

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

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Ep. 185: These Times Demand This Fascinating Look At How Abraham Lincoln Kept America One Country

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INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the 3 key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi everyone, it's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another 3 Takeaways episode. Abraham Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth at Ford's Theater over 150 years ago. He was assassinated only six weeks after his second inauguration. Today, Abraham Lincoln is revered, but it wasn't always so. Coming into the Republican National Convention in 1860, Lincoln had a record of political failure.

LT: He'd served a single term in Congress 10 years before, and since then had failed twice running for the Senate. Few would have imagined that Lincoln would win the Republican nomination for president and become one of America's greatest presidents. In today's polarized world, we can learn much from Abraham Lincoln and how he led through a time of even greater partisanship and through a civil war while ending slavery and keeping the United States as one country. Today, I'm excited to be with Ed Achorn, the author of two critically acclaimed books on Abraham Lincoln, including *The Lincoln Miracle*.

LT: According to Ed, in the capital of the Confederacy, the Richmond, Virginia Daily Dispatch found it appalling that the people of the supposedly civilized North had reelected, “a vulgar tyrant whose career has been one of unlimited and unmitigated disaster, whose personal qualities are those of a low buffoon and whose most noteworthy conversation is a medley of profane jests and obscene anecdotes, a creature who has squandered the lives of millions without remorse and without even the decency of pretending to feel for their misfortune, who still cries for blood and for money in the pursuit of his atrocious designs, unquote. I'm looking forward to learning how Lincoln healed a nation consumed by such hatred.” Welcome, Ed, and thanks so much for joining 3 Takeaways today.

Ed Achorn: Thank you, Lynn. It's such a pleasure to be here.

LT: Thank you. What was Lincoln like as a man?

EA: Lincoln was intelligent. He was kind to people. He was outgoing, but he was very secretive personally. He kept his heart closed to the world. So he's a very unusual figure and is still very difficult to get at what he actually thought and felt other than what he wrote. He was depressed, I

think clinically depressed. He had a very difficult time with a terrible childhood and he had to lift himself from just abject poverty. He educated himself, very little education, and he impressed people with just his intelligence, his kindness, his ability to look into problems pragmatically. I've spent about six years or more, day and night, in his presence and I feel very fortunate to have done that.

LT: He was described as a “homely man”.

EA: People were struck by his looks. He had sort of this disheveled hair. He could never quite comb. He had a wart on his cheek. He had a lazy left eye. He was wrinkled, prematurely aged, and he looked kind of like a country, a plain country man. But people often commented on that after they got over their initial shock of him, they actually thought he was kind of handsome in a strange way. They just sort of warmed to him and thought this guy's really special, after this initial shock.

LT: He was also known as a great storyteller with a folksy charm combined with a high intellect, wasn't he?

EA: Yes, well, his friends said he told these stories, some of which were very dirty, just to ward off his depression and sadness. And he loved telling stories and he laughed at them louder than anybody else. But some of them were really off color, somebody said in 1859, you should collect a volume of your stories and he said, that book would stink like a thousand privies. So he refused to do it.

LT: Was the election of Lincoln similar in some ways or any ways to the elections of Jack Kennedy and Barack Obama in that all three were relative political novices, they were all exceptional public speakers and had very short political records?

EA: I think you could say that. He was a very diehard Republican. He was one of the founders of the party, but he was not considered one of the leading lights of the party going into that 1860 convention. So I think you could make some comparisons with those two. JFK was, of course, a little different. He was, you know, to the manner born somewhat and his father had a great deal of money and that helped him in his political career. Barack Obama is just a media darling. Lincoln had to sort of struggle every step of the way and win people over in a very gradual way. And that was the difference.

LT: Lincoln was instrumental in the formation of the new Republican Party. And he then ran for president as a Republican. What did the new Republican Party stand for?

EA: It stood for stopping the spread of slavery. Lincoln did not want to touch slavery where it existed. He thought that would precipitate a bloody war. He didn't want to do that. He also understood the South's economy depended on slavery, but he wanted to make a statement that slavery is evil, it's morally wrong, and we as a nation, we have to say, as he believed the founders did, it has to stop. It can't go on forever. That was his commitment and that was how he shaped the party and that was the essential plank in the 1860 platform.

LT: It was about not extending slavery to the new states of the United States.

EA: That's right, the new western states, the territories. And also the South was talking about trying to take over Cuba and Central America and build new slave states there. Lincoln was adamantly opposed to this.

LT: So Lincoln won election in November and then he assumed office in March. What happened between his election and when he assumed the presidency in March?

EA: That was a terrible time. The seven Southern states decided we can't go on with this. We can't stay in a country where power has shifted to the North and we're going to be under direct threat when the Republicans take over. So even before Lincoln took the oath of office, seven states moved to leave the Union. And Lincoln believed adamantly they had no legal authority to do that. This was a permanent compact of states in the Union and they couldn't do that. So he had to go into office and challenge what they were doing.

LT: Did Lincoln oppose any offensive actions against the South after he assumed the presidency, when he first assumed the presidency?

EA: Well, he was making the argument, we're not sending troops to conquer the South initially. He believed that he was honor bound as the president of the United States to as his oath required to enforce the laws. And he believed he had to collect the revenues for the federal government and also maintain federal property in the Southern states. And obviously that led very quickly to an explosion of warfare. And Lincoln had to effectively conquer the Southern armies and the economies that were supporting those Southern armies. And it became a total war by the end of this horrible civil war.

LT: But Lincoln did not start out by attacking or acting offensively against the South. The South attacked.

EA: Yes, the South famously fired on Fort Sumter, which was a federal fort in Charleston Harbor. At that point, Lincoln called up 75,000 troops to suppress the rebellion. And that really ignited the war.

LT: How was he able to make such an important decision and take such a critical action when he had just assumed the presidency?

EA: Well, this is the incredible thing about Lincoln. Congress was out of session. He was sort of alone. He was a new president. His executive experience had been limited to running a two-man law office back in Illinois. And he somehow gathered the courage and the nerve and the strategy to start the union on the struggle to save the Union.

EA: He could have let the seven states go, but that would have destroyed the United States. And that would have violated, in his view, his oath of office. He had the courage to not only do these things, but stand up to his political advisors, his military advisors, people who were much more experienced and supposedly equipped with knowledge.

And I think history shows he made many wise decisions in establishing that the union had to be preserved.

LT: And what was his objective in fighting the Civil War at the start?

EA: His objective was clearly to save the Union. He believed profoundly in the country the founders had created. He believed it was a beacon of freedom and justice to the world. So the war, as it went along, it became a war against slavery because Lincoln understood slavery was sustaining the South's ability to fight. So he issued his Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863.

EA: And what happened was many Blacks fled from the South, especially from the border states, and became soldiers for the Union Army. And I think that really tipped the balance of the war.

LT: What do you think about the following quote from Frederick Douglass, the escaped slave who dedicated his life to destroying slavery? "Viewed from the genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent. But measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined."

EA: Yes, I think that's a brilliant analysis by Douglass. That's Douglass commenting later on, though. During the war, he was very negative about Lincoln. In fact, he was looking for another candidate to support when Lincoln came up for re-election. But I think that quote you read is profound and brilliant. That is exactly true. Lincoln had to move at a certain pace to rally the nation behind the idea of emancipation. And if he had gone too early, the whole thing would have fallen apart, that he would not have had support to conduct the war.

EA: So, and I think this is Lincoln's greatest skill, is he exactly calibrated when the public was able to endure certain things he had to do to save the country. He met every day with members of the public. It's quite extraordinary. He took up time having what he called public opinion baths. People could come to the White House and try to get in to see him. And he met all sorts of people from off the street, mothers of soldiers and so forth. And he actually got a good sense of where the country stood through those meetings. And also, he had feelers out to political figures all over the country. So his position on slavery changed from the beginning of the war.

LT: Can you explain that a bit?

EA: Yeah, his position on slavery didn't change. He hated slavery and wanted men to be free, men and women to be free. But his political position shifted as the war ground on and it became more and more essential that slavery be ended to win that war.

But Lincoln's goal all along, I believe, was to save the union. And he believed ultimately, he discussed this in his famous second inaugural address, that the Almighty had a different plan than he did or anybody did. That was to use this war to finally bring about the end of slavery. And that is what happened.

LT: Lincoln had about one year of formal schooling. He was a Congressman for a single term and a lawyer, as you mentioned, of a two man law office before becoming president. And he had essentially no administrative or leadership experience. How was he able to lead at such a challenging time as an inexperienced president facing the succession of most of the country?

EA: That's a very important historical question. And he was able to do it because he was shrewd. He was pragmatic. He had suffered personal disappointments and defeats all through life. So he sort of had this ability to accept defeat and disappointment and that sustained him during that war. He had a peculiarly fatalistic attitude that you can only do so much and that you have to do the best you can. And that sort of sustained him too. He was smart. He was politically shrewd. He understood politics. I call my book the Lincoln Miracle because it was such a miracle he was nominated, not only because the process and he was such a long shot, but also because if any of these other major candidates had been nominated, I think this country would have broken up and gone under. And it's just so profoundly wonderful that Lincoln was nominated at that convention. That saved our country and may have saved the world, actually, if you look at the struggles of the 20th century and the role the United States played in those.

LT: One of the extraordinary things to me about Lincoln was how gracious and accepting of people that he was. When he was president, his Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, compared him to a baboon. And Lincoln was asked, as you know, how he could endure the insult. And he said something to the effect that it's not an insult, it's an expression of opinion. And what troubled him about it is that his Secretary Stanton, had said it, and he said, Stanton is usually right.

EA: Lincoln would often turn those things into a bit of a joke and he had this uncanny ability. I don't know how he did it to set his ego aside, to sort of step out of his body, almost, and look at this stuff rationally. And he did not take offense. He did not harbor grudges. He did not punish his enemies. And he did this for practical reasons. He looked at the long term. And he looked at, maybe I can build friendships. Maybe we can move forward in a positive way. And that was crucial to him at the convention in 1860. Some of the people there were people he had disagreed with politically. But he maintained his friendships. And they went to bat for him day and night in Chicago and got him nominated.

LT: What was his childhood like?

EA: It was grindingly poor. His father was born out of wedlock. His father was a very undistinguished laboring man. He was poor. He was forced to work at a very young age. His mother died when he was nine years old. And I'm always struck by this, because this has to be such a profound experience for him. His father left Lincoln and his sister to find another wife, to go back to Kentucky and find a new mother for them and a new wife. And they were left alone for months in this cabin, and they were on the verge of starvation and just filthy. And then he came back with a new wife. If you think of that experience in Lincoln's life, no wonder he entered adulthood very depressed and very sad and with the notion that life can be very harsh. But as I say, I think that sustained him during the Civil War.

LT: Why do you think that Lincoln was a great leader? And what enabled him to be a great leader?

EA: I think it's those things we mentioned, his incredible array of qualities as a person, his ability to withstand defeat, his sense of humor, his keen political instincts, his idea that you don't hate people. You try to do the best you can not to make enemies, which is kind of amazing when he fought the bloodiest war in our history. And I think he just had a unique set of qualities, unlike any other president I can think of, even Washington. And he brought those to bear in our nation's greatest challenge.

LT: And what are the lessons for us today?

EA: I would say three things. One, never give up. I mean, Lincoln had suffered defeat after defeat. He'd lost two runs for the Senate. He'd even been rejected for a government position. He had not held political office for more than a decade when he entered the fray for the presidency. But I think all those defeats and disappointments helped move him forward. Second thing, and this is very alien to modern politicians, but Lincoln thought it didn't pay off to be snarky or to take offense or hold grudges. And he said, do good to those who hate you and turn their ill will to friendship. That was his advice. You would think, oh, that's Pollyanna. But it's actually very pragmatic politically.

EA: And I think that's something we could all learn. But by maintaining friendships instead of burning his bridges against very insulting and difficult circumstances, he was able to keep people on his side. And the third thing I can think of is, you can't control everything. You have to deal with life as it comes. His favorite quote from Shakespeare was from Hamlet. There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hue them how we will. We can only roughly shape our lives, but there's something acting on our lives that we cannot control. And he eventually came to think that was the Almighty. He was very fatalistic.

You can only do so much, and you have to do the best you can. And I think that approach gives you a lot of strength to endure disappointments and defeats.

LT: And he famously created a cabinet of his rivals.

EA: Yes. The Republican Party was this crazy array of all sorts of different interests and perspectives, and it was a new party. So Lincoln was very clever. He needed to have support from all ends of this party. So he believed in himself enough, he believed in the strength of his character to put his political rivals right on the cabinet. And they fought with each other, fought like dogs with each other, and sometimes with Lincoln. But he was able to keep everything together and use, he said, my greatest strength of the president was being able to deal with difficult people. And he was able to do that.

LT: And what are the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

EA: One, never give up. Don't give up because you have to keep fighting. And that was Lincoln's life. Two, don't take offense. Don't hold grudges. Try to do good to those who hate you and turn their ill will into friendship. And the third one is, you can't control everything.

You have to accept life as it comes and do the best you can. And I think those are pretty wise pieces of advice from Lincoln.

LT: Ed Achorn, thank you so much for joining 3 Takeaways today. I really enjoyed your book, The Lincoln Miracle.

EA: Thank you, Lynn. It was great to be here.

OUTRO male voice: If you enjoyed today's episode and would like to receive the show notes or get new fresh weekly episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at <https://www.3takeaways.com/> or follow us on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#). Note that 3Takeaways.com is with the number 3, 3 is not spelled out. See you soon at 3Takeaways.com (<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)

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