever composed. Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, was not exaggerating when she declared that Lincoln's words deserved to be inscribed "in letters of gold." Tolstoy, Whitman, and Melville could be counted among his admirers. A later literary figure, the noted critic Edmund Wilson, was onto something when he grudgingly conceded in 1962 that he found in Lincoln's prose no evidence of the "folksy and jocular countryman" whom he—and others—often pictured "swapping yarns at the village store." Rather, Lincoln was a gifted and accomplished writer indeed: "intent, self-controlled, strong of intellect, [and] tenacious of purpose." Wilson went further. "Alone among American presidents," he added, "it is possible to imagine Lincoln, grown up in a different milieu, becoming a distinguished writer of a not merely political kind."

Of course, except for brief and unsuccessful forays into poetry and philosophical lecturing (both mediocre) and the rare personal letter to friends or family (including an occasional masterpiece), Lincoln's writing was *all* of a "political kind." And yet, in logical and lyrical phrases that continue to echo in the national vocabulary—"malice toward none," "government of the people, by the people, for the people," "a house divided," "right makes might," and "a new birth of freedom," to name but a few—Lincoln vividly exposed the vulnerabilities and toasted the virtues of the American experiment. His rhetoric exposed the hypocrisy of a nation pledged to equality in principle, but constitutionally dedicated to deny it in practice. Later, his words consecrated the suffering and sacrifice of civil war, and gave majesty to the noble ethics of majority rule, universal freedom, and limitless economic and social opportunity.

Lincoln's masterful writing comes in three forms: speeches, letters, and jottings (what today we would call memoranda, but in Lincoln's day were usually identified as "fragments"). Most of the famous letters have been re-discovered over time in the hands of their original recipients' descendants, and later published and re-assigned to public archives for preservation, study, and display. The most notable exception is Lincoln's famous, long-lost condolence note to Lydia Bixby, a Boston widow he was led to believe had lost five sons in battle for the Union cause. As it turned out, "only" two had actually fallen in combat, while a third died in a Confederate prison, and yet another deserted and lived on for nearly half a century more. What makes the Bixby story even more complicated is the fact that Lincoln's original letter never surfaced—although forgeries and reproductions abound—leading some recent historians to doubt whether he wrote it himself at all, or assigned the task to his precocious young assistant private secretary (and later U. S. Secretary of State) John M. Hay. The mystery remains unsolved, and the letter is more famous than ever because it was so dramatically recited in the Steven Spielberg film *Saving Private Ryan.* No one really knows for sure, and it's conceivable that no one ever will. But it is fair to say that few presidents—indeed, few great writers save for Shakespeare—could inspire so much passionate debate about matters of authorship.

Fortunately, unlike Mrs. Bixby, other contemporary recipients were far more careful with the precious handwritten communications from their president, and Lincoln sometimes made doubly sure of their preservation by wisely preserving autograph drafts of his most important correspondence, or painstakingly making copies of others. Hence modern readers enjoy a nearly complete record of his brilliant communications through the mail and the telegraph.

Then, of course, there are the astounding speeches. That we know some of the early ones at all is something of a miracle. Before he became president, and retained a staff of clerks to handle his files, Lincoln surprisingly never saved the manuscript copies of even his major orations. He believed his job was merely to deliver them successfully before live crowds, then take the hand-written reading copies to the nearest pro-

Republican newspaper to make certain they were set in type accurately in order to expose them to a wider reading public. Occasionally Lincoln laboriously read the first proofs himself, once doing so late into the night after his exhausting 1860 New York debut at Cooper Union. While this practice ensured that the audience for Lincoln's speeches thus expanded exponentially, it also meant that their author felt no need to preserve the originals once they were typeset and proofread to his satisfaction.

The system did not always work flawlessly. Somehow, in printing Lincoln's most important oration to date, the June 1858 "House Divided" address that signaled his entry into that year's history-altering race for the U. S. Senate, the pro-Republican *Daily Illinois State Journal* transposed two key paragraphs of the text, rendering much of the opening argument somewhat incomprehensible. Not until historian Don E. Fehrenbacher finally caught the problem in 1989 was an authoritative new text published. Even the supposedly definitive *Collective Works* had enshrined the mistake.

For some of Lincoln's remarks we do not even have the sure knowledge of his supervising their typesetting for the press: these were the speeches recorded by stenographers on the scene, and printed in the press without the benefit of Lincoln's own drafts, much less his personal attention to typographical errors. But they abound in the Lincoln canon, too, and more than deserve reproduction and study.

Then come the speeches Lincoln never wrote down at all. Though a surprisingly ineffective extemporaneous orator—especially for a lawyer who earned such a sterling reputation for his impact on juries—Lincoln was often called upon to orate from the heart, not the page. Both before and after his election to the White House, he occasionally offered crowds amusing little remarks without the benefit of notes. His entire inaugural journey to Washington in February 1861, for example, was littered with these off-the-cuff outpourings, not all of which proved helpful to his careful effort to craft a new statesmanlike image preparatory for his swearing-in in the teeth of the worsening secession crisis. But then, Lincoln never lacked for self-confidence. His entire output during the arduous Lincoln-Douglas debates—630 minutes of oratory over the course of seven "joint meetings"—was offered entirely extemporaneously, as far as we know, with Lincoln referring to only scraps of paper for occasional reference.

These "scraps," memos, and fragments were always important to Lincoln. His contemporaries often noticed that he habitually jotted down his thoughts whenever—and wherever—they occurred, scribbling notes on small strips of paper, and sometimes storing them in his copious stovepipe hat until he needed them to flesh out his works-in-progress. These fragments are themselves of perennial literary interest, particularly in the cases of memoranda he never subsequently adapted for his formal letters or remarks. They provide uncanny insight into Lincoln's character and creative process.

Finally, there was another type of speech in the Lincoln lexicon, one that deftly combined all the literary forms and public relations acumen he had mastered: the communications we now call his "public letters," ostensibly messages to individuals, but often crafted to be read aloud in his name to rallies and events Lincoln himself could not attend, or published in the newspapers to advance the Administration's policies without risking untoward exposure for the president. This special set of communications is particularly remarkable, for Lincoln created it in the day when America's chief executives customarily shunned opportunities to speak directly to the public either in their campaigns or during their reigns. Through this special means of making his views known, Lincoln thus changed the political culture, manipulated what he called "public sentiment" in the days before pollsters could advise leaders on what communications might prove popular, and secured his place in history.

"Writing," Lincoln once argued, "is the great invention of the world." And he was one of its very greatest inventors.

****