The ups and downs of Lincoln's legacy

By Edward J. Blum
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One hundred and fifty years ago today, Abraham Lincoln died after being shot the night before. That April 15 was the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Herman Melville versed,

> Good Friday was the day
> Of the prodigy and crime,
> When they killed him in his pity,
> When they killed him in his prime.

Like others, Melville linked Lincoln, the so-called savior of the Union, to Jesus Christ, the savior of humanity:

> He lieth in his blood—
> The father in his face;
> They have killed him, the Forgiver—
> The Avenger takes his place.

In Charleston, South Carolina, when one African American heard the news, he reportedly responded: “Lincoln died for we, Christ died for we, and me believe him de same mans.”

It is easy to think that Lincoln became a beloved martyr immediately after his death. But history shows that national love came later, much later. Alive, he was anything but adored. In 1860, he won the presidential election with only 40 percent of the popular vote. Four years later, his second victory was anything but certain. A few timely Union victories brought him the second term he was unable to complete. In the years after the Civil War, sectional animosities and partisan battles between Republicans and Democrats kept Lincoln from being universally beloved. Only after the white North and the white South had come to an agreement—the agreement of racial segregation—did Lincoln ascend.

National appreciation for Lincoln soared during the first decades of the 20th century. Democrats like William Jennings Bryan joined Republicans like Theodore Roosevelt in asking themselves “what would Lincoln do” in terms of political problems. White supremacists like Thomas Dixon (author of *The Clansman*) and D. W. Griffith (director of *The Birth of a Nation*) depicted Lincoln as a friend to the white South who wanted African Americans to move to colonies outside of the United States. Most advocates for civil rights continued to prize Lincoln, “the Great Emancipator,” but they recognized they were in a fight for his legacy. In this environment, Lincoln’s face was placed on the penny, the five-dollar bill, and eventually Mount Rushmore. By the time Jimmy Stewart needed a friend in Washington, D.C., it was Lincoln’s statue that he went to in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.

The lesson is one we all know, but bears repeating. Legacies rise and fall, fall and rise. Andrew Jackson was once beloved as the “man of the people.” Now, most know him as an architect of Indian removal. George Washington was once elected unanimously by the electoral college. Now, he’s mocked for being a slave owner and making sure one runaway was hunted down. Babe Ruth was once adored as the greatest player in Major League Baseball. Now comedians wonder how well he would have done had African Americans been allowed to play in Major League Baseball during his career. Alternatively, Herbert Hoover was hated by just about everyone when he left office during the Great Depression, but thanks to Glenn Beck and others, Hoover has made a comeback.

The twists and turns of public appreciation may lead us to take a moment to reflect on the women and men of our times. Will Americans remember Billy Graham 30, 50, or 150 years from now? If they do, how so? What will history books say about Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton? What about Ann Coulter or Rick Warren?

In many ways, future opinions are impossible to control. In the case of Lincoln, since he lived in such tumultuous times, provided so many seemingly contrasting points of view, and died tragically, he became over time “all things to all men.” In life, he was a savvy politician who had a mixed record on issues of both race and faith. At times, he voiced beautiful sentiments of freedom, liberty, justice, and belief in God. His Second Inaugural is a striking example of this. At other times, he spoke the words and ethics of white supremacy. He considered moving African Americans to colonies a good idea; he told white audiences that he would not want his children to marry African Americans. One hundred and fifty years after his death, we cannot help but remember Lincoln, in part because the issues at stake in his life are ones still at

stake in ours.

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