

A Career Ruled by Honesty

Abraham Lincoln was first called “Honest Abe” when he was working as a young store clerk in New Salem, Illinois. According to one story, whenever he realized he had shortchanged a customer by a few pennies, he would close the shop and deliver the correct change, regardless of how far he had to walk.

People recognized his integrity and were soon asking him to act as judge or mediator in various contests, fights and arguments. People relied implicitly upon his honesty, integrity and impartiality.

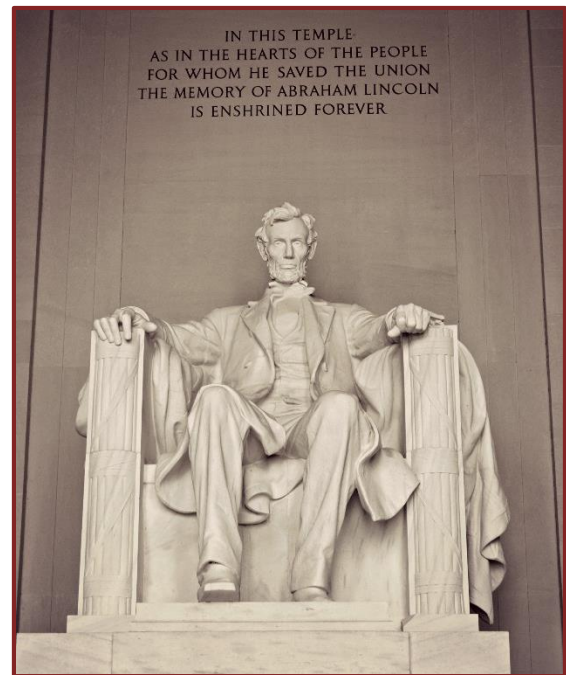
Because of his reputation for honesty and fairness, Lincoln won four consecutive terms in the Illinois legislature. He soon moved to Springfield, Illinois, to begin his law practice – a profession at which he admitted there was a “popular belief that lawyers are necessarily dishonest.” His advice to potential lawyers was: “Resolve to be honest at all events, and if in your judgment you cannot be an honest lawyer, resolve to be honest without being a lawyer. Choose some other occupation, rather than one in the choosing of which you do, in advance, consent to be a knave.”

An example of an “enemy’s” respect came in 1858, during Lincoln’s Senate race against the powerful incumbent, Stephen A. Douglas. The senator, having competed with Lincoln in the legislature and many Illinois courtrooms, knew his opponent well.

Responding to the news that Lincoln was to be his adversary, Douglas said, “I shall have my hands full. He is the strong man of his party – full of wit, facts, dates – and the best stump speaker, with his droll ways and dry jokes, in the West. He is as honest as he is shrewd, and if I beat him my victory will be hardly won.”

Lincoln lost his Senate bid to Douglas. Two years later, however, he found himself running against the same man for the presidency. When Douglas was told of Lincoln’s victory, he unselfishly told his informants: “You have nominated a very able and very honest man.”

Everyone, even his bitterest political opponents, knew exactly where they stood with Lincoln. Because he didn’t have to waste his time convincing his opponents of his sincerity, he was able to devote his energies to solving political issues and winning the war.



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In search for the reason Lincoln was so adamant about honesty, a quote by one of his closest friends, Leonard Swett (a lawyer who advised Lincoln), is revealing: “He believed in the great laws of truth, the right discharge of duty, his accountability to God, the ultimate triumph of the right, and the overthrow of wrong.”

In this election year, in the midst of a contest to win the presidency, we are dramatically reminded that the pursuit of honesty – in politics and in our culture – is woefully lacking.

What a world it would be if we could all commit to the principles of Lincoln – a belief in the great laws of truth, the right discharge of duty, an accountability to God, the ultimate triumph of the right, and the overthrow of wrong.

Were it so, Lord; were it so!

Better is a poor person who walks in his integrity than one who is crooked in speech and is a fool (Proverbs 19:1 ESV).

– Beecher Hunter