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Lincoln's Foreign Policy in Today's World

As a diplomat, Lincoln was a lifelong skeptic of grand foreign adventures

By KEVIN PERAINO

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When we think about brilliant U.S. foreign-policy minds, we don't usually think of Abraham Lincoln—and he didn't either. "I don't know anything about diplomacy," he told one foreign envoy at the start of his first term. "I will be very apt to make blunders." The most ambitious foreign trip he ever took was a jaunt to the Canadian side of Niagara Falls; shortly before his assassination, he had delighted his wife Mary by promising her that they would visit Europe for the first time after his presidency was over. He spoke no foreign languages and couldn't even read a menu in French, the 19th-century language of diplomacy. "Hold on there," he once begged a more cosmopolitan waiter in a New York French restaurant. "Beans. I know beans."

But despite his rough-hewed background, the backwoods lawyer turned out to be a surprisingly supple, sophisticated and successful diplomat. Presidents of every stripe invoke Lincoln to address problems of every shade, but the 16th president's shrewd foreign policy has been virtually forgotten. So what lessons from Lincoln's diplomacy can we apply to our own seemingly intractable foreign-policy dilemmas?

First, resist the temptation to withdraw from the world—and get up to speed about it quickly. Green though he was about world politics when he entered the White House, Lincoln swiftly realized that he couldn't ignore them. He was besieged almost as soon as he took office with bellicose European statesmen, hawkish Confederate expansionists—and occasionally his own hotheaded secretary of state, William H. Seward. Lincoln felt the pressures of the world so acutely that he could sometimes not get out of bed. And yet he got the job done—and then some. Above all, he kept Britain and France out of the conflict, thereby snipping potential life lines that might have saved the Confederacy or prolonged the Civil War. "No battle, not Gettysburg, not the Wilderness, was more important than the contest waged in the diplomatic arena," the historian Allan Nevins observed.

Second, recognize the fine line between reactive paralysis and shrewd restraint. Lincoln was a master of the latter. Patience, his personal secretary John Hay once remarked, was "one of the cardinal elements of his character." Lincoln, like many of today's foreign-policy realists, believed that nurturing the U.S. economy—not embarking on overseas adventures—would prove the more effective method of husbanding and expanding U.S. power. The Whig Party, which Lincoln joined as he grew into adulthood, did "not believe in enlarging our field," he later explained, "but in keeping our fences where they are and cultivating our present possession, making it a garden."

Lincoln was an exceptionalist, believing profoundly in the importance of the American experiment, but he wasn't a crusader. He remained a lifelong skeptic of grand foreign exploits—resisting imprudent calls for military action abroad and preventing diplomatic donnybrooks from morphing into war.

The rail-splitter, his law partner recalled, was "a realist as opposed to an idealist." He had to be. The mid-19th-century world, like our own multipolar planet, was an unforgiving place. The era produced merciless titans such as Prussia's Otto von Bismarck and Britain's Lord Palmerston, who famously argued that British foreign policy should be guided by national interests alone, not mushy notions of international friendship.

In both eras, rash overextension could prove fatal. Lincoln liked to use homey metaphors to describe his reluctance to intervene in disputes he considered none of his business. "I learned a great many years ago," he once explained, "that in a fight between man and wife, a third party should never get between the woman's skillet and the man's ax-helve."

Even modest gestures—such as shipping weapons to dubious allies—gave Lincoln pause; he feared that they might fall into the wrong hands. Once, when asked to send arms to unofficial Union supporters in Virginia, Lincoln explained that the proposal would be like giving a stranger an ax to cut down a tree: The tree might well fall, but the man wielding his new hatchet might later "turn round and brain you with it."

This restraint permeated Lincoln's diplomacy. When some advisers wanted to take a confrontational line during an 1861 diplomatic showdown with the British, Lincoln gently replied, "One war at a time." When a lengthy civil conflict erupted in the Dominican Republic between local militiamen and their Spanish overlords, some of Lincoln's allies urged him to publicly support the freedom fighters. Lincoln, wary of antagonizing the Spanish government in the midst of the Civil War, ignored their pleas. To explain his position, Lincoln told a yarn about a man who went to see his preacher for advice. The clergyman, in Lincoln's telling, told his parishioner that two roads lay before the man—one that went "straight to hell," another that went "right to damnation." If those were the only options, the advice seeker replied, he would take a third route: "I shall go through the woods." Lincoln too explained that he wanted to "take to the woods"—and remain neutral on the Dominican conflict.

Beyond Lincoln's skepticism about involvement in foreign flashpoints, his era should also remind us to keep an eye on rising powers. The U.S. of the mid-19th century was itself what we would now call an emerging market—the China of its day, in fact, full of economic promise but with a less certain political future. Lincoln's victory at home led directly to U.S. ascension abroad. We can draw a straight line from Lincoln's triumph in the Civil War to the rise of the U.S. as a world power in the decades that followed.

Above all, Lincoln's statesmanship should remind us of the virtue of humility. Even Lincoln probably wouldn't have been any more successful than we are at solving our most delicate foreign-policy worries. Indeed, most aren't problems that can truly be "solved." Lincoln was keenly aware of the difference between wars that must be won and crises that should be managed. We should be too.

—Mr. Peraino is the author of "Lincoln in the World: The Making of a Statesman and the Dawn of American Power," recently published by Crown.

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