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A man of steel, a man of velvet

By Jim Nowlan

This week or so we celebrate the anniversary of the Gettysburg Address, so I rummaged around in my files for notes on Lincoln Day talks I gave in the early 1970s when I served in the legislature, thinking I could whip out an easy column.

I found my old notes remarkable for their lack of coherence, and I wince to think of any audience trying to follow my thoughts. The notes failed to answer a question that has long puzzled me: Was Lincoln just a man, though certainly able, who rose to greatness when faced with crisis, or was he delivered to us almost super-human in his mettle and vision?

Here you have a frontier rube, a failed storekeeper, a surveyor who once gave up his horse and instruments to pay his debts. Certainly he was not viewed as a man of destiny.

As a young legislator in Vandalia in the 1830s, Lincoln enthusiastically backed an array of “internal improvement” schemes for canals, railroads and highways that were never built. The state borrowed \$10 million though it had state budget revenue of less than \$100,000, and the scheme almost bankrupt the state. The fiscal problems created were much greater than those we face at present in Illinois.

Self-trained in the law, Lincoln made his living traveling, three months at a time, by horseback across the 14 counties of the 8th Judicial Circuit, arguing over the ownership of a litter of pigs, boundary lines, slander and a routine of homely disputes.

Using common sense more than the fine points of the law, Lincoln prospered as a good lawyer before a jury.

But politics was his passion. Yet even here, success seemed to elude him, as his one term in the U.S. House was marked by his unpopular stand in opposition to the war with Mexico in 1846.

Lincoln and his political associates realized that the effort to stop the extension of slavery, not its abolition, was the issue that would be their ticket to prominence. Leaving a Whig Party that could not find its way on this overriding issue, Lincoln and others started the Republican Party in 1854.

His third run for the US Senate in 1858 (all of them unsuccessful) brought him national acclaim as an eloquent spokesman for growing anti-slavery sentiment in the North.

By 1859, this once-awkward and unpolished country lawyer was winning over sophisticated, skeptical audiences at Cooper Union Institute in New York City and throughout the Northeast.

Clearly, Lincoln had been rapidly climbing a steep cultural and intellectual learning curve.

Lincoln also benefited from the expansion of the frontier and the dizzying pace of industrial and agricultural development, with steam power, railroads and the telegraph. In a fast-growing society in continual flux, upward mobility was needed, expected.

Lincoln won the presidency in 1860 with about 41 percent of the vote in a four-way contest, anything but an overwhelming mandate. He was almost immediately confronted by the secession of South Carolina and then other southern states.

Believing that keeping the Union together was the imperative aim of his presidency, even more important than slavery, Lincoln filled his cabinet with political opponents and doubters, and conducted the bloodiest war in which Americans have ever participated.

The war went badly for the Union at the outset. The humiliation at Bull Run, bloody sacrifice at Fredericksburg and defeat at Chancellorsville dampened the spirits of Union loyalists. Plagued by “melancholia” for years, Lincoln’s torment during the darkest hours would have driven a weaker man to seek a surcease to the war. Yet Lincoln endured bitter political slings and arrows from all sides as he saw the Union through whole.

The enormity of Lincoln’s accomplishment cannot be overstated. A splintered union might well have changed the course of global history. Would a fractured, weakened political configuration have had the economic strength and will to come to the aid of our allies in World War I, and to that of a desperate England in the second world war?

Lincoln’s greatness lay in his strength of character, his common sense and his laser-like focus on the issue of Union. As Carl Sandburg wrote:

“Not often in the story of mankind does a man arrive on earth who is both steel and velvet, who is hard as rock and soft as drifting snow, who holds in his heart and mind the paradox of terrible storm and peace unspeakable and perfect.”

A lesson from Lincoln for your children and grandchildren might be that he was but a man who grew quickly in all respects, learning from even simple lessons from life on the prairie, and found the strength to be larger than life when called upon.