

### **The Roles of Lincoln: Father, Husband, *and* President?**

John Nicolay looked up on February 20th, 1862, a little after 5 PM, as a tall thin man slammed the door open. The man, looking disheveled and distraught, declared, “Well Nicolay, my boy is gone--he is actually gone!” (qtd. Goodwin 419). The man burst into tears. This man was Abraham Lincoln, sobbing over his son Willie. But President Lincoln needed to regain his composure. As painful as the thought of his son Willie’s death might be, he still had a wife who was disconsolate over her son’s death, another son in critical condition, and a war--a terrible civil war--in its second year. He needed to split his time between his distressed family and his torn country. Did he succeed at this? Was he a loyal father and husband while he handled the Civil War? With two of four sons already dead, and a heartbroken wife who could barely go on with life, Lincoln did what was necessary. Abraham Lincoln’s relationship with his wife, his letters, and his relationship with his sons revealed how the president struggled and succeeded in balancing the responsibility of his family and the demands of his presidency.

A close look at Mary Todd Lincoln’s relationship with her husband certainly aids in comprehending the family feelings toward Abraham Lincoln. Mary Todd Lincoln constantly referred to her husband as “dear” “devoted” “beloved” or “darling” in letters to her friends, her husband, or husbands of her friends (Lincoln, Mary T., 2 Nov. 1862; 12 Dec. 1869; 2 Feb. 1870; 28 May 1870; To Sally Orne (N.D.)). This establishes that Lincoln probably did not neglect her during the Civil War, or she would not have been so enamored with him in her letters. However, Lincoln’s relationship with his wife might have been more complicated during the war. Doris Kearns Goodwin, the author of the book that inspired the movie *Lincoln*, mentions that “His [Lincoln’s] intense focus on the presidential responsibilities had often left her feeling abandoned and resentful” (Goodwin 733). Although Lincoln

might have toiled intensely on his work, the first lady's attitude toward Lincoln in her letters proved that although Mary Todd Lincoln and Abraham Lincoln might have had a few rough spots-- maybe even more than a few-- they still had a loving relationship, and Lincoln did not entirely desert her. In one of her letters after Lincoln's death, Mary Todd wrote that:

Between my great sorrow and humiliating surroundings, separated from a devoted husband who always provided so comfortably and even luxuriously for me, you can imagine that the great change is crushing me to the earth....that the wife of the man whose life was so sacrificed to his country's service.....whether the services of my great and good husband will be recognized by his country. (Lincoln, Mary T., 2 Feb. 1870)

This affectionate passage demonstrates that the first lady thought her husband had "always provided so comfortably and even luxuriously" for her. If Mary Todd had really thought she was abandoned during the Civil War, then she would not think that he had supported her all the time. She also mentions a "great sorrow" unmistakably, at her husband's death. If she had been overlooked and neglected by President Lincoln during the war, she would obviously not feel an immense sorrow at his death, and would not feel that he was "devoted" and "great and good." In a letter that she composed to James H. Orne five years after the president's death, Mary Todd noted that her "broken heart cries aloud and I sigh more than ever to be at rest by my darling husband's side....All I wished *then* was to die, if it had been Our Heavenly Father[']s will—and the great sorrow & oftentimes cruelty—I have endured since, does not soften the aspect of life—or deprive it of its bitterness" (Lincoln Mary T., 28 May 1870). Mary's loving words from this letter indicated that when the loss of her husband came, she too wished to die, because she felt as if her heart was breaking at his death, and that it was a loss extremely difficult to bear. These words confirm the fact that Lincoln did not ignore his wife during the Civil War, because she undoubtedly would not have felt this way towards her late husband if he had disregarded her.

Lincoln himself penned a profusion of letters, several about or to his wife or sons. One particular

letter was written by Lincoln with much concern about his oldest son, Robert Todd Lincoln. Robert, who longed to enlist, felt he was being a coward by obeying his father's and mother's wishes by staying at home, and insisted on taking part in the army. Lincoln wrote to Ulysses S. Grant, the general at the time, requesting a position for Robert where he would not be hurt, "without embarrassment to you, or detriment to the service" (Lincoln, Abraham, 19 Jan. 1865). These words, written with much concern, corroborate the fact that Lincoln satisfied all roles. He did not allow humiliation to come to the military, he kept his son alive, and he protected his wife from a mental breakdown. Another letter to Mary Todd Lincoln reads: "The air is so clear and cool, and apparently healthy, that I would be glad for you to come. Nothing very particular, but I would be glad [to] see you and Tad" (Lincoln, Abraham, 21 Sept. 1863). This remark displays that although Lincoln was away from his family, he missed them and took the time out of his work to request for them to come and visit.

Analyzing Lincoln's loving, patient and endearing relationship with his sons, even during the Civil War and White House years, is also crucial to understanding Lincoln's behavior towards his family. Tad, who was very animated and headstrong, was very close to his father. In fact, when Tad was about eight years old, he would often burst in on Lincoln's important cabinet meetings (Goodwin 332). On one occasion, the president's son, attending a Union rally with his father, was "snuggled against his father's chest. Though he occasionally grew restless during the long speeches and jumped off his father's lap to wander along the platform, Tad quickly returned to the security of his father's embrace" (Goodwin p. 505). Despite the seriousness of the occasion, Lincoln allowed Tad to cuddle with him during the speeches, proving once again, that he could easily combine the priorities of his family with the obligations of his work. In fact, Carl Sandburg's biography states that "The boy Tad meant more to Lincoln than anyone else. They were chums" (Sandburg 243). When the president rested after a long

day of work, his two youngest sons, along with their friends, would climb all over Lincoln, as well as his chair, and demand a story (Goodwin 358). Lincoln also had a strong bond with his son, Willie, which snapped painfully at Willie's death. In the February of 1862, Willie contracted an illness. A ball was scheduled for the White House, and although the ball proceeded, Lincoln was no doubt miserable in attendance. Several days later, Willie passed away. Lincoln was totally distraught. He took a long look at the body of his son and whispered, "It is hard, hard, hard to have him die!" (qtd. in Sandburg 188). Several years earlier, when the president was on a speech tour, he wrote his wife to tell about the speeches and when he would come home. At the end, he took the time to write out a little sentiment for his sons: "Kiss the dear boys for Father--Affectionately A. Lincoln"(Lincoln, Abraham, 4 March 1860). Despite the fact that he was the leader in charge of the country, he was always conscious of his family. He thoughtfully included them in his daily doings, once again proving he could blend the requirements of his work, and the concerns of his family together.

Most people consider the 16th president a model president. Thinking of Lincoln makes one think of the Civil War, and of the Emancipation Proclamation, of the issue of slavery. The name "Abraham Lincoln" brings to mind all the responsibilities that came with his presidency. However, an especially hard concern was the one of his family, and very few contemplate the home troubles of President Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln merged the duty of his family, and the responsibility of the president role exceptionally well.

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