

Every Lispng Babe and Every Patriot Grave: Leo Paul de Alvarez on Lincoln's Political Religion

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Academia has the tendency to become ever more specialized and compartmentalized over time. This tendency is particularly prevalent among academics of the Straussian flavor because there is a clear distinction in Strauss's own work between "the ancients" and "the moderns." While this distinction is useful insofar as it allows one to more clearly demarcate the differences between classical and modern republicanism, it is detrimental insofar as it trivializes modern politics. But the mark of a great mind is to think seriously about both the world within which it operates as well as consider the examples of great men of the past. A great testament to Leo Paul de Alvarez as a thinker is that he thoughtfully grappled with both ancient political philosophy and modern politics in order to understand the truth of each.

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THE LEGACY OF LINCOLN, AND THE DISPUTE AT DALLAS

In 1976 Dr. de Alvarez, as chair of the Politics department at the University of Dallas, edited a book of essays entitled *Abraham Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address, and American Constitutionalism*.¹ In his preface he explained:

It is especially appropriate that this first publication of the University of Dallas on the American political tradition should begin with Lincoln, for the founder of the Politics Department at the University, Professor Willmoore Kendall, believed that the question of Lincoln's political religion had become the central issue of American political thought.²

For both de Alvarez and Kendall, speaking of Lincoln necessarily entailed speaking of the regime in which they lived and thought, for Lincoln's political religion had forged that regime. However, Kendall and de Alvarez seem to have disagreed upon whether Lincoln should be praised or blamed for consecrating the American political religion of equality.

Kendall blamed Lincoln for highlighting equality as America's foundational political principle. He claimed that "What Lincoln did in that opening phrase at Gettysburg . . . was to falsify the facts of history, and to do so in a way that precisely confuses our self-understanding as a people."³ As de Alvarez would explain in his essay entitled "The Missing Passage," Kendall's constitution was the Constitution of 1787, the ratified Constitution which included no amendments. The opening phrase of the Gettysburg Address—"four score and seven years ago"—points Americans to a time that precedes the ratification of that Constitution and marks their beginning as the Declaration, thus emphasizing "Liberty, Equality, and The Pursuit of Happiness" as the origin and aim of the American Regime. Kendall took issue with Lincoln's claim that the Declaration was the origin because, as he put it, it simply declared "the independence not of a nation but of a baker's dozen of new sovereignties." Because it did not establish a regime in law, but merely severed the tie

¹ Berns, Laurence B., and Leo Paul de Alvarez, *Abraham Lincoln, the Gettysburg Address, and American Constitutionalism* (Irving: University of Dallas Press, 1976). I will cite this as *Lincoln and American Constitutionalism* throughout my essay.

² Preface by Leo Paul de Alvarez in *Lincoln and American Constitutionalism*, 1.

³ Wilmoore Kendall, "Equality: Commitment or Ideal?" in *Phalanx I* (Fall, 1967), 99.

between an old regime and several colonies, it did not dedicate those colonies to any principles which ought to animate them for the future.

De Alvarez disagrees with Kendall, but forgives him; he writes:

Kendall's impiety against the Gettysburg Address was of course necessitated by the desire not to commit an even greater impiety. Not to speak against Lincoln would have been to surrender to a heresy which has so gradually crept in that we do not recognize what it is.⁴

Kendall's issue with Lincoln is that the passion for equality had run rampant partly because of Lincoln's reconstitution of the Framers' republic. At the end of the day, de Alvarez does not take issue with Kendall because Kendall does not take issue with Lincoln; rather, he takes issue with the consequences of unbridled equality. Kendall and de Alvarez share the same project, and it is a perennial project in American politics: the challenge of moderating the passion of equality.

EQUALITY, MOBBERY, AND THE DEATH OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Besides his preface to the book, Dr. de Alvarez contributed a piece entitled *Reflections on Lincoln's Political Religion* which spotlights Lincoln's *Temperance Address*. De Alvarez's essay demonstrates that Lincoln's political religion, rightly understood, entails an inherent check upon the passion of equality. Therefore, although de Alvarez and Kendall share the same concern about unbridled equality, de Alvarez doesn't blame Lincoln as Kendall does. Instead, de Alvarez proceeds to show that Lincoln's political religion is not merely the worship of equality, but rather a political religion of freedom made possible by the many checks upon equality that Lincoln himself sought to foster.

The first peculiarity of Lincoln's political religion is that it seems fanatical: *must* political religion be tied to a *passion*? Further, does its being tied to a passion make it unreasonable and therefore unjust? Although Kendall claims that Lincoln, in his opening lines at Gettysburg, reached past the Constitution and therefore undermined its authority, the first line of de Alvarez's essay makes almost the opposite claim. He writes "Lincoln's task as he himself conceived of it was that of inscribing the

⁴ *Lincoln and American Constitutionalism*, 3.

Constitution in the hearts of the citizens.”⁵ According to de Alvarez, Lincoln’s prioritizing the principles of the Declaration attempted to *strengthen* the Constitution by drawing the people to it through attaching their affections to the regime. In fact, such a strengthening was necessary according to de Alvarez. He claims, “governments, everyone knows, are not based only upon reason but upon an active sentiment of affection.”⁶ In order that the Constitution to be hallowed in a regime “of the people, by the people, for the people,” it had to be connected with popular “sentiment.” Dr. de Alvarez wonders “had the Framers provided such a sentiment? Or did they themselves acknowledge the defect of such sentiment in their all too cool forecasts?”⁷ Because “the people” cannot be always activated by reason, sentiment had to bind them to a Constitution which forced them to moderate themselves through a law that acted as a surrogate for reason. Lincoln’s endeavor was to induce the people to self-govern first by leading them to the Constitution and the laws by engaging their passions, then to obliging them to observe their commitment to those laws and thus moderate themselves.

De Alvarez claims that “Lincoln spoke of this fusion of sentiment and reason as a political religion,” and he explains that Lincoln attempted to bring this fusion about through “a new rhetoric” and the “language of the Bible to give political principles a new warmth.” The fusion of sentiment and reason in the people mirrors Lincoln’s famous remarks regarding the Constitution and the Declaration: that the former is the silver frame and the latter the apple of gold.⁸ As de Alvarez claims, “The people had rebelled in order that they might rule themselves; the Constitution made it possible to rule themselves.”⁹ The Republic had been so constituted that the people were granted the interesting opportunity to rule themselves, and to thereby prove “whether or not men may be governed by deliberation and choice, or whether they are forever destined to rely for their political constitutions on accident and force.”¹⁰ However,

⁵ Leo Paul de Alvarez’s “Lincoln’s Political Religion” essay in *Lincoln and American Constitutionalism*, 172.

⁶ *Lincoln and American Constitutionalism*, 172.

⁷ *Lincoln and American Constitutionalism*, 172.

⁸ Lincoln, *Fragment on the Constitution and Declaration*.

⁹ *Lincoln and American Constitutionalism*, 173.

¹⁰ Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist 1*.

if they were to live up to the opportunity to rule themselves a mere framework for self-government would be insufficient: the people needed to possess the character requisite to use that framework to preserve their liberty. Lincoln's political religion provided a rhetoric that would animate the people to adopt the character requisite to rule themselves, and maintain their dedication to the American experiment.

The greatest challenge to the maintenance of the American experiment, to Lincoln, was the allure of forsaking it for its imperfections. Tocqueville spells this problem out well in *Democracy in America*. He writes:

If you would rather see vices than crimes, and if you prefer to find fewer great actions on condition that you will encounter fewer enormities; if instead of acting within a brilliant society it is enough for you to live in the midst of a prosperous society; if, finally the principal object of government, according to you, is not to give the most force or the most glory possible to the entire body of the nation, but to procure the most well-being for each of the individuals who compose it and to have each avoid the most misery, then equalize conditions and constitute the government of a democracy.¹¹

Tocqueville and Lincoln both understood that American Democracy would not be marked by "loftiness (of) spirit," "profound convictions," "elevated manners," and "poetry, renown, and glory," but that it would afford each man the opportunity to use his freedom to better his own lot and govern himself. In his *Lyceum Address*, Lincoln would go even further than Tocqueville and discourage "loftiness of spirit" and "renown and glory" as proper aims of the citizen and statesman.¹²

Discontent with the lowliness of democratic mores and the inability of government to swiftly punish criminals is what led Lincoln to urge a new political religion in his *Lyceum Address*. In the *Lyceum Address*, Lincoln responds to the "mobocratic spirit" beginning to plague the country. De Alvarez explains:

¹¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, V 1. Part II. CH6. Mansfield Winthrop edition, 234.

¹² Lincoln, "Lyceum Address" in *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writing*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New York, Kraus, 1969), 84.

The passions of the mob are not dangerous, abstractly considered. But they are dangerous because the mob, in the first place, is unable to make distinctions, and, above all, the example it sets encourages the lawless in spirit to become lawless in practice. The fundamentally just passions of the mob have to be disciplined by law; the mobocratic spirit has to be subdued by the Constitution.

The public acting as a mob, and punishing criminals outside of lawful means, is a tacit submission by the people that the Constitution is inadequate to promote justice within the polity. In considering the mobocratic tendencies, and Lincoln's experience in the young republic, de Alvarez seems to touch upon the fundamental inadequacy of Kendall's approach: lest the sentiments of the people lead them to rely upon the rule of law, the restive character of the people may lead them to revolt *against* the very Constitution that they first revolted *for*. Lincoln took singular issue with the mobocratic spirit not merely because it would induce an increasing number of the citizenry to lawlessness, but more importantly because mob rule was a forfeiture of government by deliberation and choice guided by the Constitution—the kind of deliberation and choice that Kendall blames Lincoln for killing. In the *Lyceum Address*, Lincoln admits that he knows the American people “are much attached to their government,” but he fears that they might lose it despite that love if they continue to act through the mob rather than the political institutions of the country. He remarks “if the laws be continually despised and disregarded, if their rights to be secure in their persons and property, are held by no better tenure than the caprice of a mob, the alienation of their affections from the Government is the natural consequence; and to that, sooner or later, it must come.”¹³

However, de Alvarez's observations regarding mob rule go further than the creation of political habits that end in the deprecation of the Constitution: the political mode of the mob leads to the corruption of political philosophy. When de Alvarez claims that “the passions of the mob are not dangerous, abstractly considered” he is observing the just claims that the people who turn to mob rule are acting upon. As Lincoln does in his *Lyceum Address*, de Alvarez recognizes that in the passions of

¹³ Lincoln, “Lyceum Address,” 82.

the mob there is some vestige of truth. Of the gamblers who were killed, Lincoln shows that they were guilty, and claims “they constitute a portion of population that is worse than useless in any community; and their death, if no pernicious example be set by it, is never a matter of reasonable regret with anyone.”¹⁴ However, de Alvarez and Lincoln recognize a philosophical and political problem with the mob: in acting rashly out of a sense of justice, the mob makes true claims of justice through the rule of law impossible. Lincoln claims that “much of (the mob’s) danger consists in the proneness of our minds to regard its direct as its only indirect consequences.”¹⁵ Lincoln’s true qualm with the actions of the mob considers the indirect consequences of mob rule: the increasing disregard for the punishment through law in the country must inevitably end in the destruction of the country’s political institutions through lack of use. The destruction of political institutions through lack of use must necessarily forfeit the possibility of refining the just passions of the people who are increasingly turning to mob rule. The forfeiture of the political institutions of the country turns the citizenry to punishment through lawlessness and abandons the refinement of claims of justice through courts of law. Such a political process makes force rather than deliberation the mode of advancing justice within the polity. When de Alvarez claims that the mobocratic spirit must be “subdued by the Constitution,” he means to show that rule by law forces the mob to refine their just claims through the political process, gaining a consensus among the people, and promoting stability and order rather than continual revolution within the polity. Only by the refinement of passions through the political process can deliberation and choice survive times dedicated to the political religion of equality when each man may lay claim to legislative, executive, and judicial power by virtue of his equal standing with his fellow citizens.

THE MODERATION OF MORAL REFORM, AND THE SALVATION OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Lincoln’s famous solution to the mobocratic spirit is that “every American, every lover of liberty, every well wisher to his posterity, swear by the

¹⁴ Lincoln, “Lyceum Address,” 82.

¹⁵ Lincoln, “Lyceum Address,” 81.

blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others." But he also urges,

. . . let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap—let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in Primers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;—let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.

However, that is much easier said than done. Lincoln's urge that every American vow never to violate the laws of the country seems to proscribe a means which does not well comport with the character of the Americans to whom he speaks. Dr. de Alvarez is right to point to the *Temperance Address* as the great practical advice that Lincoln gives to inculcate his political religion. Whereas the *Lyceum Address* defines Lincoln's political religion, the *Temperance Address* explains the character that the Americans must adopt in order to properly observe it.

The great paradox of Lincoln's political religion is revealed through the logic of the *Temperance Address*. Although moral reform is necessary for the maintenance of democracy, Lincoln reveals that even moral reform must be moderated in America. Dr. de Alvarez observes that Lincoln

. . . considered the danger of democracy . . . a kind of sober madness, a tendency toward a principledness which is ultimately tyranny. Lincoln's political religion is, in a way, the making of democracy unsobber; an inducing of democracy to drink the old wines which have always comforted mankind.

Why is "sober madness" the ultimate danger of democracy according to Lincoln? Doesn't his urge in the *Lyceum Address* that "Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defence" seem to contradict his advice of the *Temperance Address*? The "calculation" that must take place in the moral

reform of drunkards is a proper estimation of the politically possible, an understanding of human nature, and a respect for equality. De Alvarez observes,

Democracy, the regime in which the passions are set free, requires that men constantly reform themselves. Indeed, democracy is based on the possibility of moral reform, on the capacity of men to raise themselves from their necessarily low beginnings to some higher rank of manhood . . . But one cannot reform men by denouncing them, by presuming to dictate them. Only on the basis of equality can men be reformed—as only reformed drunkards can best persuade drunkards to become temperate.¹⁶

De Alvarez recognizes the real danger of the political community to be “rational tyranny,” whether that be the zeal of temperance reformers or the abolitionists in the North. He ties the two together, suggesting:

The universal sense of mankind in favor of intoxicating liquors must temper the enthusiasm of these moral reformers. That is the true temperance teaching. And must not the political reformers, those against slavery, learn also the same temperance? A democracy, because it is based upon the principle of equality, needs to learn not dedication to the principle of equality, but temperance in its expectations of how far man can be made reasonable.¹⁷

Because America is a regime “of the people, by the people, and for the people” the statesman and the well-meaning citizen alike must be wary of the sentiments and tastes of the people, and reform in ways that are tolerable to those tastes, lest they alienate a group of their equals and do more harm than good. De Alvarez argues that

. . . by their very existence (these zealous reformers) indicate a dissatisfaction with the political order; in the most important respect, the attainment of moral perfection, the political order is defective—and perhaps not only defective but a hindrance . . . What these movements desire is a perfection of man; where the political order accepts the ignoble

¹⁶ *Lincoln and American Constitutionalism*, 174.

¹⁷ *Lincoln and American Constitutionalism*, 175.

passions as the necessary basis, the Temperance and Abolitionist advocates would have only cleansed and perfected men as the foundation of their new order.¹⁸

De Alvarez's claim that "the Temperance and Abolitionist advocates would have only cleansed and perfected men as the foundation of their new order" is truly just an admission that such reformers would prefer no order at all, for no men are angels and politics is the art of governing fallen men with what little wisdom and insight we may possess. Lincoln's political religion ultimately urges Americans to accept that Union under the laws and freedom for all is a greater good than perfection for some and servitude for most.

Both de Alvarez and Kendall were right, and still are right: speaking of Lincoln means speaking of our own regime. Lincoln's political religion, and his renegotiation of the framers' founding, has made our polity more equal, more free, and more prosperous than any democracy the world has yet seen. Perhaps this is why Abraham Lincoln remains the world's sixth most biographed person. Yet most who write about Abraham Lincoln tend to neglect his political philosophy. What is unique about de Alvarez's work on Lincoln is that he grapples with Lincoln the man and the thinker, not Lincoln the figure, Lincoln the war leader, or Lincoln the President. That said, de Alvarez attends to the aspects of Abraham Lincoln that are most difficult, but most useful to us today as we attempt to make use of the blessings of equality. I am thankful that I belong to a program in which I can study Lincoln in the spirit that Dr. de Alvarez thought about him, because in many ways recovering Lincoln's political philosophy means moderating, and making best use of, the blessings of the Union which he saved.

¹⁸ *Lincoln and American Constitutionalism*, 176.