

Look at Lincoln: Lincoln's Sense of Humor

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Feature Essay

Look at Lincoln

Spring 2018

Carwardine, Richard. *Lincoln's Sense of Humor*. Southern Illinois University Press, \$24.93 ISBN 0809336146

Lincoln's use of jokes and stories is legendary. He had a deep need to use humor as therapy to ward off sadness, tragedy, and family loss. He also employed comic stories to engage listeners and, in the case of trials, engage jurors and discombobulate witnesses. In the law office, addressing clients, Lincoln used humor to gain the trust of clients who found him more approachable when he employed it.

Richard Carwardine, a scholar and administrator at Oxford University (President of Corpus Christi College). At one time, Carwardine was an actor who appeared with Richard Burton in the 1967 film *Doctor Faustus* which, "bombed." In contrast, his writing and administrative skills were a success. His biography, *Lincoln*, won the Lincoln Prize in 2004.

He asserts that Lincoln's humor was the first in the White House and has surpassed other presidents in effectiveness – FDR, JFK, and even Ronald Reagan.

Learning the skill of a storyteller from his father with whom he became estranged, Lincoln did excel as the teller of tall tales, bawdy jokes, absurdities, double entendres, and use of a sharp wit that could poke one in the ribs.

As a politician – at least early in his career – he excelled in cruel sarcasm against political opponents. In one such case, it almost led to a duel with Illinois Democrat James Shields – the state auditor. Yet, Lincoln was not a good hater, as early in his administration he appointed Shields, a veteran of the Mexican War, as a Brigadier General. That was the mature Lincoln.

As the author indicates, his comic side, "...was a weapon to win political or personal advantage, sometimes by frontal assault on opponents, but much more commonly by lucid exposition through parable, refusal through wit, and diversion through cunning."

When General John Pope sent him "telegrams from the saddle," Lincoln responded to aids, "The trouble with Pope is that he has his saddle where his hindquarters ought to be." I could not find this in the book but it is one of my favorites.

Lincoln knew that others thought him strange and even ugly. So, he told about the incident involving a man with "features the ladies could not call handsome." He met a woman on horseback and he waited for her to pass but instead she stopped and said to him, "Well, for

land's sake, you are the homeliest man I ever saw." "Yes madam...but I can't help it," he replied. "No, I suppose not," said the lady, "but you might stay at home."

The lawyer-president was also gifted as a conversationalist with quick rejoinders. A delegation called on him at the Executive Mansion to urge the appointment of a friend as commissioner to the Sandwich Islands – Hawaii, arguing that their candidate was in poor health and could benefit from the balmy climate. The president expressed regret and said, "Gentlemen, I am sorry to say that there are eight other applicants for that place, and they are all sicker than your man."

Not everyone appreciated Lincoln's humor, especially some in his Cabinet. Secretary of War Stanton, who came to respect and have affection for him, was aghast at Lincoln's "little stories."

But Carwardine points out that Lincoln's intrinsic humor was that of a humanitarian and helped contribute to turn his stature as president into statesmanship.

There are many other volumes on Lincoln's humor, including Paul M. Zall's *Abe Lincoln's Legacy of Laughter: Humorous Stories by and about Abraham Lincoln* which Zall edited, but this is the best succinct version from one of the finest volumes in the Concise Lincoln Library of Southern Illinois University Press. Some of Lincoln's stories are still humorous today but you be the judge as many are repeated in this excellent book.

Frank J. Williams is the founding Chair of the Lincoln Forum, President of The Ulysses S. Grant Association and Presidential Library, and regular Civil War Book Review columnist for Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War, and Reconstruction.