

The Lincoln experience: Up-to-date history

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [December 13, 2005](#) issue

The opening earlier this year of the \$90 million Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Illinois, sparked a battle over the place of technology in museums. Traditionalists among historians and museum directors wrung their hands at the computer-generated special effects and lifelike fiberglass figures, deriding the effort to popularize history as “Six Flags over Lincoln” or “Lincoln Disneyfied.” But advocates for the futurized museum asked how, in an age of cell phones and ADHD, the interest of young people can be captured without a bit of whiz-bang.

The latter not only won this battle, but may have won the war over museum design for the foreseeable future. For the new Lincoln museum is often crammed full of visitors, and is receiving guests from other museums who are thinking of imitating what they see.

The museum is a success not just because the exhibits are so lifelike—Madame Tussaud’s wax museums can do that. It’s that they tell Lincoln’s story so well. There’s young Abe the rail-splitter educating himself by firelight as his family snores in a one-room log cabin. Here’s the young professional Lincoln draped over a couch in his law office, reading a newspaper, oblivious to his boys’ raucous behavior. Here he’s towering over political opponent Stephen Douglas; there he’s reading his newly drafted Emancipation Proclamation to an incredulous cabinet. And there’s a scene in which John Wilkes Booth makes his deadly approach at Ford’s Theatre. The sculptures and re-creations of whole rooms are stunning. None is more powerful than the one representing a New Orleans slave auction at which a family is being split apart. A child behind me asked, “Mommy, why are they in handcuffs?”

Some of the much-discussed special effects, designed by the former Disney executive in charge of BRC Imagination, who was paid a tidy \$54 million, turn out to be unremarkable. During a film sequence on the Civil War, cannons explode, smoke rings fly through the air and the theater seats shake. Everyone giggles, and then it’s

over. In a feature called “Ghosts in the Library” the viewers sees holographic images—like one of a feather quill for writing the Gettysburg Address. If museums expect these cheap thrills alone to attract a new generation, they will be disappointed. I was reminded of Lisa Simpson’s assessment of Epcot Center on *The Simpsons*: “It was designed in 1975 to show people how great life would be in 1987.” I asked one teenager what she thought of the special effects, and she shrugged. “It’s pretty cool, I guess”—she barely glanced up from the video game on her cell.

One of the newfangled exhibits that has generated controversy is a TV control room that runs commercials for the 1860 elections, each introduced by NBC’s Tim Russert, complete with a cable news-style ticker at the bottom of the screen. An ad for John C. Breckenridge’s southern Democratic campaign complains about politicians who “want to take away your property and trample on your state’s constitution.” Each ad ends with a voiceover, such as “paid for by citizens for John C. Bell.” Russert comments on Lincoln’s pro-union platform and his successful political strategy of winning the White House without support from a single slaveholding state.

Traditionalists will complain: “But there was no television in 1860!” But that mastery of the obvious misses the museum’s delightful frankness. All museums offer a constructed memory, not the real thing, whatever that might be. Why not introduce the candidates in 2005 style, especially when it can be done effectively in two minutes? The museum winks at us, and those not intent on playing Scrooge will get the joke. In any case, there is no less information here than in any other museum, and perhaps there is more. A plaque behind each exhibit asks “Read more?” and offers an extended annotated bibliography.

The title of another exhibit, “The Civil War in 4 Minutes,” might suggest the sort of dumbed-down experience that traditionalists would deride. They would be wrong. A wall-sized plasma screen shows the slow, four-year Union advance, with explosions representing battles and with mournful period music in the background. A ticker counts the casualties. Visitors paused longer here than anywhere else, caught short by the staggering numbers—1.3 million total, 600,000 of whom died.

The “Whispering Gallery” displays quotes from Lincoln haters while voices mock Mary Todd Lincoln’s manners and cartoonists lampoon her husband’s oafish looks and perceived imbecility. Even students of history who know that Lincoln had fierce enemies will be struck by those antagonists’ cruelty and cleverness.

It was an age of eloquence. To hear the Gettysburg Address or the Second Inaugural Address, intoned by an actor, is to experience awesome rhetorical power.

But the museum's own efforts to praise Lincoln fall short. The biographical film *Lincoln's Eyes* describes his rags-to-riches story as a quintessential American story, and asks if we don't all "see a little bit of ourselves in Lincoln's eyes." In another clip a Union soldier who died in battle summarizes "our ideals": "We despise tyranny, love freedom, and are willing to fight and, if need be, die for our ideals." He then dons his army coat and salutes us, "Now the best part of us lives on in you." This schmaltzy rhetoric is a hallmark of our age, not Lincoln's. It would have been better to let Lincoln's own eloquence wash over us without updating.

Nonreligious viewers of the exhibit may be surprised by the robust civil religion that accompanied 19th-century homage to Lincoln. The impressive re-creation of the rotunda of the Illinois Statehouse, where Lincoln lay in state, includes the words "Washington the Father, Lincoln the Savior" on the base of the giant dome. *Lincoln's Eyes* speaks of him cutting "a divine figure," giving his life for the liberation of others and for a vision of a society in which all are equals, a vision that is America's gift to the world. Christians may argue passionately about the appropriateness of mixing Christian speech with political rhetoric, and of appending descriptions like "messianic" to a U.S. president, especially with their correlation to the current administration's war policy. But clearly those are the terms in which our forebears thought, and that is the legacy with which we now have to wrestle.

Though the museum hints at fascinating questions about Lincoln's faith, it fails to ask or answer them fully. How was his oratory shaped by the revival preaching he heard as a boy in Kentucky and Indiana? Is his eloquence even thinkable apart from an imagination shaped by scripture? We have had few presidents who were never members of a church, and Lincoln was one of them. Yet none was more theologically eloquent than he.

Lincoln the God-inquirer is largely muted in the museum, compared to Lincoln the aggrieved parent who buried two sons, Lincoln the spinner of folk wisdom, and Lincoln the hedging abolitionist. A plaque mentions that "more books have been written about Lincoln than any other individual, with the possible exception of Jesus of Nazareth" (possible?), with no further word about the relationship between the two. Lincoln's famous prophecy about secession, that "a house divided against itself cannot stand," is attributed to Aesop's fables rather than to scripture. Lincoln's

generosity to his conquered enemies and his tentative probings about Providence are not explored.

Perhaps that's because religion has little explanatory power in our age. In Lincoln's day, scripture so soaked all language that politics could not help being shaped by it, even though scripture was rarely deployed as deftly as by Lincoln. In other words, religion functioned then as technology does now. We couldn't do history without technology any more than our pre-20th-century forebears could do politics without religion—they are the respective streams in which we swim.

The use of technology is mostly effective, though in the end the pride of the museum lies in the exhibits that are least enhanced by the computer. These materials could have been on display had the museum opened in 1905 or 1865: a copy of the Gettysburg Address in Lincoln's own hand; Mary Todd's wedding gown; Lincoln's stove-pipe hat, worn down where he held onto it against the wind; the carriage in which the Lincolns rode on their last evening together; Lincoln's blood on Mary Todd's clothes; his death bed. Somehow these physical artifacts speak more eloquently than computer-generated effects.

So score some points for traditionalists and some for champions of the contemporary. Technology is used well here, though the whiz-bang effects would be weak without the real stuff of history alongside them. Perhaps we could declare an armistice in this ongoing civil war.