

Article

Charismatic Reactions to Individuals and Ideas: Looks, Language and Lincoln

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Abstract: This paper explores the application of Freud’s theories of leadership and group psychology to the case of Abraham Lincoln. It argues that followers’ needs for charismatic leaders propel them to construct heroic and charismatic cognitive representations of leaders who give the impression of power and who represent the ideal qualities of the group. Both leaders and their ideas can create an emotional connection with followers. During his lifetime, Americans developed charismatic and heroic interpretations of Abraham Lincoln’s appearance. They also responded positively to Lincoln’s use of biblical rhythms and phrases in his speeches and writings.

Keywords: charisma; Lincoln; Freud; biblical

In the 2012 film *Hyde Park on Hudson*, Laura Linney portrays Franklin D. Roosevelt’s (FDR) distant cousin and confidant Daisy Suckley [1]. The film, based in part on Suckley’s recently discovered diaries, has her suggesting that the press, the public and FDR himself all worked, for their own reasons, to maintain the heroic, charismatic image of Roosevelt that seemed so important to the nation’s psyche in mid-1939. For example, photographers generally cooperated in not taking pictures of Roosevelt being transferred bodily from his wheelchair to his car, or from his car into buildings. People knew he had polio, but all parties preferred pictures of FDR that showed him looking confident and powerful. Human beings have a need for heroes and strong, charismatic leadership. They construct cognitive representations of individual leaders that allow them to develop and maintain heroic images [2]. Like FDR, leaders often are active participants in what we might call leadership theatre, designed to give follower audiences what they wish for. John Keegan (1986) puts it well. “The theatrical impulse will be strong in the successful politician... and will be both expected and

reinforced by the audiences to which they perform.... The leader of men... can show himself to his followers only through a mask, a mask that he must make for himself, but a mask made in such form as will mark him to men of his time and place as they leader they want and need” ([3], p. 11).

This paper considers the construction and also the experience of charisma in the specific case of Abraham Lincoln. We first develop three points. One, people have a need for charismatic leaders, and do considerable cognitive work to manufacture charismatic perceptions of their leaders. Second, charisma is something that is felt as well as perceived. There is an emotional connection between leaders perceived as charismatic and the followers who so perceive them. Third, part of the reaction to charismatic leaders is attachment to their ideas and the language which expresses them, as well as to them as persons. After considering these points, we address the ways in which Abraham Lincoln’s persona, his ideas, commitments and language produced charismatic reactions. We emphasize the power of biblical language in Lincoln’s speeches and writings.

Many of the ideas outlined above were discussed in Sigmund Freud’s 1921 essay on “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,” published shortly before Max Weber introduced the term “charisma” into the social science vocabulary [4,5]. Freud emphasized the ways ideas and the persons who hold them combine to give leaders “prestige” and went further to suggest that perhaps ideas themselves can lead and have prestige. Freud’s prestige is, of course, in many ways Weber’s charisma. While it does not involve the attribution of religious aura to a leader, it is essentially the same concept.

Following the writings of Gustave LeBon, Freud proposed that people thirst for strong leadership but that for an individual to be perceived as such a leader, he (Freud assumed that leaders were male) must have the qualities followers need and expect [6]. The group’s “thirst for obedience” carries “it half-way to meet the leader, yet he too must fit in with it in his personal qualities.” Anticipating Hogg’s notion of the centrality of leader prototypicality, Freud wrote that the leader must “possess the typical qualities of the individuals concerned in a particularly clearly marked and pure form.” He must also “give an impression of greater force and of more freedom of libido” ([7], pp. 184–200). Further, in order to compel the attention and obedience of potential followers, the leader must “himself be held in fascination by a strong faith (in an idea) in order to awaken the group’s faith; he must possess a strong and imposing will.” Freud summarizes LeBon’s thinking that “leaders make themselves felt by means of the ideas in which they themselves are fanatical believers.” They acquire “a mysterious and irresistible power” which acts as “sort of domination exercised over us.” This domination can be exerted “by an individual, a work or an idea” ([4], pp. 81, 129).

Two points are relevant to our eventual consideration of Lincoln. First, the force of the person and the force of her or his ideas combine in some organic way to generate power. Second, the leader’s force is experienced deeply, as some kind of “magnetic magic.” The experience includes a strong attachment to the leader. Using the language of charismatic leadership, there are two relevant elements [8]. First, the leader is seen to have charisma and second, his charisma is experienced emotionally by followers. Thus, we can speak of charismatic reactions or experiences as well as the charismatic individual. It might be useful to think of charisma as something that happens, something that resides in the followers perhaps more than the leaders.

Freud argues further that leaders have their charismatic effects through illusions, and those illusions operate through “the truly magical power of words.” The leader “who wishes to produce an effect

upon” followers “needs no logical adjustment in his arguments; he must paint in the most forcible colors, he must exaggerate, and he must repeat the same thing again and again” ([4], pp. 78, 80).

How can we use these ideas to consider whether Abraham Lincoln had charisma in the sense that he himself or his work and words had a “magnetic magic” and “prestige” that both dominated then and dominate now? First, what about Lincoln as an individual, in his own time? Lincoln was as canny a politician as FDR, and wanted, at least, to be seen. Hopefully, reaction to the view would be positive. In his trilogy of Civil War narrative histories, Shelby Foote argues that Lincoln made himself unusually available to the public [9]. As more and more people saw him, or heard from others who had, they liked what they saw or heard. Foote explains “...he received all comers, and for the most part received them with a sympathy which, by their own admission, equaled or exceeded their deserving. He shook their hands at frequent public receptions in the White House....; he attended the theater, a form of relaxation which kept him still within their view; he drove or rode, almost daily, through the spokelike streets of the hive-dense city, returning the looks and salutes of men and women and children along the way. Thousands touched him, heard him, saw him at close range, and scarcely one in all those thousands ever forgot the sight of that tall figure, made still taller by the stovepipe hat, and the homely drape of the shawl across the shoulders. Never forgotten, because it was unforgettable, the impression remained, incredible and enduring, imperishable in its singularity—and finally, dear” ([9], p. 802). Similarly, in Richmond, on April 4, 1865, a formerly enslaved African American woman declared “I know that I am free. I have seen father Abraham and felt him” ([10], p. 261). In short, Lincoln’s odd appearance and gracious manner became enduringly compelling. That was as much as Lincoln could wish for.

Many people got a closer look through his widely distributed (often by Lincoln) photograph. His face became “the most familiar face in American history.” Maybe this was not advantageous. “The Paris correspondent of the *New York Times*” said he looked like a condemned murderer of servant girls, and that “such a face is enough to ruin the best of causes.” However, people’s needs for a charismatic hero led many to convince themselves that his face revealed inspiring heroic qualities. Foote writes “you saw it not so much for what it was, as for what it held. Suffering was in it; so were understanding, kindness, and determination.” A young soldier wrote after a Lincoln visit to the front: “None of us to our dying today can forget that countenance....Concentrated in that one great, strong yet tender face, the agony of the life and death struggle of the hour was revealed as we had never seen it before. With a new understanding, we knew why we were soldiers” ([9], pp. 802–03). Thus Lincoln’s appearance, at a distance and close up, had an inspiring effect, it made charisma happen.

Lincoln worked hardest to make an emotional connection with his words, spoken and written. Then and more now, his impact comes through those words. They may have more impact today when read by a Sam Waterston or enacted by a Daniel Day-Lewis. Or, people reading them may imagine Lincoln writing or speaking them, thereby adding to their emotional and intellectual impact. Still, it is the words themselves that most move people. What is it about them that gives them such power? One element is Lincoln’s use of religious imagery or biblical allusion. Sometimes the use of biblical language is quite direct; sometimes it simply nods to religious themes or content. Biblical language allowed Lincoln to use rhythms and phrases that would have been familiar to large and diverse audiences. The Second Great Awakening would have made such language highly resonant as people pondered Lincoln’s meanings ([11], pp. 56–57).

In his famous house divided speech delivered in Springfield, Illinois upon accepting the Republican Party nomination for the U.S. Senate in 1858, Lincoln memorably argued “A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free” ([12], p. 426). The house metaphor might have had impact by itself, but surely its biblical origins gave it additional power. Lincoln was speaking to an audience which would have varied widely in their education. Of course he himself had very little formal instruction. He attended “blab schools,” he said, “by littles,” not having much more than one full year in total of schooling. But Lincoln had read all and absorbed much of the Bible. His audiences would also likely be familiar with its ideas and cadences, whether they were literate or not. The house divided metaphor derived from language attributed to Jesus in Matthew 3:25: “And if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand.” Similarly, in a speech to the U.S. Senate during the controversy leading to the Compromise of 1850, Sam Houston from Texas quoted Mark 3:24, “A nation divided against itself cannot stand.” By using language from a familiar text with soothing rhythms and inspirational imagery, Lincoln was more likely to move his listeners.

Lincoln’s presidential speeches and writings frequently mention or appeal to God. In doing so, he often implied that God was on his (the Union) side. At the end of his December 1862 message to Congress, a speech some of whose last words are set to music in Aaron Copland’s *Lincoln Portrait*, the President concludes his appeal for Congressional support for emancipation using balanced phrasing, alliteration and appeals to honor and eternity. And ultimately he asserts divine support for this position. “In *giving* freedom to the *slave*, we *assure* freedom to the *free*—honorable like in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last, best hope of earth. Others means may succeed; this could not fail. The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just—a way which, if followed, the world will forever applaud, and God must forever bless” ([13], p. 415).

Another example comes from the final Emancipation Proclamation, signed on January 1, 1863. Lincoln concludes a dry, legalistic document full of “Whereas,” “Now, therefore I...” and “by virtue of the power, and for the purpose aforesaid...” with appeals to important values and divine approval. The document is often criticized for its legalistic, stilted wording, and also for aspects of its substance. However, given the assertion of Constitutional prerogative in the Proclamation, that tone is appropriate. Still, Lincoln was happy to add toward the conclusion “And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God” ([14], p. 425).

Sometimes Lincoln’s use of biblical imagery and appeals to the divine are slightly more subtle. In his first inaugural address, a lengthy discourse on the unconstitutionality and impracticality of secession, Lincoln suggests that passions that “may have strained” and threaten to “break our bonds of affection” may be eased when “the mystic chords of memory” are touched “by the better angels of our nature” ([15], p. 224). In his famous Gettysburg Address, delivered in November, 1863, Lincoln’s uses religious terminology without a direct appeal for God’s assistance. The speech touches on themes of birth and death, nation and people, and dedication and honor. It famously begins poetically: “Four score...” We could interrupt there. The two words in this short phrase rhyme, and use of a word, “score,” more familiar from the Bible than anywhere else. The sentence continues “and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” In the next sentence Lincoln repeats the words

“nation,” “conceived” and “dedicated”: “Testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.” The word “dedicated” appears one more time and the word “dedicate” twice. The noun “devotion” occurs twice. Lincoln also uses the words “consecrate,” “hallow,” and “consecrated”: “But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or subtract.” (Then in a self-deprecating aside, opposing word and deed, with an embedded double alliteration, the President says “The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here...”) [16]. Toward the end, in a more explicit religious phrasing, Lincoln states that included in the “unfinished work” and “great task remaining before us” is to ensure “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom” ([17], p. 536). The speech, then, is laced with religious, quasi-religious and biblical wording. Such wording would strike a familiar chord, create a positive association, and add to the charismatic appeal of the speech. It would help produce a charismatic emotional reaction, or as we have framed it earlier, make charisma happen.

The text of two short speeches adorn the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. The Gettysburg Address is one. The other is the Second Inaugural Address, often regarded as Lincoln’s greatest speech. The first part of the latter refers to the “reasonably satisfactory and encouraging” “progress of our arms” and discusses the political fractures which brought war, even though “all dreaded it.” Then Lincoln asserts that slavery was the cause of the war and notes that neither side “anticipated that the *cause* of the war might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease.” In the latter portions of the address, Lincoln turns to the Bible and to God, and considers the role of the divine in both starting and potentially ending the war. He discusses prayer, and includes both direct biblical quotations and allusions to biblical passages. His audience would be familiar with both.

Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. “Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!” If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s two hundred fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn by the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether. ([18], pp. 686–87)

In the second sentence above Lincoln refers to both old and new testaments. “Bread from the sweat of other men’s faces” touches base with Genesis 3:19 “in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread,” while “let us judge not that we be not judged” is Matthew 7:1. Directly quoted are Matthew 18:7 (“Woe unto the world because of offences!...”), and Psalms 19:9 (the judgments of the Lord ...). Interestingly a sentence that has biblical resonance is the one that asserts “The Almighty has His own

purposes.” This may call to mind Job Chapter 42, where Job speaks to the Almighty “I know you can do all things, no purpose of yours can be thwarted...surely I spoke of things that I do not understand...” Lincoln’s words seem to reflect his immersion in the Bible but they do not quote directly. Again, to the extent that his audience has been immersed in the same text, Lincoln’s words can connect with them.

Lincoln takes a different attitude toward divine power in this speech than he had earlier. He doesn’t claim as much knowledge of God’s will as before. For example, in his December, 1862 message to Congress Lincoln talks about his way being “plain, peaceful, generous, just...” and says that it is a way that “God must forever bless.” In contrast, in the Second Inaugural, Lincoln, like Job, does not claim to understand God’s purposes. He argues that it is not illogical to think that God gave “both North and South this terrible war” but he doesn’t assert that he knows God’s purposes. God may or may not will “that it continue.” Lincoln’s uncertainty about God’s will and purpose also comes into focus in the first phrases of the climatic last sentence (and paragraph) of the Second Inaugural: “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in ...”

Regardless of the gloss Lincoln gives to his understanding of the Almighty’s purpose, he adorns his views with his own sense that he is doing God’s will, as best he can divine it. His characterization of himself as doing God’s bidding, expressed in language either taken directly from scripture, or using scriptural forms and words, likely went far in creating a charismatic reaction in his audiences. At the time Lincoln’s appearance, voice and demeanor may have added to that reaction. Now, only the words, the photographs and the interpretations of numerous readers and actors shape our response. For many, the response is emotional in a way that is consistent with the way Freud, Weber and others have described the impact of charismatic leaders.

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