BARACK OBAMA, ABRAHAM LINCOLN, AND JOHN DEWEY

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In the last few months, there has been a spate of comparisons between Obama and some of our most influential former presidents. Just days after the election, Congress announced the theme of the inauguration as "A New Birth of Freedom," while reporters and commentators speculate about "A New New Deal" or "Lincoln 2.0."[1] Many of these comparisons are situational: Obama is a relatively inexperienced lawyer-turned-politician who will inherit two wars and an economic crisis unequalled since the Great Depression.[2]

The backlash has been equally vocal. Many consider these comparisons both premature and presumptuous, evidence that the media is sympathetic toward an Obama Administration or that the President-elect has himself orchestrated these connections.[3] Indeed, Obama frequently invoked Lincoln as both a model for and an influence over his own candidacy, which he launched on the steps of the Old State Capitol in Springfield, Illinois. He introduced Vice-President Joe Biden in the same spot, where the latter also referenced the memory of Lincoln.[4] Certainly it makes sense for Obama to exploit Lincoln's legacy, for no other figure in American history continues to command such admiration, the occasional neo-Confederate or other detractor notwithstanding.[5] To position Obama in front of the State House is surely meant to place him as a kind of an heir to Lincoln. It is a political strategy, and Obama has proven himself an adept political strategist.

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1. Evan Thomas & Richard Wolffe, *Obama's Lincoln*, NEWSWEEK, Nov. 24, 2008, at 29; s*ee also* THE NEW YORKER, Nov. 17, 2008 (the cover picturing the Lincoln memorial at night, with the "O" in "Yorker" illuminated above, and the stillness of the reflecting pool in the foreground); TIME, Nov. 24, 2008 (the cover comparing Obama to FDR).

2. At the Democratic National Convention in Denver, Al Gore compared Obama and Lincoln as similarly clear thinkers and great orators with a passion for justice and a determination to heal divisions. Gore also creatively turned Obama's lack of experience in office into an asset by citing Lincoln's similarly short resume, and noted that as a Congressman Lincoln objected to the Mexican-American War, just as Obama opposed the Iraq war in 2002 as an Illinois state legislator. Al Gore, Address at the 2008 Democratic National Convention (Aug. 28, 2008), http://www.demconvention.com/al-gore/.

3. One of the most extensive critiques of Obama's self-fashioning and references to history can be found in Charles R. Kesler, *The Audacity of Barack Obama*, THE CLAREMONT REVIEW OF BOOKS, Fall 2008, *available at* http://www.claremont.org/publications/crb/id.1579/article_detail.asp.

4. Joe Biden, Remarks of Joe Biden at the Announcement of Vice Presidential Nominee Selection in Springfield, Ill., August 23, 2008, http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2008/08/biden_springfield_speech_trans.html.

5. Ron Paul argues that Lincoln put the country on a disastrous course of ever-growing federal power and forced an unnecessary war to end slavery. Television interview by Tim Russert with Ron Paul, "Meet the Press," Dec. 23, 2007, *available at* http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/22342301/page/4.

But Obama's appreciation of Lincoln—and of American history—is deeper and more complicated than a photo-op suggests. Furthermore, these situational comparisons miss the more interesting ways that Obama's ideas grow from a uniquely American tradition. In his more reflective speeches and essays, as well as *The Audacity of Hope*,[6] we see the pervasive influence of two of the most important contributors to American thought. First among these is Lincoln, whose intellectual legacy was to integrate the Declaration of Independence with the Constitution in a way that forged a new direction for the country. To hear Obama speak about the Constitution reminds us that Lincoln changed the way Americans understood the nation's central meaning. More subtle are the ways that Obama's conception of politics and the public reflects the work of John Dewey, whose reconceptualization of philosophy in the wake of evolution laid the groundwork for the reform politics of the early twentieth century. Certainly there are others who have influenced Obama, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Reinhold Niebuhr. But above all, Obama's approach to politics draws on Lincoln's sense of the Constitution and Dewey's concept of value.

THE PROBLEM OF PERFECTIBILITY

Shortly after his election to the United States Senate in 2004, Obama was asked to contribute a brief essay to a special issue on Lincoln for *Time* magazine. He adapted the article from a speech he had recently delivered at the dedication of the Lincoln Museum in Springfield. Obama did not treat Lincoln, as most Americans do, as a larger-than-life figure whose moral and political strength brought the nation through its gravest national crisis. Rather, he mentioned what some might consider weaknesses—serial political failures, a capacity for self-doubt—as qualities that made the President such an enduring figure. Perhaps Lincoln's determination, Obama wrote, emerged from an awareness of his limitations, a desire to transform his humble and rude background, and to remake not just himself but also the world around him.[7]

Peggy Noonan (Ronald Reagan's speechwriter and a columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*) read the essay as grandiose self-flattery: Obama presumed to cast himself as "Lincoln, only sort of better."[8] But his point was more modest, and more interesting, than Noonan's critique allowed. Why *do* we continue to find Lincoln so compelling? As Obama pointed out, Lincoln imposed emancipation as a military measure, and after issuing the proclamation, continued (if briefly) to advocate for the coloniza-

6. BARACK OBAMA, THE AUDACITY OF HOPE: THOUGHTS ON RECLAIMING THE AMERICAN DREAM (2006) [hereinafter THE AUDACITY OF HOPE]. This book, Obama writes, grew largely from his experiences on the campaign trail in 2004. *Id.* at 8.

7. *See* Barack Obama, *What I See in Lincoln's Eyes*, TIME, June 26, 2005, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1077287,00.html.

8. THE AUDACITY OF HOPE, *supra* note 6, at 123 (recounting Noonan's critique).

tion of black Americans to Africa. Thus the title "Great Emancipator" does little justice to the complex process by which slavery ended in this country. But Lincoln's imperfections, and his awareness of these imperfections, actually enhanced his reputation, because in spite of them he managed to retain his humanity and his morality. As Obama wrote, Lincoln "neither demonized the fathers and sons who did battle on the other side nor sought to diminish the terrible cost of his war."[9]

Americans probably don't reflect enough on that "terrible cost," and sometimes come dangerously close to treating emancipation as inevitable, thereby making the war our sacrifice to end slavery. When we do this, we flatten the contingency of history, and forget that emancipation was initially a weapon, rather than a goal, of the war. As Obama wrote in his speech of October 2, 2002, opposing the invasion of Iraq: "[t]he Civil War was one of the bloodiest in history, and yet it was only through the crucible of the sword, the sacrifice of multitudes, that we could begin to perfect this union, and drive the scourge of slavery from our soil. I don't oppose all wars."[10] The danger is in seeing the war as the price "paid" for slavery, because emancipation was by no means inevitable. History is complicated, and rarely gives us the moral clarity we would like.[11]

Obama recognizes this fundamental ambiguity of history. As he writes in *Audacity of Hope*,

> I'm left then with Lincoln, who like no man before or since understood both the deliberative function of our democracy and the limits of such deliberation. We remember him for the firmness and depth of his convictions—his unyielding opposition to slavery and his determination that a house divided could not stand. But his presidency was guided by a practicality that would distress us today, a practicality that led him to test various bargains with the South in order to maintain the Union without war; to appoint and discard general after general, strategy after strategy, once war broke out; to stretch the Constitution to the breaking point in order to see the war through a successful conclusion.[12]

Part of what Obama appreciates in Lincoln is the latter's struggle to understand the Constitution. We know from endless biographies that Lincoln was a superb orator and a gifted politician, a moral individual who was also (somewhat) able to manage a cabinet of egotistical rivals.

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9. Obama, *supra* note 7.

10. Barack Obama, Remarks of Ill. State Senator Barack Obama Against Going to War in Iraq (Oct. 2, 2002), http://www.barackobama.com/2002/10/02/remarks_of_illinois_state_sen.php.

11. For an extended discussion of Americans' tendency to see the Civil War in somewhat simplistic terms, see Edward L. Ayers, *Worrying about the Civil War*, *in* MORAL PROBLEMS IN AMERICAN LIFE: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURAL HISTORY 145 (Karen Halttunen & Lewis Perry, eds., 1998).

12. AUDACITY OF HOPE, *supra* note 6, at 97-98.

But Lincoln's greatest contribution to American political thought was his ability—after great struggle—to infuse the Constitution with the commitment to equality which animated the Declaration of Independence.

To reconcile these two documents in the antebellum era was a major feat. Prior to 1854, Lincoln shared his countrymen's reverence for the Constitution as the Union's foundational document. The Jacksonian surge in politics that made Lincoln a Whig strengthened his belief in law and representative (rather than democratic) institutions; it also gave him a healthy skepticism of "the people." Though he opposed slavery, he had no reason to act on this sentiment as long as the practice remained in the South. But when the struggle over slavery threatened to engulf the country in the 1850s, Lincoln was forced to reconsider his understanding of the Union and the intent of the Founders.

In 1849, Lincoln concluded his first and last term in Congress, an unremarkable two years that left him without an obvious next step in public life. He returned to Illinois, settled into a career as a circuit lawyer, and continued his active role in the Whig Party.[13] This relatively private life abruptly ended when Stephen Douglas introduced the Kansas-Nebraska Bill in 1854, which opened over a million square miles of the former Louisiana Territory to slavery. In order to repeal the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which forbade the extension of slavery in that region, Douglas introduced the concept of "popular sovereignty," whereby the people of a given territory would determine the fate of slavery.

Opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act effectively created the Republican Party, and had an equally electrifying effect upon Lincoln. Though it did not immediately make him a Republican, it yanked him back into politics, for he believed Douglas had betrayed the Founders' intent that slavery die naturally in a Union that—since the 1790s—had tolerated its existence but inhibited its growth. In the aftermath of Kansas-Nebraska, Lincoln confronted—then rejected—the terrible possibility that the Constitution actually *confirmed* the rights of slaveholders. But what made him so certain that the Framers intended slavery to end? Like any good lawyer, he built a case from their words and actions.

In a speech in Peoria in October 1854, Lincoln condemned the Kansas-Nebraska Act as a betrayal of the Framers' hope that slavery would erode rather than grow. In defending the Act, Douglas made clear his "indifference" to slavery; what mattered to him was that "democracy" prevail, which meant allowing the people of a given territory to deter-

13. Much of my treatment of Lincoln here is guided by DANIEL FARBER, LINCOLN'S CONSTITUTION (2003); Allen C. Guelzo, *Apple of Gold in a Picture of Silver: The Constitution and Liberty*, *in* THE LINCOLN ENIGMA: THE CHANGING FACES OF AN AMERICAN ICON 86 (Gabor Boritt, ed., 2001); and Phillip Shaw Paludan, *Emancipating the Republic: Lincoln and the Means and Ends of Antislavery*, *in* WE CANNOT ESCAPE HISTORY: LINCOLN AND THE LAST BEST HOPE OF EARTH 45 (James M. McPherson, ed., 1995).

mine for themselves whether slavery would be introduced. Lincoln countered by arguing that he hated slavery primarily "because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty—criticizing the Declaration of Independence, and insisting that there is no right principle of action but *self-interest.*"[14] Here for the first time Lincoln treated the Declaration as a consequential document, and his literal reading meant that the Kansas-Nebraska Act was not just ill-advised, but anathema.

Lincoln took the Declaration at face value in order to show that Douglas's concept of popular sovereignty was a sham, the opposite of democracy. The most fundamental principle of American republicanism was "that no man is good enough to govern another man, *without that other's consent*."[15] This principle anchored the country, but it was found not in the Constitution, but in the Declaration of Independence. Slavery and popular sovereignty both violated this principle because self-government could only be realized through equality. Even those sympathetic to Lincoln's anti-slavery posture might have been surprised to hear him close by urging his fellow Republicans to "re-adopt the Declaration of Independence." While abolitionists had routinely used the document to indict slavery, Lincoln was no abolitionist, and his use of the Declaration marked a turning point in his career.[16]

Lincoln's view of the Constitution had gained followers—witness the exploding popularity of the Republican Party between 1856 and 1860—but it showed pro-slavery southerners that the very existence of that Party threatened their property rights. Lincoln spent much of the next six years trying to prove that the Constitution did not protect slavery, which made him an enemy of many southerners, as well as the President and the Supreme Court. In 1857, writing for the majority, Chief Justice Roger Taney found that the Constitution not only tolerated slavery, but protected its growth in the territories. The news for Lincoln and the Republican Party could not have been worse, for the party's founding mission had been to block the expansion of slavery. *Dred Scott v. Sandford*[17] placed Lincoln and the party not just at odds with the Constitution, but potentially outside the law.

Lincoln's position also became the main point of contention between he and Stephen Douglas in the well-known debates that led to the latter's reelection to the U.S. Senate in 1858. Lincoln stressed that Douglas's doctrine of popular sovereignty—which had wreaked havoc in Kansas in 1855 and 1856—perverted the Constitution and betrayed the

14. Abraham Lincoln, Speech at Peoria, (Oct. 16, 1854), *in* THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN 247, 255 (Roy P. Basler, ed., 1953) (emphasis in original).

15. *Id.* at 266 (emphasis in original).

16. *See id.* at 276.

17. 60 U.S. 393 (1856).

Founders' principle of equality as stated in the Declaration. Douglas balked at this accusation, for "the signers . . . had no reference to negroes at all when they declared all men to be created equal."[18]

Douglas prevailed in 1858, but the debates circulated the issues widely and made Lincoln a household name. As a result, he was invited to speak at Cooper Union as one of several contenders for the Republican nomination for President. The speech took place only months after John Brown's failed raid on the arsenal at Harper's Ferry, an event that put the Republican Party on the defensive when Democrats used it to label Republicans closet abolitionists who secretly supported Brown's extreme and violent plans. When he took the stage in New York, Lincoln had to both legitimize the Party in the eyes of skeptical northerners, shaken by John Brown's act, and legitimize himself to northeastern Republicans skeptical of his western roots.

Gary Wills argues that Lincoln's Cooper Union address is similar both in content and rhetorical structure to Obama's speech on race in March 2008. Both men were responding to charges of extremism, and used their speeches to address much larger issues of slavery and race, respectively. The similarities are indeed striking, but Cooper Union also signals the triumph of a *conception* of the Constitution that Obama used to frame his argument.[19] To prepare for Cooper Union, Lincoln immersed himself in the writings of the Founders in order to claim the Republican Party as the heir to their vision for the Union. Like all patriots, Lincoln venerated the Founders; what made him different was the way he put their principles to work. In his view, the Constitution's emphasis on law and order was designed to implement the values of the Declaration. In a brilliant move, Lincoln positioned himself and the Republicans as conservative, for they defended the *status quo* while southerners tried to reverse the longstanding legislation that blocked slavery's growth, such as the Northwest Ordinance and the Missouri Compromise. Most fundamentally, Lincoln argued, the Constitution did not expressly protect slavery.

Lincoln's position is important because it is *his* view of the Constitution—as a dynamic document that works to secure equality through the law—that we accept today. In fact, Lincoln's view is so powerful that today we *assume* that the original Constitution explicitly ensured equal-

18. Stephen Douglas, Speech at Alton (Oct. 15, 1858), *in* THE LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATES OF 1858, at 299 (Robert W. Johannsen, ed., Oxford University Press, 1965).

19. *See* Gary Wills, *Two Speeches on Race*, 55 N.Y. REV. BOOKS 7 (2008), *available at* http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21290. In a related effort, Tim Rutten compares Obama's speech to Lincoln's "House Divided" address. *See* Tim Rutten, *Obama's Lincoln Moment*, L.A. TIMES, Opinion, Mar. 19, 2008 at A17. Obama's remarks on race were made at Constitution Hall in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008. *Id.*

ity, when it did not.[20] We also believe—mistakenly—that the Declaration and the Constitution naturally reinforce one another, indeed that no tension exists between the two. We forget that a decade separated the two documents, and that only six men were involved in writing both. We forget that most Americans who thought about the Declaration prior to the 1850s considered it to be primarily symbolic: the opening shot of the Revolution, certainly, but ultimately a statement devoid of authority. Instead, Americans understood the Constitution, a procedural document, to be the foundation of national authority. Some argue that Lincoln took liberties with the Constitution by turning the Framers into closet opponents of slavery, but our country has adopted his vision of "a more perfect Union." Little wonder that my students often assume that the Framers designed the Constitution to protect equality.

Obama understands the revolution Lincoln wrought by reconciling these two documents, and by appealing to law, morality, and reason to shift the nation's course. This is why he used *Lincoln's* Constitution as the cornerstone of his speech on race in Philadelphia. The speech was precipitated by the controversy over Jeremiah Wright, Obama's pastor and former mentor whose inflammatory statements about America created a firestorm in the campaign and raised significant questions about Obama's judgment. In response, Obama spoke not just about Wright, but about the role of race in the campaign, and in American life generally.

Obama began with the Constitution's preamble, "We the people, in order to form a more perfect Union." Standard patriotic fare, perhaps, but in the words that followed Obama described the complexity of America's founding. In 1787, "a group of men" gathered in Philadelphia to launch "America's improbable experiment in democracy," making "real their declaration of independence" through a constitutional convention. Yet "the document they produced was signed but ultimately unfinished . . . stained by this nation's original sin of slavery."[21] The idea that freedom existed alongside slavery in the minds of the Founders is well known, a bedrock irony of American history and standard content in history textbooks. But consider *how* Obama reconciles the brilliance of the Founders with their compromise on slavery:

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20. This is one of the most interesting points of GARRY WILLS, LINCOLN AT GETTYSBURG: THE WORDS THAT REMADE AMERICA (1992). Yet Wills sees Lincoln privileging the Declaration over the Constitution, an issue contested by Philip Paludan and Allan Guelzo in their respective works cited *supra* note 13.

21. Barack Obama, Speech on Race (Mar. 18, 2008), *available at* http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/03/18/politics/main3947908.shtml. Obama's treatment of slavery as a sin is taken from Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. In this, perhaps his most complex speech, Lincoln framed the Civil War as a conflict forced by southerners, but also a divine punishment inflicted on all Americans for the collective sin of slavery, one that might continue "until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword." *See* Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address (Mar. 4, 1865).

> the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution—a Constitution that had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty, and justice, and a union that could be and should be perfected over time.[22]

Obama knows that "equality" does not appear in the original Constitution, hence his description of "the ideal" of equality. The articulation of equal protection as a Constitutional principle would not occur until Reconstruction and the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, and then lay dormant—at least for African-Americans—until Lyndon Johnson signed the nation's most effective civil rights legislation into law nearly a century later. Yet for Obama, the Constitution implicitly *promises* equality, for it has incorporated the Declaration, and now the two speak with a single voice. We have Lincoln to thank for that.

Just as Lincoln looked to the Constitution to answer the problem of slavery, Obama looked to the Constitution to speak candidly about race. Lincoln found the answer to the problem of slavery within the document itself, for "a more perfect Union" implied that national equality was something to be pursued. The Constitution could be the means to implement the values of the Declaration. This is why the Gettysburg Address is so consequential, for Lincoln dates the founding of the nation—four score and seven years ago—with the Declaration rather than the Constitution. He sees the nation dedicated to the "proposition that all men are created equal." Lincoln's use of the term "proposition" places the perfection of the Union in the future rather than the past, and turns the republic into an experiment that is open to improvement.

If this observation about "a more perfect Union" seems esoteric, consider a remark made by Republican Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin at a rally in California on October 4, 2008. In one of her first attempts to associate Obama with Bill Ayers, the former member of the Weather Underground, Palin claimed that Obama saw America as "imperfect enough that he's palling around with terrorists."[23] The word choice was significant, and highlights a recurrent difference between the two parties in the last several elections. For Palin, the United States as it exists *is* the ideal, hence her emphasis on demonstrated patriotism and repeated efforts to question that of her opponents.

But for Obama—as for Lincoln—the Constitutional phrase "a more perfect Union" suggests the possibility of improvement, a hope that itself evidences patriotism. Obama's speech on race reflected this belief. As he put it, "[t]his union may never be perfect, but generation after genera-

22. Speech on Race, *supra* note 21.
23. *Palin says Obama "Palling Around" with Terrorists*, L.A. TIMES, Oct. 5, 2008, at A13.

tion has shown that it can always be perfected."[24] Significantly, in both opening and closing his speech, Obama dated the origin of the nation to 1787, not 1776. He was able to do this because Lincoln did the heavy lifting for us by making the Constitution the vehicle for realizing equality, and a more perfect Union. The recognition of common ground between Americans, Obama concluded, "is where the perfection begins."[25]

THE COMMON GROUND OF POLITICS

If "a more perfect Union" links Obama to Lincoln, the "recognition of common ground" underscores his debt to John Dewey. The contributions Dewey made to American philosophy facilitated Obama's approach to politics, particularly the latter's emphasis on the creation of common values as essential to political progress. Born in 1859, Dewey came of age during the chaos of late nineteenth-century industrialization and the simultaneous intellectual upheaval spawned by Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Dewey was especially concerned with the social implications of natural selection, for if taken to its logical conclusion, the concept of evolution—of continuous change over time—meant that everything was in flux, including the human mind, even the concept of truth itself. At the turn of the century, evolution and the progress of science threatened to invalidate both religious faith and philosophy, which had been nearly indistinguishable for centuries.

In response to this crisis, Dewey looked for alternative ways to ground human inquiry. He began to think about the concept of truth not as abstract and permanent but as something rooted in *value*, and by definition a *social* enterprise. Rather than seeing evolution as eroding the possibility of certainty, he reconceptualized truth as an ongoing pursuit of the good. Thus Dewey earned the label "pragmatist" for his willingness to set aside the pursuit of absolute truth, which had always been the goal of philosophers, in order to focus on the operation of truth in the form of solutions to social problems. As his fellow pragmatist William James put it, we must give up certitude without relinquishing the quest for hope of truth itself. Dewey agreed, but then asked the more difficult question: if truth was made rather than discovered, *how* to make truth? The answer for the ever-optimistic Dewey was to settle on values that would bind us together, for there was no *a priori* or eternal truths to fall back on. In other words, the crisis brought by evolution put more responsibility on us to *determine* the good. Dewey welcomed this challenge to received wisdom, for it could only make knowledge more democratic.[26]

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24. Speech on Race, *supra* note 21.

25. *Id.*

26. *See* JOHN DEWEY, THE INFLUENCE OF DARWIN ON PHILOSOPHY: AND OTHER ESSAYS IN CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT (Henry Holt and Company 1910). Meghan O'Rourke recently alluded to a strain of "measured pragmatism" in Obama's policies. *See* Meghan O'Rourke, *There's No*

We can see some of this sensibility in *The Audacity of Hope.* Obama's premise is that affirming core values and shared understandings might help us address problems that have become entrenched by increasing partisanship. To be sure, politicians routinely claim to reject ideologically charged politics, and hold out the hope of building a more unified electorate. We have heard this many times before—from many quarters—though seem no closer to unity. But the way Obama argues for this change is significant, for like Dewey, he asks us to guide ourselves not by positions but values and beliefs, because values have the potential to surmount problems. As the former puts it, "[v]alues are faithfully applied to the facts before us, while ideology overrides whatever facts call theory into question."[27]

Obama used this idea in his speech at the Democratic National Convention in August 2008:

> We may not agree on abortion, but surely we can agree on reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies in this country. . . . I know there are differences on same-sex marriage, but surely we can agree that our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters deserve to visit the person they love in the hospital and to live lives free of discrimination. Passions fly on immigration, but I don't know anyone who benefits when a mother is separated from her infant child or an employer undercuts American wages by hiring illegal workers.[28]

The idea surfaced again in Obama's Inaugural Address, where he argued that the question was not "whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works."[29] Obama has been criticized in this respect for being too conciliatory, not firmly grounded *enough* in an ideology, and for (naively) believing that politics can be solved through the appeal to common sense.[30] Indeed, we do not know whether this style of governance will work, but it does privilege values over positions as a way to transcend division.

It also grows from Obama's interest—shared by Dewey—in seeing the individual not apart from the community, but a product of it. For Dewey, the social world made the individual possible, just as Lincoln argued that the Union made state rights possible. Similarly, in his speech on race Obama emphasizes common hopes as the only ground on which to move forward, and frequently speaks of common progress as the best measure of individual progress. It also explains his emphasis during the

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Place Like Home: The Mood in Hyde Park—and What it Says About Obama, SLATE, Nov. 4, 2008, at 1. James's idea is taken from William James, THE WILL TO BELIEVE (Longman's Green, 1896).

27. AUDACITY OF HOPE, *supra* note 6, at 59.

28. Barack Obama, Remarks of Senator Barack Obama at the Democratic National Convention (Aug. 28, 2008).

29. Inaugural Address available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address/.

30. *See* David Leonhardt, *Obamanomics*, THE N.Y. TIMES MAG., Aug. 20, 2008, at MM30-38 (outlining some of these critiques).

campaign (and in his keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention) that what unites us is far more powerful than what divides us. Ironically, this rhetoric of unity mobilized millions of Americans to become involved in the campaign even while it became fodder for Obama's opponents to criticize the campaign as a naive exercise in "happy talk."

Dewey was similarly criticized as naive and relativistic, for he considered democracy itself a form of philosophy, a search for what works, what is valued, and what brings the good.[31] Indeed, Dewey has a curious relationship to twentieth-century liberalism. Hailed by many as its intellectual father, he saw much of it as actually an empty procedural doctrine that undermined democracy. As one biographer of Dewey wrote, liberals tended to treat government as something provided *for* but not *by* the people.[32] In a society that increasingly treated democracy as simply a periodic check on the power of elites, Dewey offered the reverse, a vision that would maximize participation, extending democracy to all aspects of social life, where values were forged on the level of communities. Thus it seems ironic that Dewey was labeled "pragmatic" even as he fought this "realistic" vision of democracy.

Dewey's decision to move away from ideology and toward a politics centered on values paved the way for modern liberalism even as the "values" themselves were left behind. Since the New Deal, Democrats defined democracy as providing minimal social welfare (admittedly itself a value) through the mechanisms of corporate capitalism. By contrast, liberals largely took a neutral approach to cultural questions, and demurred when conservatives became increasingly interested in applying particular values to social problems. Perhaps it is no small victory for Dewey that Obama's wide appeal was partly due to his willingness to reassert a moral posture.

Thus, to call Obama—like Dewey—pragmatic misses the degree to which both have a vision of democracy that is highly idealistic. Obama's decision to work as a community organizer was ridiculed by Rudy Giuliani and Sarah Palin,[33] but it probably grew from a belief—grounded in Dewey—that change is most effective and authentic if it begins with agendas and alliances forged by people themselves rather than their leaders. This view of democracy was also apparent in the organization of

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31. John Dewey, *Philosophy and Democracy*, *in* CHARACTER AND EVENTS: POPULAR ESSAYS IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY VOLUME II at 841-55 (Joseph Ratner, ed., Henry Holt 1929), *reprinted in* DAVID A. HOLLINGER & CHARLES CAPPER, THE AMERICAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION VOLUME II: 1865 TO THE PRESENT at 202 (5th ed. 2006).

32. ROBERT WESTBROOK, JOHN DEWEY AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY 282 (1991).

33. Rudolph Giuliani, Remarks at Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul, Minnesota (Sept. 3, 2008), http://www.latimes.com/news/politics/la-na-giulianitranscript4-2008sep04,0,5260395.story; Governor Sarah Palin, Remarks at Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul, Minnesota (Sept. 3, 2008), http://www.latimes.com/news/politics/la-na-palintranscript4-2008sep04,0,3137902.story.

Obama's campaign. It was a sophisticated operation that masterfully exploited communication technology, and its enormous coffers were fed by legions of small donors. But at bottom, both of these things occurred because Obama—and his representatives—convinced supporters that victory was their responsibility. This might be dismissed as simply a political strategy, but it is closer to a grassroots operation than any successful campaign in recent memory. It is an exhausting approach to democracy—perhaps more than Americans bargained for—but one that Dewey laid the groundwork for a century ago.

As a historian, I have little ability to predict what comes next. Whether Obama is able to govern probably does not have much to do with the sophistication or depth of his understanding of history. He is as untested now as Lincoln was in 1860, someone who upended the party's expectations and improbably became President. Lincoln was "the second choice" of enough in the 1860 Republican Convention in Chicago to secure the nomination; Obama faced long odds within his own party, not to mention the uphill battle of his lack of electoral experience, strange "pedigree"—as he put it—and even stranger name. The point is that his ideas and approach to politics are deeply rooted in the nation's past. In his conception of the Constitution, Obama leans heavily on Lincoln; in his approach to reform politics, he echoes the instrumentalism of Dewey. In terms of American influences, you could do much worse.