



Straight Talk

by Muriel Sluyter

Abe Lincoln and Truth

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Greetings, Gentle Reader,

Mark Twain said, "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes."

Could Abraham Lincoln have imagined how extensively the lies told about him would travel, while the truth would be absent-mindedly searching for its shoes, never mind putting them on? Could he have known that generations of professors would teach students to hold him in contempt, because of their own contemptible deficiency of character?

Today's writers take a fraction of a sentence out of context and persuade readers their target is something he is not. Lincoln was no stranger to such despicable behavior, but he had no videotape to prove his innocence. Fortunately, his own words are sufficient for honest citizens, so let's read a few of them:

Lincoln was a debater, and at one time he wrote himself a note (as debaters do) that illuminates his principled reasoning. He wrote this as though he were addressing a slaveholder. "You say A. is white, and B. is black. It is color, then: the lighter having the right to enslave the darker? Take care. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with a fairer skin than your own.

"You do not mean color exactly? You mean the whites are intellectually the superiors of the blacks, and therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with an intellect superior to your own."

Lincoln articulated his conviction that nothing could disqualify blacks as human beings. It couldn't be color, because people of all races come in varying shades. It couldn't be intellect, because people of all races come with varying degrees of intellectual capacity.

He expressed his view of human value and the Constitution's "all men are created equal" in a eulogy for his friend Henry Clay. "... (A)n increasing number of men... for the sake of perpetuating slavery, are beginning to assail and to ridicule the white man's charter of freedom, the declaration 'that all men are created equal.' So far as I have learned, the first American, of any note, to do or attempt

this, was the late John C. Calhoun. But, only last year, I saw with astonishment, what purported to be a letter of a very distinguished and influential clergyman of Virginia, copied, with apparent approbation, into a St. Louis newspaper containing the following, to me, very extraordinary language (referring to the phrase, all men are created equal): 'This is a genuine coin in the political currency of our generation. I am sorry to say that I have never seen two men of whom it is true. But, I must admit I never saw the Siamese twins.'

Lincoln then adds, "This sounds strangely in republican America. The like was heard in the fresher days of the Republic."

So, to whom was the clergyman's statement attributed in a new book on Lincoln? To Lincoln, naturally, using it as proof that he rejected the Constitution's dictum that God created all men equal. Pretty slick. Crooked, but slick.

Lincoln, though adamantly opposed to the concept that individual states could legitimately decide whether to embrace slavery, as though it were a merely political question, rather than a moral one, stated realistically, "The probability that we may fail in the struggle shouldn't deter us from the support of a cause we believe to be just."

Ah, yes! Lies are world travelers, but they need willing couriers; unfortunately, here was no shortage of them then, nor is there now.