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No Time for Mere Catch Arguments

by

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This essay was just published by the Center of the American Experiment as part of a symposium publication entitled, "Learning from Lincoln: Principle and Pragmatism: Getting the Balance Right." There is always much to learn from Lincoln, but especially so as the political conventions take place and the fall campaign begins in earnest. As I say in the essay, the nation's current situation in no way approaches the peril confronted by Lincoln. Nevertheless, in Lincoln's words, this is not a proper time "for mere catch arguments."

A link to all the symposium essays is [here](#).

In the introduction to Doris Kearns Goodwin's magnificent *Team of Rivals*, the story of Lincoln and his War Cabinet, she recounts that Frederick Douglass in 1876 declared at the dedication of a new Lincoln monument, "Any man can say things that are true of Abraham Lincoln, but no man can say anything that is new of Abraham Lincoln."

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Douglass spoke just a bit prematurely. In the more than 130 years since, Lincoln's life has been more thoroughly examined than that of any other president. Yet it is still possible to gain new insights, or at least deeper ones, into Lincoln's character. *Team of Rivals*, subtitled *The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, gives us a new appreciation for an aspect of Lincoln's character rare in politicians of any age, and certainly not much in evidence today. That is, the willingness to reach out to political opponents and seek common cause to advance the public interest rather than self-interest.

After winning the presidency, Lincoln brought into his cabinet, in several cases not without dogged persistence, all of his principal rivals for the Republican nomination. And for good measure, he added three former Democrats. Lincoln did so knowing full well that in every instance these men considered themselves to be his superiors.

In arduously melding this "team of rivals," a group of disparate personalities with conflicting loyalties, into an effective governing unit, Lincoln had two paramount goals: first, save the Union, and, second, lead the nation to what he called in the Gettysburg Address "a new birth of freedom," meaning emancipation of the slaves.

But for perhaps the first one, there have been no elections in our nation's history more important than that of 1860, when the Union's fate, and the fate of the liberty principle for which the Union ultimately would come to stand, hung in the balance. Yet no national election is insignificant, and, in light of the challenges confronting America, the upcoming one may be more significant than most.

We are engaged in a long war with Islamic extremists—one that will continue to try our nation's resolve. Our ability at once to maintain individual liberty and protect our homeland will be tested again and again. Our economy, while the strongest in the world, is presently sluggish, giving rise to more than the usual orgy of irresponsible campaign one-upmanship. Notwithstanding huge looming budget deficits fueled by the lack of political will to reform Social Security and Medicare, our erstwhile politicians gleefully promise more "middle class relief" of all manner—universal health care, universal pre-K education, universal mortgage forgiveness, and so on, not to mention summer gas tax "holidays." It is as if the money to pay for these promises simply grows on some exotic new tree called "Tax the Rich" or "Tax Big Oil."

Having engaged in a series of serious debates with Stephen Douglas over the most profound issues facing the country in 1858, what would Lincoln think about the frivolities and rhetorical excesses of the current campaign? Not much, indeed.

No doubt, much of Barack Obama's appeal this campaign season stems from his so-called "postpartisan" message—the suggestion, without much prior action to back up the suggestion, that he would reach out to people across the

political aisle to find common ground to solve problems. Meanwhile, John McCain's appeal to Democrats and Independents stems in part from the perception he would do the same. The existence of partisanship, properly understood, in the sense of political parties developing and vigorously contesting divergent policy ideas and perspectives is crucial to the success of the ongoing American democratic experiment.

I don't wish to live in a post-partisan America in which candidates, for whatever reason, do not vigorously contest their different governing philosophies. But I do wish to live in an America in which our political leaders show more willingness to engage in meaningful debate that considers fresh solutions for old problems. And I wish to live in an America in which, especially with regard to matters of national security, our leaders show a willingness to adopt a Lincolnian disposition to reach out to rivals.

The nation's current situation in no way approaches the peril confronted by Lincoln. Nevertheless, those who seek to lead us now should heed the injunction contained in Lincoln's December 1862 message to Congress: "If ever there could be a proper time for mere catch arguments, that time surely is not now. In times like the present, men should utter nothing for which they would not willingly be responsible through time and eternity."