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## Principalities & Powers

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by Samuel Francis

### Abraham the Unready

(This column is based in part on an address delivered at a "Colloquium on Lincoln, Reagan, and National Greatness" sponsored by the Claremont Institute in Washington, D.C., on February 12, 1998.)

*L'affaire Lewinsky* was the obsession of the headlines and conversations of Washington throughout February, obscuring even the jolliness promised by another airborne stomping of Iraq and the possible obliteration of the American economy by the Asian stock market crash. All through the month, one *femme* after another seeped from the woodwork of the Clinton administration—not only the lovely and talented Monica but also her mother, her literary agent, her friend Mrs. Tripp, the president's secretary, the elusive Miss Willey, the interminable Paula Jones, and, of course, the fat-mouthed First Lady herself, who on national television fabricated fantastic conspiracy theories to preserve her husband's office and the illusion of a normal marriage a few days longer. On top of these eruptions came Mrs. Albright bellowing for blowing Saddam Hussein out of his combat boots, the solemn Janet Reno, and the giggly Donna Shalala. Never in American history has John Knox's horrid regiment of women waxed so prominent and so vocal, and all that was missing was former Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders haranguing the public on the virtues of tutoring pre-schoolers in bondage fantasies.

One would have thought the public, even without Dr. Elders, would at last have had enough, but according to opinion polls they only craved more. The president's popularity not only survived but appeared to flourish, and even those who said they believed he had an affair with the former intern also reported that, as long as the stock market held, they didn't much care. How is it that we have come to this sad passage in the history of the nation and its president? Is it too far-fetched to suggest that the indifference of the American people to the moral character of the chief executive is in fact the

chief legacy of Abraham Lincoln?

In a recent article in *Chronicles*, I characterized Lincoln as not only not a great President but "an ill-prepared man who has a strong claim to being the most incompetent President in American history." Yet, despite his incompetence and the immediate disasters his administration wreaked on those Americans who had the misfortune to live (and those who did not succeed in living) through it, he did leave an important legacy that is not unconnected to the present contentment with the present occupant of Lincoln's office that a majority of Americans seem to harbor.

Of the 15 Presidents who preceded Lincoln in the White House, Lincoln enjoyed less preparation for high office than any. He had served in the militia during the Black Hawk War but saw no action; he served only one term as a congressman and four as a state legislator. By 1860, he had twice run for the U.S. Senate and had been defeated both times. In the same year, nominated as the candidate of a new splinter party widely regarded as eccentric if not extremist, he was elected to the White House as a fluke, because of the split within the Democratic Party, with less than 40 percent of the popular vote. It is quite true that Lincoln was a skilled local politician and that he had become a prominent lawyer in Illinois, but he was not a nationally known lawyer, and most of his cases seem to have been rather ordinary ones.

In fact, Abraham Lincoln displayed all his life the world view of a small-town politico, and it was the immediate source of the disaster of his administration that he carried this mentality into the White House at the greatest crisis in American history.

Lincoln's small-town political mentality is clear in the period between his election and his bungled resolution of the Fort Sumter crisis. Lincoln simply could not bring himself to believe that Southerners felt strongly enough about the issues that animated them to secede; he was temperamentally unable to recognize that some people engage in politics for reasons of high principle and do not regard politics merely as a bottomless

bucket of patronage.

Those who heard Lincoln talk about secession during this period confirm that, once Lincoln was inaugurated, it was to dispensing patronage that he devoted his immediate and almost total attention, despite the formation of the Confederacy and the looming specter of Ft. Sumter. His most recent biographer, David Donald, recounts how "The new President allowed office-seekers to take up most of his time. From nine o'clock in the morning until late at night, his White House office was open to all comers, and sometimes the petitioners were so numerous that it was impossible to climb the stairs." Indeed, when Charles Francis Adams, recently appointed ambassador to Great Britain by the administration, came to the White House with Seward to thank Lincoln and expected to discuss Anglo-American diplomacy at a critical moment when it was imperative for the Union to prevent British recognition of the Confederacy, Lincoln showed no interest. He dismissed him with the rude remark, "Very kind of you to say so, Mr. Adams, but you are not my choice. You are Seward's man," and he changed the subject to what he was really interested in: "Well, Seward, I have settled the Chicago Post Office."

Lincoln betrayed no indication of what he planned to do about the crisis of the Union that confronted him by the time of his inauguration, the secession of seven states and the formation of the Confederate government. He repeatedly insisted that neither he nor his party had any intention of interfering with slavery as it legally existed and that his sole purpose was to preserve the Union. Yet, given that goal, he issued no statement after his election or his inauguration that made clear what he would do. Had he done so, his statement could have meant crucial support for Southern Unionists and avoidance of war.

Throughout the crisis Lincoln took his stand on formalities and evasions—that as President-elect he had no authority, that compromise proposals were only efforts to subvert the Constitution or compromise with revolutionaries, that any meeting with Confederate representatives would imply recognition of Con-

federate independence and the right of secession. Technically, he may have been correct in some of these claims, but his insistence on them in the face of the dissolution of the Union and the prospect of war and at a time when even radicals on both sides were suggesting compromises reveals his mediocrity as a national political leader. Seward, Adams, Sen. Lyman Trumbull of Illinois, Sen. John Crittenden of Kentucky, and the Virginia legislature all advocated or offered compromises, as did commissioners from the Confederacy, but Lincoln rejected them out of hand or ignored them.

When he first polled his Cabinet about re-provisioning Fort Sumter, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of War, the Secretary of the Navy, and the Secretary of the Interior advised against it. Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase advised against it if it would mean war. Winfield Scott warned him that it would mean secession of the Upper South and that Sumter could not be reinforced without a major military and naval commitment. Both Stephen Douglas and Horace Greeley also favored evacuating the fort.

And yet he decided at last to re-provision it. His decision to do so was the greatest single blunder in American history, since it clearly invited and virtually forced the Confederacy to fire on the fort and allowed Lincoln to call for 75,000 troops in response. His call for troops in turn provoked the secession of the Upper South and the completion of the Confederacy, including the secession of Virginia. It allowed the Confederacy to add immeasurably to its own strength, placed its borders adjacent to Washington itself, and gave the South its greatest military commanders, Lee and Jackson.

While Lincoln insisted on formalities and legalisms when confronted by the secession crisis, he showed no such punctiliousness when dealing with Southern sympathizers in the North or with border states. The man who could not risk a meeting with Confederate commissioners because it might imply recognition of the Confederacy had no problem with illegally suspending habeas corpus, allowing the arbitrary incarceration of political opponents, and using federal troops to prevent secession of the border states, nor did the champion of perpetual unionism have much problem with the secession of West Virginia from its parent state. “The next years,” writes Profes-

or Donald, “would see greater infringements on individual liberties than in any other period of American history.”

The result of his blunder was the self-inflicted genocide of the Civil War, and instead of accomplishing his stated goal, the preservation of the Union, he caused its mortal wounding. What kind of “Union” is it when half of it is forced back into it at the cost of military devastation and conquest, and much of the remainder has to be held under martial law and the suspension of civil liberties?

I do not argue that Lincoln’s course of conduct or his language was deliberately deceptive, that he intended all along to provoke war, overthrow the Constitution, and make himself dictator in a Caesarian grab for power. But the character that emerges from his conduct remains that of a small-town politico, more concerned with the spoils of office and the cadging of votes than with the interests of the nation, and too inexperienced and poorly educated to meet the challenges his office demanded. He is simply the classic case of the Peter Principle—a man promoted beyond the level of his competence.

Nor do I believe that he ever intended to re-found the American political order along lines radically different from what it was as he found it. Lincoln subscribed to a fairly conventional Whig nationalism, as conventional as it was questionable from a constitutional and historical viewpoint, but nonetheless useful for what he considered the great practical object of government, the encouragement of economic affluence. His doctrine of equality was intended to justify that role of government. “On the side of the Union,” he told Congress in his message of July 4, 1861, the war “is a struggle for maintaining in the world that form and substance of government whose leading object is to elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial weights from all shoulders; to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all; to afford men an unfettered start, and a fair chance in the race of life.” As Harry Jaffa has put it, “The principle of Equality, far from enfranchising any leveling action of government, is the ground for the recognition of those human differences which arose *naturally*, but in *civil society*, when human industry and acquisitiveness are emancipated.” I do not agree that the principle of equality does not enfranchise leveling—the very lifting of “artificial weights” by the state is itself a process

of leveling—but it does serve to justify the egalitarian scramble for wealth, and in Lincoln’s mind its purpose was exactly that.

But Lincoln failed to see the flaws of such a theory or where it would lead—to the unlimited expansion of centralized state power, the destruction of the power and authority of the states, the death blow to the Old Republic, and the enthronement of Economic Man as the *summum bonum* of human endeavor. Both the late M.E. Bradford and liberal historian James McPherson rightly see Lincoln as the godfather of the “fundamental transformation of the relationship between power and liberty” that the war brought. The result was the launching of the federal leviathan on the course it has followed ever since. The political and plutocratic corruption of the late 19th century and the eventual marriage of plutocrat and bureaucrat in the modern managerial state of our own day are Lincoln’s legacy, whether he intended them or not.

The ethic of acquisitive scramble and the politics of a leviathan state busying itself with the systematic removal of “artificial weights” that impede acquisition are today the common bond that most mainstream conservatives share with the general public, and it is the only ethic that remains accessible to most Americans of any persuasion or social stratum. The moral reflexes that demand at least the appearance of integrity and sobriety in public leaders are themselves “artificial weights” from which the Lincolnian leviathan is committed to emancipating us. Today, conservatives who are still animated by such reflexes gaze in dismay as an American public expresses indifference to the moral conduct of the chief executive and praises him for his successful management of the economy. In February, the *Wall Street Journal* quoted a citizen of Illinois, the “Land of Lincoln,” who angrily retorted to its reporter, “Don’t tell us that we have a bad guy in [the White House]. We can see for ourselves that things are better,” and her husband added in agreement, “He has kept up the economy.” Why should we be surprised that the triumph of Economic Man results in indifference to and denial of the moral degradation of the presidency and the nation it serves? It was Abraham Lincoln, wittingly or not, who put us on the path to where we are today.

## Letter From Rome

by Andrei Navrozov

### Nothing Better to Do



I have always wanted to spend some time in Rome, for a whole rosary of personal reasons. As with much else in a person's private life, to recount these in print is to expose oneself to public ridicule. Yes, Rome is a wonderful city. Yes, the food is good.

But then in England, where I live, the new Labour government came in to finish what the Tories started. And since another famous fact about Rome is that it has already fallen, I figured that over here my chances of being buried under the Eurorubble were encouragingly smaller. So I moved. Days are now passing like centuries outside my window, to the ringing of church bells and the flashing of Japanese cameras.

The paramount joy in all this is a newfound superficiality. On my terrace, in the suggestively Decembrist sunshine, I have been reading a collection of Russian memoirs from the 1830's. How people knew and valued their cities in those days—Petersburg, Moscow—how well they described every facade, every little bridge they had known since childhood! And of course we have all read such memoirs of London, of Paris, of Vienna, even of New York or San Francisco, written by the natural or adoptive children of those cities with the same tenderness, the same observant devotion.

This, alas, is no longer possible. To know a great city like London or Rome nowadays, to know it by heart and in depth and over the span of a lifetime, is to sustain an emotional injury that would render a sensible man all but mute with indignation and shame. Only a giddy foreigner, a pliant, impressionable, superficial stranger, is ignorant enough not to taste the anti-oxidizing agent in his bottle of bubbly *prosecco*; nor has he met enough cranky old-timers to acquire their inevitable bitterness. He knows nothing of the way things used to be 50, 20, even ten years back. To him, every-

thing is the real thing.

"The knowledge that the world is ending," wrote a Russian writer in the 1920's, "is what distinguishes an individual from a philistine." In retrospect I am beginning to think that this leave of absence from London, a place which during the last 13 years I had learned to use and to love like the great library it is, was really a convoluted means of getting a few months' respite from living the life of an individual.

Of all the countries I have ever visited, Italy is the only place where one can live like a philistine without wearing trainers, reading the *International Herald Tribune*, or degenerating into an animal in other ways. One look in the dining room of a middle-of-the-road hotel anywhere in Europe will remind us that, at the moment of pouring anemic, bluish milk over their bowls of high-fiber cereal, middle-class Swedish, French, or Belgian families look exactly alike; that is to say, they look American. They are ready for life in the United States of Europe, where everything will be "better and more fun," as their predecessors in interest used to sing, not always tunefully, aboard eastbound cattle trains.

By contrast, in Italy, philistine life is possessed of an aesthetic so richly ritualized that a Roman pharmacy owner on a week's skiing holiday with his family in Cortina d'Ampezzo will be mistaken for a serious nobleman among serious noblemen. Neither he nor his wife will go skiing, of course; hauteur, like couture, will not be ruffled by rude Teutonic winds; instead, they will join the carefully timed round of cocktails and promenades that exhibit their exquisite, almost hypochondriac idleness, his languid wit, and her new furs to fine advantage.

Admittedly the weight of tradition is responsible. The Italian bourgeois had begun to promenade when the aristocracy still fenced and boxed. Now that the middle classes of the world have united, under the colors of Benetton, in Americanism—sport, most conspicuously, and all the attendant trappings of the sporting life—the Italian is the odd man out. His vision of the active life may be centered on the English country house of a century ago, but unlike Ralph Lauren he never ran and sweated to get there in one generation. To the contrary, the Italian

simply promenaded until every bourgeois around him turned *gentilhomme*, and now he promenades among them like a great aristocratic original. None of which, incidentally, has deterred Benetton from selling the Brooklyn Bridge to Brooklyn, or at least Brooklyn Heights.

Apart from tradition, which has saved the Italians from the embarrassment of ending up like everyone else, another powerful characteristic that humanizes their middle class is a kind of seriousness, a seriousness which at times resembles cheerfulness and at times cheerful resignation. I have already alluded to the image of life which the Americanist set all over the world holds up as a banner of progress, and I allude to it again in this connection. The familiar strangeness of seeing, on the No. 22 bus in central London, a young woman wearing a track suit or a Walkman is explained by the conjecture that she does not enjoy being on the No. 22, indeed that riding it is only a transitory phase of her existence, and that she would gladly swap this for a run in the park or an evening at the local discotheque. Looking around, one may note that just about everyone else on the bus, including the driver and the conductor, shares her anxiety and her sense of displacement.

What is it with people? From the exodus of the Jews from Egypt to a Sotheby's drinks party, everybody wants to be somewhere, if not something, else. You are talking to an old stupid woman with a glass of champagne in her trembling hand, you think you are being polite as a boy scout, you suppose the woman is grateful for the attention, but no! You catch her eyeing the door through which a famous used-car salesman is entering, and before you can murmur something suitable ("Madam, is it not time, now that you are in the frosty autumn of your life, to be thinking of higher things?") she is off like a shot. And for the stupid old woman of the parable, read "everyman," read baker and banker, newspaper editor and lover, bootblack and writer.

A scene of this kind, which is routine in New York, Rockford, or Paris, is almost unobservable in Rome and hilariously inconceivable in a provincial town of Italy. Of course I would not say under oath that there are no waitresses here who are actually critically acclaimed ac-