

# Flip-Flopping, Presidential Politics, and Abraham Lincoln

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The American public can count on a few things during the presidential election season. First, candidates will take a moral high ground and forswear mudslinging. Before long however, they will proceed to engage in nasty accusations against their opponents. Subsequently, news pundits will wring their hands and claim (erroneously) that this is the most mean-spirited election ever.<sup>1</sup> Among the many accusations candidates hurl at one another is the particularly damning charge of “flip-flopper.” While some accusations of flip-flopping may be deserved—and our system of primary elections undoubtedly encourages candidates’ prevarications—often accusations of flip-flopping tarnish candidates for having nuanced views on complicated issues or for changing their minds over time.

A vibrant democracy ought to welcome carefully thought out views that, when intentionally simplified or distorted by opponents, make a candidate look like a flip-flopper. The skill of understanding complex decisions in their historical contexts can help stir a hunger for greater political discourse. Using the example of Abraham Lincoln’s views on slavery, history educators can enlighten students about the complexity of national political decisions.

## Defining Flip-Flopping

The term “flip-flopper” is a depreciative term referring to “a person, esp[ecially] a politician, who (habitually) changes his or her opinion or position.” It can be traced at least as far back as 1894, when the *Chicago Daily Tribune* described an individual as “that incomparable political flip-flopper [who] was rewarded for his last flop with a fat diplomatic position.” Nearly a century later, the *Economist* opined that candidate Jimmy Carter was a flip-

flopper (and, for good measure, that Ronald Reagan was a “clip-clopper,” whatever that means).<sup>2</sup> The accusation really gained traction in 2004 when President George W. Bush accused Senator John Kerry of being a flip-flopper.<sup>3</sup> Kerry attempted the strategy in reverse, prompting CBS News to catalogue the top 10 flip-flops of both candidates for voters’ consideration.<sup>4</sup> In 2008, Senators John McCain and Barack Obama both accused each other of flip-flopping. Since attacking an opponent for inconsistency has become *de rigueur*, it is no surprise that Obama and Mitt Romney have also labeled each other flip-floppers.

## Abraham Lincoln, Flip-Flopper?

An investigation of Abraham Lincoln’s views on slavery can illustrate not only how students often develop simplistic thinking about political decision-making—but also how students might be led to develop deeper thinking. Had the term “flip-flopper” existed at that time,

many would probably have applied it to Lincoln regarding his views on slavery. While slaveholders characterized Lincoln as a radical, abolitionists knew he was moderate. Since many viewed slavery in stark terms, Lincoln’s moderate views could only seem like inconsistency—particularly since he did not elaborate his entire position on the issue at each occasion. Indeed, Republican Party leaders chose Lincoln as their presidential candidate in 1860 because he was “not so mixed up in the conflicts as to lose the support of the more moderate men.”<sup>5</sup> This very nuance in his views and corresponding policies helps explain why he has consistently ranked at the top of scholars’ presidential polls.<sup>6</sup>

From an early age, Americans learn a simplified version of Lincoln’s policies regarding slavery.<sup>7</sup> In an effort to celebrate Lincoln in the K-12 classroom, state standards documents often set up a caricature that becomes hard to shake. For example, the California standards begin honoring Lincoln in kindergarten. In second grade, he is included as one of the “heroes from long ago...[who] made a difference in others’ lives” and the following year, as “an American hero who took risks to secure our freedoms.” By eighth grade, when students are asked to more objectively “discuss Abraham Lincoln’s presidency and his significant writings and speeches and their relationship to the Declaration of Independence,”

most already have an ingrained conception of Lincoln as someone who must have always stood courageously and unequivocally for freedom and equality.<sup>8</sup>

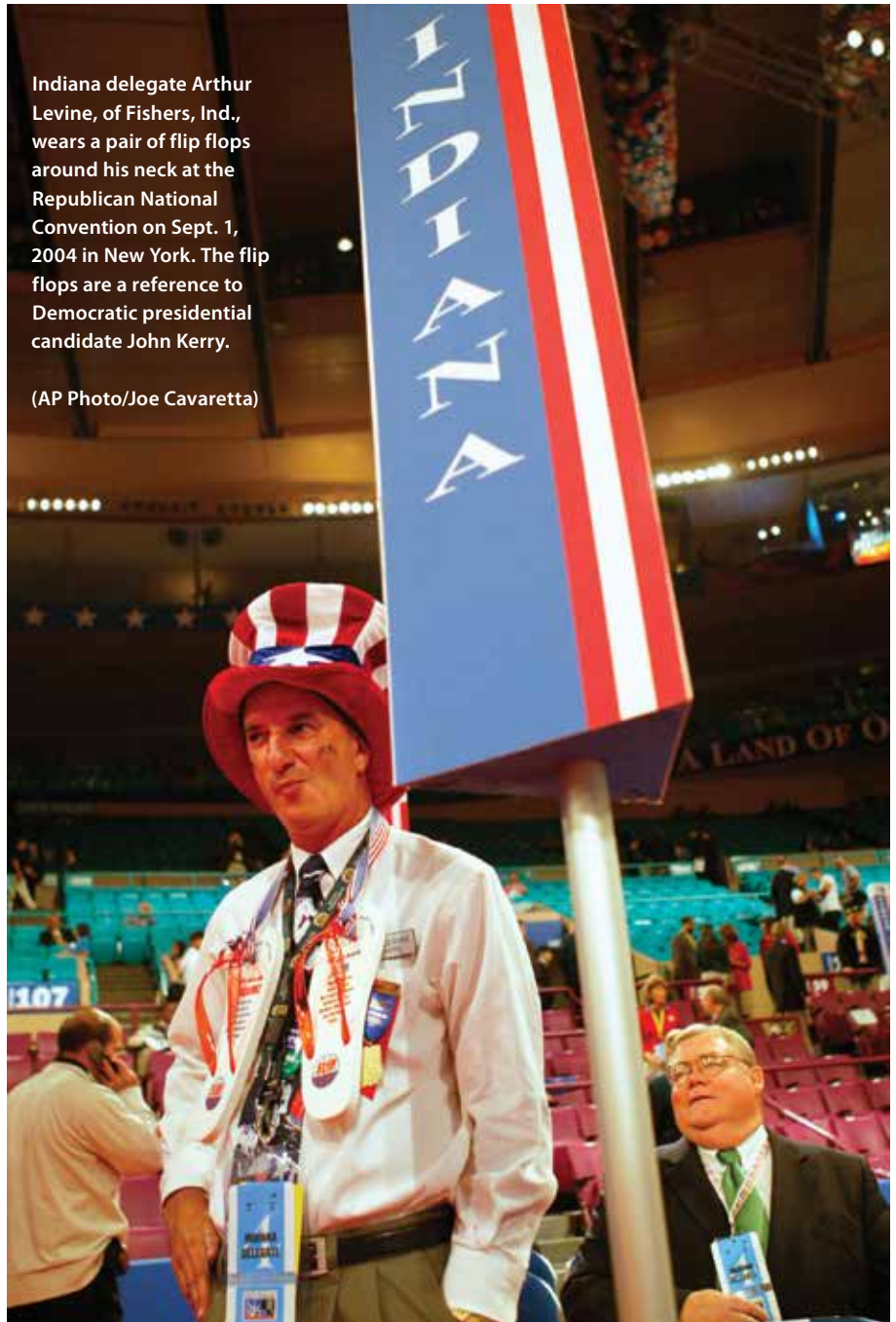
My own experience teaching a post-baccalaureate capstone course for history-social science credential students, anecdotally confirms this impression. In an exercise reviewing content they had learned in their subject matter programs, several students wrote about how the South seceded because Lincoln had vowed to end slavery when he became president. One student wrote, “The North was moved heavily by abolitionists, people who opposed slavery. Lincoln, as well, opposed slavery and wanted to abolish it, and wanted to save the Union states from the South.” A second argued, “Lincoln eventually set the Southern states off into secession” because he was “attempting to abolish slavery and enforcing new laws upon them.” A third explained that Lincoln’s “platform of anti-slavery was hostile to Southern interests.” These responses illustrate a common perception of Lincoln’s views that students learn early in school and continue to maintain, even after receiving a degree in history, as many of these students had.

But simply exposing students to greater complexity regarding Lincoln’s views is not enough. Since many people view events and leaders as rigid dichotomies, shattering students’ myths about Lincoln as a hero may only lead them to conclude that he was a hypocrite, instead. I learned this, to my chagrin, the first time I presented U.S. history students with documents history education expert Sam Wineburg had used in a research project designed to capture the complexity of Lincoln’s views on slavery.<sup>9</sup> One of the documents in Wineburg’s set comes from a speech during the Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858. In it, Lincoln states

I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and black races. There is a physical difference between the two, which in my judgment will

Indiana delegate Arthur Levine, of Fishers, Ind., wears a pair of flip flops around his neck at the Republican National Convention on Sept. 1, 2004 in New York. The flip flops are a reference to Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry.

(AP Photo/Joe Cavaretta)



probably forever forbid their living together upon the footing of perfect equality, and inasmuch as it becomes a necessity that there must be a difference, I, as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong, having the superior position.<sup>10</sup>

My students often found this statement difficult to assimilate with the hero they had learned about earlier in school. At

the end of the activity, they frequently concluded that Lincoln was a white supremacist. Though I wanted students to emerge with a more complex view of Lincoln, most simply embraced the opposite image from what they previously believed. I might have avoided that outcome if I had better assisted students in developing deep contextual knowledge that enables more nuanced reading.<sup>11</sup>

## Abraham Lincoln and the Complex Problem of Slavery

So what *were* Lincoln's complex views on slavery and what kind of contextual knowledge would help make sense of them? Lincoln morally opposed the institution of slavery, stating that slavery was "an unqualified evil to the negro, the white man, and the state" which "deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world [and] enables enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites."<sup>12</sup> At the same time, he seems to have stopped short of full political and social equality, at least early in the war.<sup>13</sup> Abhorrence of slavery and a belief in hierarchy often coexisted in the antebellum era. Indeed, abolitionism perhaps blossomed more easily among politically conservative, paternalistic Whigs, forerunners of Republicans. While nearly all whites embraced "belief in white superiority, of one kind or another" before the Civil War, as Daniel Walker Howe explains, "the deferential concept of society that Whigs generally shared can plausibly explain" Whig support for civil rights for free blacks, while "Democrats' egalitarianism seemed to force them to deny the very humanity of nonwhites lest they have to confront them as equals."<sup>14</sup>

As a Republican, Lincoln emerged from a "free soil" tradition, whose disgust with slavery often stemmed more from a belief that slavery restricted and degraded whites, than it did from any sense of equality between the races.<sup>15</sup> But even as a moderate Republican who stopped short of embracing full equality, his claim that blacks were "entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence" was a bold statement in southern Illinois at a time when even a Northerner could claim that "Our Heavenly Father has made us to rule and the Negroes to serve."<sup>16</sup>

Like most Republicans, Lincoln opposed the expansion of slavery into new territories. As a Whig member of

Congress, he repeatedly supported the doomed Wilmot Proviso, which would have outlawed slavery in any territory acquired in the Mexican-American War. But he saw a federal prohibition against the expansion of slavery as distinct from the abolition of slavery where it already existed. Lincoln, a lawyer whose "well-chosen vocation...proved temperamentally congenial,"<sup>17</sup> understood the distinction in clear legal terms: the Constitution accepted the right of property in slavery, so he did not possess the authority to outlaw slavery where it already existed. He made this distinction repeatedly, including in his first inaugural address:

Apprehension seems to exist among the people of the Southern States, that by the accession of a Republican Administration, their property, and their peace, and personal security, are to be endangered. There has never been any reasonable cause for such apprehension. Indeed, the most ample evidence to the contrary has all the while existed, and been open to their inspection. It is found in nearly all the published speeches of him who now addresses you. I do but quote from one of those speeches when I declare that "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so." Those who nominated and elected me did so with full knowledge that I had made this, and many similar declarations, and had never recanted them.<sup>18</sup>

This conciliatory address can be understood in part through the precariousness of his presidential authority. Winning substantially less than half of the popular vote and, after secession, controlling a region that included many hostile Democrats, Lincoln moved cautiously. The Emancipation Proclamation is

sometimes described dismissively as freeing slaves where Lincoln had no authority and leaving people enslaved where he did have authority, i.e., in the border states. But his decision not to alienate the border states was based on a clear grasp of their strategic importance to military victory—without which no slaves would have been freed.<sup>19</sup> What is less known, however, was that Lincoln quietly began negotiations for a gradual, voluntary, compensated end to slavery in the border states. He also signed a measure ending slavery in the federal District of Columbia, though he agonized over the measure's constitutionality.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, context helps explain his change in tone from the first Inaugural Address, where he vowed to leave slavery alone in Southern states, and his second, where he reflected that the Civil War was divine punishment for the sin of slavery. In 1861, his primary goal was to prevent a rupture between the regions, and he was willing to make continued slavery the price of reconciliation. Four years later, the carnage of the war caused him to search for a deeper meaning. The drafting of a constitutional measure to end slavery enabled him to reconcile his moral revulsion against slavery with his legal concerns about the property rights of slaveholders.

## Broader Implications

While these comments are necessarily brief, they aim to suggest the ways that historical context makes sense of Lincoln's complex—though not contradictory or so called flip-flopping—views on slavery. While this skill cannot be easily developed in students, as my own U.S. history example illustrates, it is vital to the entire process of historical investigation. Only in attempting to understand people from the past in their own terms can we really make sense of history. As Peter Lee and Rosalyn Ashby explain, "Empathy, as historical understanding, demands hard thinking on the basis of evidence.... It

means entertaining complex ideas and seeing how they shape the views of historical circumstances and goals, even when such ideas and goals may be very different from (and perhaps opposed to) our own.”<sup>21</sup>

Moving beyond Lincoln’s views on slavery to a broader consideration of the past, teachers could work with students on the following three ideas throughout the school year to deepen their appreciation of historical empathy:

**1. Context:** We should teach students that all people are products of their time. Even the most sympathetic scholar of Lincoln probably recognizes that, by twenty-first-century standards, the president’s views of African Americans were not fully egalitarian. Given how few whites at the time embraced full equality with African Americans, this should not be surprising. Rather than celebrating Lincoln as a flawless hero or condemning him as a hypocrite, students might evaluate him as a relatively enlightened mid-nineteenth century leader.

**2. Close reading:** We should emphasize the close reading of at least portions of important texts. Careful attention to Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address, for example, would help to dispel many of the most simplistic stereotypes of Lincoln’s views. If teachers routinely paired this close reading of documents with a deep attention to context, students might wrestle with questions of what a document meant to those who were alive at the time. In this way, history teachers will provide significant support in the development of the literacy skills called for in the new Common Core Standards.

**3. Healthy skepticism:** We should teach students a suspicion of simple explanations. We can help them appreciate the complexity of the legislative process. Bills typically represent

a bundle of sometimes contradictory provisions. In these circumstances, a vote in either direction can create the appearance of flip-flopping. We should help students to be suspicious of sound bites that make a political figure look awful, encouraging them always to wonder about the larger context—what was said beyond the sound bite and where and why it was said.

We can teach students that political integrity is a valued quality, and that we ought to admire people who take principled stands—sometimes unwavering ones. But we can also show them, through historical example, that what looks like inconsistency might also, after a closer look, deserve respect. This could go a long way toward developing humility, which would help us better view each other, in the words of Lincoln, with “malice toward none, with charity for all.”

#### Notes

1. It would be hard to top the accusations hurled at Thomas Jefferson over 200 years ago: “a hopeless visionary, a weakling, an intriguer intoxicated with French philosophy ... charged with infidelity to the Constitution ... a spendthrift and libertine,” as cited in David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 543. According to McCullough, “It was said Jefferson had swindled clients as a young lawyer. ... But most amplified were charges of atheism.”
2. The definition and quotes from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* and the *Economist* come from the *Oxford English Dictionary* on “flip-flopper.”
3. David Paul Kuhn, “Bush’s Top Ten Flip-Flops,” *CBSNews.com* (February 11, 2009), [www.cbsnews.com/2100-250\\_162-646142.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-250_162-646142.html).
4. *Ibid.*, “Kerry’s Top Ten Flip-Flops,” *CBSNews.com*, (February 11, 2009), [www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/09/29/politics/main646435.shtml](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/09/29/politics/main646435.shtml).
5. Henry Wilson to Henry Charles Carey, April 16, 1860, quoted in Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 214.
6. See, for example, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “Rating the Presidents: Washington to Clinton,” *Political Science Quarterly* 11 (1997), 179-90, where Lincoln ranks first among presidents in a poll conducted among more than 30 prominent scholars.
7. See Sam Wineburg, “Making Historical Sense” in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History*, eds. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg (New York University Press, 2000), 322.
8. California State Board of Education, *History-Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve*

(Sacramento: California Department of Education, 1998). Quotes are from pp. 4, 8, and 37, respectively. [www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/histsocscistnd.pdf](http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/histsocscistnd.pdf).

9. Sam Wineburg, “Reading Abraham Lincoln” in *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 89-112.
10. From Lincoln’s reply to Stephen A. Douglas at Ottawa, Illinois, August 21, 1858, in Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings*, vols. 1-2, quoted in Wineburg, *Historical Thinking*, 97.
11. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking*, 21. Later, Wineburg points out that skilled readers of this document often recognize the nuance of Lincoln’s language and suggests that Lincoln might not have been conceding as much as it seems at first blush (100).
12. James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 55.
13. While Wineburg, above, offers the possibility that Lincoln opened the door to full equality, Matthew Pinsker, *Lincoln’s Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers’ Home* (New York: Oxford University Press, 27), argues that in 1862, well into the war, Lincoln was not yet a proponent of full equality.
14. Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 38.
15. McPherson, *Ibid.*
16. Wineburg, 107.
17. Howe, 269.
18. From the Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, edited by Roy P. Basler as posted on *Abraham Lincoln Online*, <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/1inaug.htm>.
19. Pinsker, 26.
20. See Allan Nevins, *War for the Union, 1862-1863: War Becomes Revolution* (New York: Konecky & Konecky, 1960), 91-94.
21. Peter Lee and Rosalyn Ashby, “Empathy, Perspective Taking, and Rational Understanding” in *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies*, eds. O.L. Davis Jr., Elizabeth Anne Yeager, and Stuart J. Foster (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 25.

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