

## Gilligan: On Presidents' Day, assessing America's moral wilderness

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We live in a moral wilderness. But it's not new.

Abraham Lincoln confronted it head on in his Peoria speech of 16 October 1854. It marked a turning point in American life. That speech became the cornerstone of Lincoln's career and the seed of every major speech afterwards.

The expansion of slavery had generated increased discord and violence throughout the nation. Stephen Douglas, Lincoln's opponent, had shepherded through Congress the Nebraska Bill (1854). It allowed settlers the right to vote for or against slavery in whatever states were carved out of the Nebraska Territory. Douglas argued that the "sacred right of self-government" is in the freedom of the people to choose.

Lincoln countered that "no man has the right to govern another without that man's consent. I say this is the leading principle and sheet anchor of American Republicanism."

Douglas was well-intentioned in his effort to preserve the Union, noted Lincoln, but he was misguided about moral principles. Self-government was a means to an end. And the end was contained in the Declaration of Independence "that all men are created equal ... endowed ... with certain unalienable rights ... among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

For Lincoln, "a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" was the fundamental reason for creating the United States of America. This was the "sacred right" to be honored and protected. Everything else was a means to that end.

Lincoln was a mix of lawyer, philosopher, psychologist, educator, politician, historian and statesman. He reminded the audience of what they already knew from life experience. Human nature contains within itself two warring principles in eternal opposition: a desire for justice and a propensity toward unchecked self-interest.

The Nebraska Bill for Lincoln was both a symbol and symptom of unleashed self-interest. And it was fast becoming America's polestar.

In Lincoln's historical review, the "Genius of Discord ... had been having its sway" since the turn of the century. A new "sacred right to enslave another" was replacing the Declaration of Independence.

By 1838 violence had become pandemic. There were murderous mob uprisings in America's major cities. Vigilante groups were assaulting groups and people they found distasteful: racial, ethnic, religious and political. Editors, abolitionists, clergy and others of their interests and beliefs were beaten, killed or had their homes burned.

That was when Lincoln warned (1838) the Young Men's Lyceum at Springfield about "a spirit of lawlessness pervading the country." If it continued, Americans would be the "authors" of their own destruction.

In 1854, national self-destruction had gained a momentum of its own. The "apple of discord," said Lincoln, "was slavery. ... It is founded in the selfishness of man's nature." The moral principle rooted in the Declaration of Independence was morphing into a "new sacred right to enslave" other human beings.

We know the rest of the story. But what is its relevance today?

The chief characteristic of a moral wilderness is when what's obviously known to be morally right is blindsided by passionate interests. And personal outrage overrides moral decency.

The "genius of discord" is running rampant in today's public square. It's not just ugly but dangerous. Discord creates an us and them world. And since discord is the mother of hate, it inevitably breeds violence.

A lack of disciplined discourse creates a wilderness of unchained, passionate intensity used to justify any word or deed. At least Lincoln could speak to an audience, make a thoughtful argument over several hours and not be jeered from the podium. He adamantly opposed Douglas for six years, but never denigrated him.

Serious and respectful argument is no longer on stage. Twenty-first century mobs of destruction need no torches, bats or guns. Crowdsourcing via Twitter, Snapchat, Facebook etc. can destroy a person's character in seconds. Technology in mean-spirited hands is forging a moral political wilderness of quicksand.

Gathered at the steps of the Peoria County Courthouse, Lincoln reminded the audience that the moral fabric of the nation was in their hands. And that responsibility could never be offloaded even to their representatives. That's the Gettysburg message of "a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Lincoln taught us what it means to be Americans. And it's "for us the living, to be dedicated to the unfinished work" upon which this nation was founded. This is the enduring message of the president we honor today.

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