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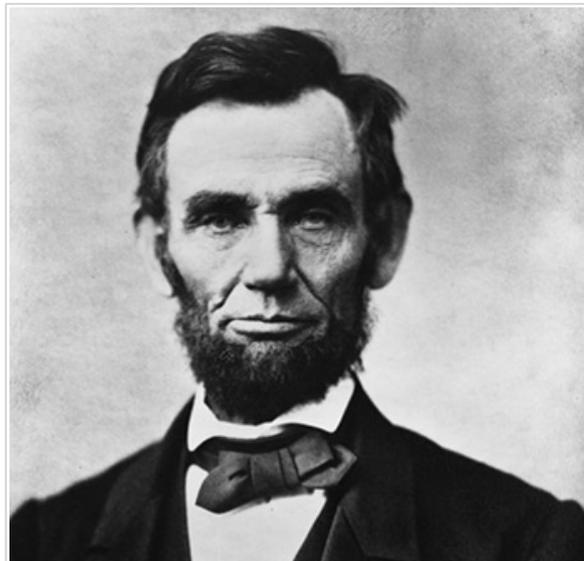
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L. Gregory Jones: Lincoln's leadership in the crucible

Abraham Lincoln's handling of the Fort Sumter crisis in his first days as president seems miraculous until you consider that his character was formed over time to think and act in a particular way.

by [L. Gregory Jones](#)



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Abraham Lincoln knew he would face challenges as president, but he hadn't expected his first days to be quite so daunting.

On the first morning after his inauguration, he was given an urgent military communication from the Union commander of Fort Sumter indicating that the fort was about to run out of supplies. Unless the fort was resupplied, the commander would be compelled to surrender.

But there was no obvious way to resupply the fort without sending armed troops along with the supplies, risking a confrontation that would trigger the beginning of a war. And Lincoln had promised

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a day earlier in his inaugural address that the Union would not initiate any conflict.

What was Lincoln to do? He had almost no national leadership experience on which to draw, having served only one two-year term as a congressman -- and that more than a decade earlier. Those closest to Lincoln with extensive national experience counseled him to surrender the fort.

Those advisors included former President James Buchanan; Buchanan's secretary of war, Joseph Holt; Secretary of State William Seward, a former senator and widely respected leader of Lincoln's Republican Party; and Gen. Winfield Scott, the hero of the Mexican War. Indeed, virtually all of Lincoln's own Cabinet, with the exception of Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, agreed that it would be wise to evacuate Fort Sumter.

Lincoln chose not to accept his advisors' initial counsel but rather sought more information, asking further questions and soliciting additional input from others. This seems odd, for ordinarily we expect wise leaders to trust the counsel of their senior advisors. We might worry that leaders would be acting rashly or hastily if they disregarded their advisors' advice -- especially if it came close to a consensus. But in this instance it was the senior advisors who all seemed to be offering a rash solution.

Lincoln worried that to surrender Fort Sumter would be effectively to grant the claims of the South Carolina secessionists. He feared that he would not be able to surrender Fort Sumter and continue to preserve the Union he had just sworn to preserve in his oath of office. So Lincoln concluded that he should avoid a hasty decision and be patient while searching for another way to resolve the situation.

Eventually, Lincoln worked with Blair and Blair's brother-in-law, a former naval officer, to devise a creative plan to resupply Fort Sumter via ships that would go on a humanitarian rather than a military mission. Through this strategy, they would signal to the South Carolina militia that they were coming in a nonprovocative way; they explicitly told the militia that this was what they were doing. Lincoln had found a third way beyond two unacceptable alternatives.

Lincoln's Cabinet was still not persuaded and voted 5-2 against it. But Lincoln proceeded anyway with a solution that proved to be critical to his presidency and the preservation of the Union. The South Carolina militia fired on the ships carrying out the humanitarian mission, but by doing so the militia fired the first shots of the war -- and this gave the Union the moral high ground when it came to keeping key border states in the Union as the Civil War began.

For Lincoln, keeping those border states in the Union was critical to the moral and political argument of the Union, and it was also essential to sustaining the manpower necessary to fight the war.

Lincoln's leadership in the crucible was as exceptionally successful as it is difficult to imagine, even in retrospect. Here is a leader, in his first day in office, who has almost no experience as a political or military leader, now faced with an extraordinary crisis, and many of his closest advisors tell him to do something he somehow rightly concludes would be disastrous both in the short term and in the long term. And he exhibits both the judgment and the courage not to do the wrong thing but creatively to find a wise thing to do.

It is tempting to treat Lincoln's decision as a lucky roll of the dice or, depending on your perspective, a miracle. But that is to look at Lincoln's decision in isolation rather than in the larger context of his character and his formation as a leader. The more we understand Lincoln's life prior to his election to the presidency, the more intelligible his behavior in the Fort Sumter crisis becomes.

Throughout his adult life, Lincoln had cultivated mindsets, engaged in activities, and developed traits of character that made it seem natural for him to do what he did in the Fort Sumter crisis and throughout his presidency. Indeed, viewed in this context, Lincoln appears less superhuman or even lucky and more like the kind of person of character whom aspiring leaders can and should emulate.

For example, Lincoln had a mindset of preserving the bonds of relationships whenever possible. He described the calling of a lawyer as being a "peacemaker," and he counseled people ready to "go to law" over the least aggravation: "Persuade your neighbors to compromise whenever you can" (cited in Ronald C. White Jr.'s "A. Lincoln: A Biography.") This mindset became even more pronounced in Lincoln's conviction that his calling as president was to "preserve the Union" -- a conviction that was a focus in his first inaugural address and guided his deliberations in the crucible of the Fort Sumter crisis.

Further, this mindset was revealed in activities that Lincoln engaged in throughout his life as a lawyer and as a politician. In particular, Lincoln learned to pay attention to those who thought differently from him. He sustained networks of relationships with people and inquired about their convictions, both through personal conversations and through written correspondence. Lincoln maintained relationships with political rivals as well as opponents throughout his career.

In addition, he subscribed to a wide range of newspapers, including Southern newspapers, as he sought to grapple with diverse views about slavery. Not surprisingly, Lincoln drew on his networks when faced with the Fort Sumter crisis -- and he did so by asking astute questions. He did so within his Cabinet, with advisors around Washington, and with people across the country.

Lincoln's mindset and activities both shaped and were shaped by his exceptional character. Well-known then and now for his courage and truthfulness, Lincoln exhibited two additional traits in the Fort Sumter crisis that had been formed earlier in his life: humility and interpretive charity. Lincoln's humility was not primarily the folksy simplicity for which he is known; rather, it was his willingness to learn from mistakes and put others and even his country above his own interests.

Lincoln's interpretive charity, a trait of seeing others' positions in the best possible light, was cultivated by his habits of learning and listening. As a lawyer, Lincoln developed a strategy of always seeking to understand a case from his opponent's perspective before he articulated his own; he then developed that as a rhetorical strategy in his public speaking.

He became known as a person who consistently reached out generously to others when the country needed such generosity -- or, as he eventually put it in his famous second inaugural address, "with malice toward none; with charity toward all."

Lincoln's story illumines how and why the intersections of mindsets, activities and traits are essential to the exercise of leadership in the crucible. We may not face as difficult or costly a decision as did Lincoln, but we can surely hope, pray and live so that our habits will serve us as well over time as did his.