

DEFEND THAT LIFE

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by

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Abraham Lincoln was never an abolitionist. Yet, the abolition of slavery in America can aptly be attributed to no single influence more than his own. There hangs a tale of immediate relevance for us today. This has become startlingly clear to me through my own experience of standing as a candidate and observing people's reactions to strongly-held, principled views, wholly apart from any real or imagined immediate threat to their private interests.

In Lincoln's case, his opposition to abolitionism did not convey any support for slavery, save to guarantee established legal rights. Thus, although he was not an abolitionist, and specifically declared for protecting slavery where it existed – a principled stance – he was nevertheless vehemently opposed by pro-slavery advocates. Indeed, the opposition to Lincoln was so vehement that his mere election led to South Carolina's firing on Fort Sumter before he even assumed office.

We may well wonder why South Carolinians preferred fratricidal war to life under a President who, while disagreeing politically, nevertheless believed that the rule of law required his defending their rights to what the law called their "property," even in opposition to the moral law. Lincoln, I say, as a public representative, declared and meant to adhere to the rule, that the law of the land, not the moral law, bound his exercise of the powers of office.

The reason this was not enough for South Carolina, I believe, is that South Carolina sought something more than the rule of law – South Carolina sought moral submission to its view of what was right and just. What the South Carolina of 1860 could not endure was not the prospect of any movement by the federal government against the ownership of persons as chattel slaves – they knew that was unlikely. What could not be endured was the thought that, even as President Lincoln enforced the laws, the free and articulate expression of the view that slavery was unjust and inhumane would render the lives of slaveholders untenable. The moral condemnation would burden them more heavily than the prospect of any legal prohibition ever could.

In a society in which slaveholding, while permitted, is nevertheless looked down upon as an immoral, barbaric practice, the slaveholder becomes little better than a whore – a recognized but not quite acceptable blight in the society.

For a people of any pride whatever, that constitutes an intolerable foundation for civil association. For the proud and manly descendants of the founders of the South, it were better to fight than to accept to be viewed as little better than a poor relation with bad manners.

While Abraham Lincoln would never have spoken in such terms, and knew as well as any man how to hate the sin while loving the sinner, his generosity of soul could not stifle the

piercing doubts of fearful imaginations. The situation was tragic; for he could neither say nor do less than he did, and the South Carolinians could accept him only by agreeing that their enslavement of others was an abuse, a robbing human beings of the bread they had earned by the sweat of their own brows.

Not very different from the South Carolinians are the so-called single-issue activists of today – folk who hear me spurn a human life amendment for our Constitution, who hear me reject the idea of special anti-abortion legislation; who hear me predict a future in which technology will make the womb unreachable by the law for all practical purposes, and who hear me declare the life of the mother to be of no less concern than the life of the child.

They are like the 1860 South Carolinians because they recognize, that even as I threaten no general initiative aimed directly at their interests, I will not cease to make a profoundly anti-abortion argument. They say that they never could vote for me, so long as I continue to *believe and act* to persuade them that abortion is wrong. It is the appeal to their moral understanding that they reject, even if there were not the least prospect of altering the laws consistent with that appeal. They wish, in the end, approval – not indifference and certainly not reproof.

Despite the tragic aspect of Abraham Lincoln’s mission, Lincoln proved that there is a place in our public life for reproof – that we cannot accept, without great loss, the proposition that the merely lawful is moral.

Because of this we need to take very seriously the obligation to engage one another in moral disputation – and to demand of public officials the expression of moral judgments. It is no act of tyranny – indeed it is an honorable distinction – to say to a man that you think him capable of better judgment or better conduct. That is the aim of reproof.

I have painted with too broad a brush. Many people who are pro-abortion have declared that they support me. Indeed, they volunteer in this campaign. They are not offended to be engaged by me. Those who differ, however, seek comfort in aiming either to silence me (“It’s not a public question!”) or to deny the basis for judgment (“Science hasn’t proved that we are discussing human life”). I have shown through the example of Lincoln that personal conduct which depends on general public approval is the very definition of a public question. As to the judgment whether we discuss human life – here we have the South Carolina dilemma par excellence.

In order to seek approval for slavery, ultimately, defenders of the south were driven to deny the humanity of black people. Justice Taney said it: a black person has no rights a white person is bound to respect. Most people have interpreted this saying negatively. However, it has a positive meaning; namely, the South Carolinians admitted that they shared our fundamental commitment to the equality of human beings. Therefore, they could not admit black people to be fully human without also declaring slavery wrong. The syllogism is irresistible. Thus they tried to deny the minor premise: i.e., that black people are indeed people.

Similarly, those who want to argue away the humanity of the unborn child, by that fact, nevertheless join me in affirming a commitment to defend the sanctity of human life.

As for their doubts about what is truly human, I cannot accept the invitation to defer to science. I will use what seems a more certain index – namely the unfailing certainty with which many Koreans, Chinese, and Asian Indians are able at the earliest stages of pregnancy to

distinguish whether mothers bear boys or girls. As soon as they know, they proceed to kill the girls. The results show a tolerable degree of accuracy on their part.

I believe that Americans are not less able than Koreans, Chinese, and Asian Indians to arrive at this insight. And as soon as one knows one has a boy or a girl, one knows that one has a living human being. Only this differs: I think that when an American knows this, what must follow is a commitment to defend that life.

Abraham Lincoln, unlike me, may no more have become an anti-abortionist than he became an abolitionist. Like me he would have upheld the rule of law. But I am certain, also, that he would have embraced human life. Our public traditions are richer because he did indeed do so. They can only become richer if we dare to do as he did.