

On Pragmatism and Principle: The Lessons of Fort Sumter

By Eric Lipman

In his challenge to the symposium authors, Mitch Pearlstein presents an important question that is wrapped around a real hazard: Does the presidency of Abraham Lincoln reflect the sturdy adherence to principle or the steely statecraft of a pragmatist?

While this question deserves careful study, in the end, the false choice between principle and pragmatism is a trap. We simply cannot apportion presidents or other political figures between these opposing camps. And trying to push Abraham Lincoln onto one or another side of the divide diminishes him and any discovery that we might make about his presidency.

The better and more helpful question to ask is: When did the Great Emancipator stand on principle, and were these pragmatic choices? Phrased in this way, it is clear that pragmatism is not always a pathway different from principle, but could be part of a sequence, from one to the other. Better still, I think that this is how President Lincoln viewed his own dilemmas and choices.

Lincoln's response to the blockade of Fort Sumter lends support to this sequential view. As readers of these pages will recall, the day after Lincoln took the oath of office, he received word that regiments of the Confederate Army had surrounded Fort Sumter and demanded the surrender of the Union soldiers inside. Lincoln's cabinet was bitterly divided on the best method to avoid the outbreak of civil war. Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, for example, favored a strong show of force, urging that an early rescue of the Fort would dissuade a wider war. Arguing against Blair's view, Secretary of State William Seward and General Winfield Scott maintained that war was best avoided by surrendering the fort and showcasing the withdrawal as an act of compromise.

Against such a backdrop, the limits of the original question are evident: Which set of presidential advisors was pursuing principles and which was practicing pragmatism? Couldn't Blair, Seward or Scott fit neatly into either category? And if that were true, a dichotomous divide between "principle" and "pragmatism" does not help us at all to make difficult decisions today. If we trace Lincoln's decision-making during the crisis, it is clear that he took pragmatic steps in pursuit of principles that he had long held.

Lincoln believed that the Constitution was an important, covenantal relationship—a relationship that could not be severed or modified by a minority of the country. Likewise, he believed that once the Constitution was ratified, any later disputes amongst Americans, however bitter, were to be resolved within the processes established by that compact. For his own part, Lincoln strenuously

disagreed with Southern legislators over slavery, but he, too, was bound. He would not provoke the Southern states to leave the Union or to make war. Lincoln held these views throughout his adult life and reaffirmed them at his inaugural. After completing the oath of office, the new President remarked,

In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to preserve, protect, and defend it.

Lincoln's response to the blockade of Fort Sumter was in line with these values. The president dispatched a naval convoy to supply the Union forces with food, pressing the Confederate generals to make the choice of whether to attack the fort and to engage a larger war.

As it was with Lincoln, our choices are never really between martyrdom and opportunism; they are less dramatic and more difficult.

But Fort Sumter does provide us a lesson. In our own fretful times, with advisers on all sides counseling very different courses of action, we need to turn to what we have always said and believed. Then, with the resources we have, we can take pragmatic steps toward these first principles. This is how Lincoln soldiered on through years of difficulty and how he became great.

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The complete set of symposium writings, Learning from Lincoln - Principle and Pragmatism: Getting the Balance Right, is accessible here:

http://www.americanexperiment.org/uploaded/files/2008_forum_publications/principle_and_pragmatism_2008.pdf