

Dealmaking

By [David Heim](#)

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Within the decided limits of a Hollywood blockbuster, Steven Spielberg's movie *Lincoln* presents a nonheroic version of the 16th president. Though some iconic images are carefully polished—Lincoln as folksy storyteller and as lonely bearer of the ravages of war—the film focuses on Lincoln as wily politician, twisting arms and trading favors.

His immediate goal in the spring of 1864 was to pass [the 13th amendment](#), abolishing slavery. One can't help wishing that current lawmakers in Washington might see the film and be inspired to cut some deals.

Films about politics often climax with the hero giving a rousing speech in defense of principle. Spielberg's film climaxes with a politician shrewdly dissembling about principle in order to accomplish an immediate goal.

The speech is given not by Lincoln but by Pennsylvania Rep. Thaddeus Stevens (played by Tommy Lee Jones). A Radical Republican, Stevens was known as an ardent supporter of full racial equality. Yet he backed a version of the amendment outlawing slavery that, in a bid to lure conservative votes, sidestepped the issue of equality. The movie has him assuring his colleagues before the crucial vote, "I don't hold with equality in all things, just equality before the law, nothing more."

Later, when a colleague tells him he's betrayed the cause, Stevens says that to pass the amendment, "it seems there's nothing I won't say." That bit may owe more to Tony Kushner's screenwriting than to history, but it neatly captures the message of the film.

Indeed, the film captures some of Lincoln's own sense of what it is to lead and govern. He once explained, "The pilots on our Western rivers steer from 'point to point' as they call it—setting the course of the boat no farther than they can see; and that is all I propose to myself in this great problem."