

A presidential family in time of war

By Joseph Kay
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Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided, *Produced and directed by David Grubin, a presentation of the Public Broadcasting System series The American Experience*

History's demands are harsh. It often seems to treat the individual with disregard, even contempt, using and discarding his life as it wills, without considering personal or familial interests.

In times of civil war history takes its cruelest form: it calls forth men by the thousands to die on the battlefield; it places enormous strains on the mental and emotional capacities of individuals, demanding, in the name of progress, sacrifices of body and spirit. It does not consider that the individual might have other interests as well, that he or she might wish to raise a family, love, play, be merry, live.

Many thousands died in the American Civil War, a war whose objective purpose was the abolition of slavery in the United States and the triumph of free-labor capitalism. At a certain point, the destruction of the Southern slaveholders, as a class, became necessary. Since this class would not peacefully give up its property—that is, its slaves—war was required. This was a profoundly democratic and egalitarian event. Abraham Lincoln was called upon to lead the Northern bourgeoisie in this war, and he was himself one of its many casualties.

A House Divided, a three-part, six-hour, documentary on the Public Broadcasting System that aired last month, attempts to analyze the way in which the Civil War impacted the lives of the Lincolns—Abraham and his wife, Mary Todd. The documentary considers the formation of their personalities and how they interacted with the social conditions and historical events of the period, and provides much information on the character and political evolution of Lincoln.

What was it about Lincoln that led him to the presidency at the moment of crisis in 1861? What combination of chance and necessity, luck and willful choice, ensured that he and not another, perhaps weaker, individual was assigned the task of leading the Northern forces against the Southern slavocracy? How did the demands of history interact with and transform the individual lives of Lincoln and his family?

These questions are complex, and the documentary deals with them only partially, at times superficially. In general, however, through narration and interviews with many historians, the production offers some interesting ideas about the personal life of Lincoln and the Lincoln family. Its treatment of Mary Todd, who has often been portrayed as a superficial and weak-minded character, unworthy of the greatness of the president, is especially informative. By underscoring the exceptional qualities of Mary Todd, the documentary gives us a better sense of the relationship between the two and of Lincoln himself.

The subtitle of the documentary, “A House Divided,” has a dual reference. It is, first of all, a reference to the famous phrase, “A house divided against itself cannot stand,” which Lincoln used in his 1858 speech accepting the nomination of the Illinois Republican Party to run as its candidate for the US Senate. Lincoln continued, in words that summarized his support for the ultimate elimination of slavery, “I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free.... It will become all one thing or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall

rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates shall push it forward till it shall become alike lawful in all the States.”

The overriding social question of the time, the question that increasingly formed the content of every political debate, was that of slavery and its expansion. To its credit, the documentary treats Lincoln's attitude toward this issue with the complexity it deserves. Lincoln was not, after all, an abolitionist, at least not until well into the Civil War. His overriding aim was to preserve the union, and until the end of 1862 he resisted calls within his own party to issue a proclamation of emancipation. Though he consistently voiced opposition to slavery, he also spoke out, particularly during his senatorial campaign in 1858, against complete racial equality.

The evolution of Lincoln's thought on slavery merits close consideration, and the documentary does show the manner in which Lincoln's attitude on the matter progressed. While previously rejecting abolitionist demands, primarily for fear of alienating the support of border states, Lincoln, after deciding to issue the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, came to view the overriding aim of preserving the union as inseparable from the eradication of the institution of slavery. Even more, he came to believe that emancipation was a moral end in its own right. These sentiments were expressed in the justly famous Gettysburg Address of 1863—in which Lincoln appealed to the egalitarian ideals of the American Revolution—as well as Lincoln's second Inaugural Address, which deserves to be quoted:

“Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, ‘The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’”

Some historians have argued that Lincoln had no great interest in freeing slaves, and that this is proved by the fact that the Emancipation Proclamation freed only the slaves in rebel states—that is, in states over which the federal government had no immediate authority. Such arguments ignore the fact that slavery was still enshrined in the federal Constitution, that after 1862 Lincoln nevertheless wholeheartedly subscribed to the effort to eliminate it, and that by the close of the war he supported a constitutional amendment to abolish slavery throughout the republic.

The documentary provides some interesting details concerning the evolution of Lincoln's thought on the issue of slavery and race. The great Negro abolitionist Frederick Douglass was initially frustrated by Lincoln's refusal to take up the banner of abolition and angered by Lincoln's proposals to solve the “Negro problem” through expatriation to Africa. But he came to regard Lincoln highly as the views of the latter changed. Lincoln was the first president to seek the advice of black leaders, and Douglass noted that Lincoln was one of the few white men in whose presence he felt no trace of discrimination or denigration.

The documentary cites an incident that encapsulated the progressive evolution of Lincoln's views on race, and the moral and political greatness

of the man. At the reception following Lincoln's second inaugural address, White House officials attempted to bar Douglass from entering, but Lincoln personally intervened and insisted that Douglass be invited in, greeting him warmly. He was the first African-American to attend an inaugural reception.

In his last public speech Lincoln outlined a program of reconstruction that would grant citizenship to some ex-slaves, a speech that Douglass admired, but another individual in the crowd—John Wilkes Booth—took as sufficient reason to assassinate the president.

The focus of *A House Divided*, however, is not American society as a whole, but rather the Lincoln household—and the tensions and divisions that developed between Abraham and Mary. The division of the American “house” generated strains within the Lincoln house, not, however, because the couple was divided over the question of slavery.

Mary opposed slavery and was a staunch unionist, even though her brothers fought on the side of the Confederacy. Rather, the burdens of the Civil War had a profoundly disruptive effect on the Lincoln family, and particularly on the mental stability of Mary. The documentary is interesting insofar as it throws light on the way in which the social conditions of the time shaped—and, in the end, were shaped by—the psychology of these two.

The relationship between the two, of course, began well before the outbreak of the war. They were married in 1842. Mary Todd was the daughter of Robert Todd, a wealthy Kentucky aristocrat, who, while owning slaves, in principle opposed the “peculiar institution.” He was a Whig, and the Todd house was frequently visited by the prominent Whig leader, Henry Clay.

Mary, the fourth of six children, had a high-strung and sensitive character, perhaps a result of the death of her mother when Mary was only six. Through her father she became interested in politics, developing an opposition to slavery. She also received a strong classical education—an achievement unusual for women at that time—and acquired fluency in several languages. When she met Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois she was highly placed in society and sought after by many a young man.

The documentary presents Mary as an ambitious young woman, intelligent but emotionally unstable, who, due to the social conditions of the time, saw her chance of personal success as being bound up with her marriage to a rising lawyer and aspiring politician. For much of his political career, Lincoln discussed politics with her, and Mary shocked Republican stalwarts after Lincoln's election by suggesting possible members of his cabinet. These facts help to explain why Lincoln, an intensely political individual, remained extremely close to her, despite the traumas of personal tragedy and the terrible scars left by the national trauma of civil war.

Lincoln had quite a different childhood. His early life has acquired something of a mythical character in American national memory. He was the “rail-splitter,” the poor, hard-working log cabin boy who worked his way up to the highest political office in the United States. The story, nevertheless, has a large element of truth, for his origins were quite humble. He was the son of a small farmer who migrated from Kentucky to Indiana, and from Indiana to Illinois, building houses and clearing the land he was to farm. Karl Marx lauded Lincoln as the “single-minded son of a working man.”

Though Mary and Abraham had quite different social backgrounds, the documentary argues that they shared certain psychological characteristics. Lincoln's mother, Nancy Lincoln, also died early, when Abe was only nine, and the death seems to have been hard on the young boy. He suffered from depression for most of his life, and had trouble interacting with others, particularly with women. With the encouragement of his father's second wife, Sarah, Lincoln taught himself, primarily by reading whatever he could get a hold of. He had only a year of formal education, but quickly began to differentiate himself from his peers by his

intelligence and ambition.

Lincoln left home and moved to New Salem, Illinois at the age of 22. After running for state legislature (eight months after arriving) and losing, he took up a variety of employments, from blacksmith to shop keeper. At his second attempt at politics, he won a seat in the state legislature as a member of the Whig Party and moved to Springfield, where he became a lawyer and eventually met and married Mary Todd. By doing so, Lincoln moved definitively out of the class of rural poor.

The documentary considers in some detail the emotional life of Lincoln during this period and subsequently. The picture presented says something about the character of the individual who would take up the presidency in 1861, helping to explain the source of his success. His continual bouts of depression may have prepared him for the emotional burdens he would have to carry during the war.

Lincoln had many problems with women. He fell in love with a young woman, Ann Rutledge, who was engaged to another man and whose death provoked a prolonged period of depression. Another, whom he considered ugly, but whom he proposed to out of a feeling of obligation, rejected him. After proposing to Mary, he broke off the engagement, plunging into deep, almost suicidal, melancholy, only to return some months later and agree once again to marry.

It is not unreasonable to surmise that Lincoln's personal problems, as well as the hardships of his social background, gave him a degree of personal strength that allowed him to take on the tasks assigned him later on. He became capable of separating his emotional and personal problems from his work, a characteristic whose value was evident during the war, when he was forced to deal simultaneously with the death of one son, the sickness of another, and the increasingly unstable condition of his wife, all while supervising and directing the Northern effort.

Mary Lincoln complained of Abraham, “When he felt most deeply, he expressed the least.” Mary was an effusive individual who wanted Abe's attention and conversation, but the latter often withdrew into his work, leaving Mary at home. These problems would intensify during the war.

The two shared, however, a political and emotional bond, as well as an intense desire that Lincoln succeed in his career, a desire that was partially fulfilled when Lincoln was elected as a Whig to the US Congress in 1846. However, after speaking out strongly against the Mexican War—a war that was supported primarily by the South as a means of extending slavery by acquiring new Southern states—Lincoln's political career faltered. Certain of defeat, he did not seek reelection and retreated from political life for several years.

As Lincoln's political prospects grew dim, and as he himself became frustrated with the generally reactionary political atmosphere of the early 1850s, the relationship between Mary and Abraham suffered. Mary's frustration turned into rage, and her behavior became increasingly erratic. Lincoln would spend much time attending to his work as a lawyer, partially as a means of escaping the difficulties at home. These strains were exacerbated by the death of their second son, Edward Lincoln, at the age of six.

Things took a different turn towards the middle of the 1850s, as the aggressive character of the Southern slavocracy became more and more apparent. The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, a bill initiated by Lincoln's Illinois rival, the Democrat Stephen Douglas, brought Lincoln back into politics. The bill overturned the Missouri Compromise of 1820 that had placed restrictions on the expansion of slavery. Lincoln became closely involved with the increasingly volatile political situation. He joined the anti-slavery Republican Party in 1856 and ran as its candidate for the Senate from Illinois in 1858.

Though he lost to Douglas, the 1858 campaign—and the Douglas-Lincoln debates that formed a crucial part of it—was a milestone in Lincoln's political development. It was at this point that he formulated his pre-war attitude toward slavery and became a nationally prominent

opponent of its expansion. In 1860 the Republican Party nominated him for president.

According to the PBS documentary, the life of the couple assumes from this point on an element of tragedy. The personal qualities of Abraham and Mary created problems, and they also were a source of his success. However, the ultimate success that was supposed to lead to happiness only created more problems. For upon winning the presidency, Lincoln was immediately called upon to lead the North as the nation plunged into civil war.

As historian James McPherson notes, Lincoln “was the only president ... whose entire administration was bounded by the parameters of war” (James McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, Oxford University Press: 1991, p. 65). Before he had even taken the oath of office, several Southern states had seceded. The first decision he had to make as president was regarding the defense or abandonment of Fort Sumter. Urgent military questions occupied his time for the next four years. Then, as the war was ending in 1865, he was assassinated.

Mary Todd lived in constant fear that Lincoln would be killed, and, indeed, he received many threats. The death of their most beloved child, William, in 1862, devastated Mary, who was consumed by a grief that Lincoln did not have the time to share or console.

Willie was the son with whom Lincoln was closest, but he could not allow his personal tragedies to interfere with his political tasks. As a means of coping with her frustrations and her depression, Mary became increasingly consumed with a project to refurbish the White House. She became a compulsive and extravagant shopper, running up enormous debts but not informing Lincoln. These facts are often used to depict Mary in a one-sided way as frivolous and irresponsible.

The documentary presents a more complex story: that of an intelligent and ambitious woman plagued by the deaths of her sons and the unrelenting burden of the Civil War. The qualities that undoubtedly attracted Abraham were revealed in her activity during this period as well. As a means of consoling her grief, she did not only shop, but also became involved with the Contraband Relief Association, an organization that aided ex-slaves who had crossed the Confederate lines. An ex-slave with whom she developed close ties, Elizabeth Keckley, introduced her to this activity.

However, as the war dragged on, Mary became increasingly unstable. She turned to spiritualists, through which she sought to communicate with her dead sons. Lincoln's political troubles, exacerbated by the apparent failure of the war effort, caused her great anxiety.

An episode that occurred during this period is revealing of Lincoln's character. Mary's entire family was fighting on the side of the Confederacy, and indeed several of her relations had died in the war. Mary's half sister, Emily Todd Helm, lost her husband in the war, and in an effort to travel across the battle lines to her mother's home in Kentucky, Emily was stopped by Union troops. Lincoln personally invited her to come to the White House, where she spent much time with Mary. The two were able to console each other in their common grief caused by the hardship of the war. Lincoln's willingness to accept Emily says something about his generous and deeply human character, which was capable of recognizing the personal suffering generated on both sides of the battle lines.

Even after the North's fortunes began to turn around in 1863 and 1864, and after Lincoln won a second term, Mary's mental stability did not improve significantly. She became convinced that her sons visited her at night and comforted her. She accused a prominent general's wife of flirting with her husband. The burden that the war had placed on the Lincoln family, and the personal burdens which she herself had been made to bare, had largely exhausted her emotional strength.

With Lincoln's assassination, Mary lost not only another loved one (in

addition to two, soon to be three, of her sons) but also the individual she viewed as giving her—and, given the conditions of the time, to a significant degree did give her—status and importance. She lived, depressed and slightly delusional, until her death in 1882. Mary Todd, too, was a casualty of the Civil War.

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