LEADERSHIP

IN TURBULENT TIMES

DORIS KEARNS
GOODWIN

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

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For my husband, Richard Goodwin, and our best man and closest friend, Michael Rothschild

FOREWORD

Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson—the lives and times of these four men have occupied me for half a century. I have awakened with them in the morning and thought about them when I went to bed at night. By immersing myself in manuscript collections, personal diaries, letters, oral histories, memoirs, newspaper archives, and periodicals, I searched for illuminating details that, taken together, would provide an intimate understanding of these men, their families, their friends, their colleagues, and the worlds in which they lived.

After writing four extensive books devoted to these men, I thought I knew them well before I embarked on this present study of leadership nearly five years ago. But as I observed them through the exclusive lens of leadership, I felt as if I were meeting them anew. There was much to learn as the elusive theme of leadership assumed center stage. As I turned to works of philosophy, literature, business, political science, and comparative studies, in addition to history and biography, I found myself engaged in an unexpectedly personal and emotional kind of storytelling. I returned to fundamental questions I had not asked so openly since my days of college and graduate school.

Are leaders born or made? Where does ambition come from? How does adversity affect the growth of leadership? Do the times make the leader or does the leader shape the times? How can a leader infuse a sense of purpose and meaning into people's lives? What is the difference between power, title, and leadership? Is leadership possible without a purpose larger than personal ambition?

How fondly I remember long and heated sessions over just such questions with my graduate school friends, arguing through the night with a fervor surpassing our level of knowledge. Yet, at bottom, something in these discussions was exactly on the mark, for they engaged us deeply, tapped our idealism, and challenged us to figure out how we wanted to live our own lives. I realize now that debates such as these put me on the path to find my own calling as a historian.

* * *

In Part One we see the four men when they first entered public life. In their twenties, when they set forth to forge their public identities, they appear very different from the sober, iconic countenances that have since saturated our culture, currency, and memorial sculpture. Their paths were anything but certain. Their stories abound in confusion, hope, failure, and fear. We follow mistakes made along the way, from inexperience, cockiness, lack of caution, outright misjudgments, and selfishness, and see the efforts made to acknowledge, conceal, or overcome these mistakes. Their struggles are not so different from our own.

No single path carried them to the pinnacle of political leadership. Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt were born to extraordinary privilege and wealth. Abraham Lincoln endured relentless poverty. Lyndon Johnson experienced sporadic hard times. They differed widely in temperament, appearance, and physical ability. They were endowed with a divergent range of qualities often ascribed to leadership—intelligence, energy, empathy, verbal and written gifts, and skills in dealing with people. They were united, however, by a fierce ambition, an inordinate drive to succeed. With perseverance and hard work, they all essentially made themselves leaders by enhancing and developing the qualities they were given.

All four men were recognized as leaders long before they reached the presidency. And like rocks in a polishing cylinder, all four were brought to shine by tumbling contact with a wide variety of people. They had found their vocation in politics. "I have often thought," American philosopher William James wrote of the mysterious formation of identity, "that the best way to define a man's character would be to seek out the particular mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely alive and active. At such moments, there is a voice inside which speaks and says, 'This is the real me!' "

Dramatic reversals that shattered the private and public lives of all four men are the subject of Part Two. They were at different life stages when forced to deal with events that ruptured their sense of self and threatened to curtail their prospects. The nature of the adversity that assailed each was unique: Abraham Lincoln suffered a blow to his public reputation and his private sense of honor that led to a near-suicidal depression; Theodore Roosevelt lost his young wife and his mother on the same day; Franklin Roosevelt was struck by polio and left permanently paralyzed from the waist down; Lyndon Johnson lost an election to the United States Senate. To draw an analogy between an election loss and the tragic reversals experienced by the others would appear, on the surface, ludicrous; but Lyndon Johnson construed rejection by the people as a judgment upon, and a repudiation of, his deepest self. For a long while, the election loss negatively changed the direction of his career until a massive heart attack and the proximity of death repurposed his life.

Scholars who have studied the development of leaders have situated resilience, the ability to sustain ambition in the face of frustration, at the heart of potential leadership growth. More important than what happened to them was how they responded to these reversals, how they managed in various ways to put themselves back together, how these watershed experiences at first impeded, then deepened, and finally and decisively molded their leadership.

Part Three will bring the four men to the White House. There, at their formidable best, when guided by a sense of moral purpose, they were able to channel their ambitions and summon their talents to enlarge the opportunities and lives of others. Specific stories of how they led will explore the riddle: Do leaders shape the times or do the times summon their leaders?

“If there is not the war,” Theodore Roosevelt mused, “you don’t get the great general; if there is not a great occasion, you don’t get the great statesman; if Lincoln had lived in times of peace, no one would have known his name now.” Roosevelt’s debatable notions voice opinions heard from the beginning of our country. “It is not in the still calm of life, or the repose of a pacific station, that great characters are formed,” Abigail Adams wrote to her son John Quincy Adams in the midst of the American Revolution, suggesting that “the habits of a vigorous mind are formed in contending with difficulties. Great necessities call out great virtues.”

The four leaders presented in this book confronted "great necessities." All took office at moments of uncertainty and dislocation in extremis. Abraham Lincoln entered the presidency at the gravest moment of dissolution in American history. Franklin Roosevelt encountered a decisive crisis of confidence in our country's economic survival and the viability of democracy itself. Though neither Theodore Roosevelt nor Lyndon Johnson faced a national crisis on the scale of secession or devastating economic depression, they both assumed office as a result of an assassination, a violent rupture of the democratic mode of succession at a time when seismic tremors had begun to rattle the social order.

While the nature of the era a leader chances to occupy profoundly influences the nature of the leadership opportunity, the leader must be ready when that opportunity presents itself. One leader's skills, strengths, and style may be suited for the times; those of another, less so. President James Buchanan was temperamentally unfit to respond to the intensifying crisis over slavery that would confront Abraham Lincoln. President William McKinley encountered the same tumultuous era as Theodore Roosevelt but failed to grasp the hidden dangers in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. President Herbert Hoover's fixed mind-set could not handle the deepening depression with the creativity of Franklin Roosevelt's freewheeling experimentation. President John Kennedy lacked the unrivaled legislative skill and focus that Lyndon Johnson brought to the central issue of the time—civil rights.

"Rarely was man so fitted to the event," observed philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson when eulogizing Abraham Lincoln at the Church of the First Parish in Concord, Massachusetts. One would be hard put to invent a leader who could have better guided us through the darkest days of the Civil War, a leader both merciful and merciless, confident and humble, patient and persistent—able to mediate among factions, sustain our spirits, and translate the meaning of the struggle into words of matchless force, clarity, and beauty. Yet, a similar statement might be made of Theodore Roosevelt, whose spirited combativeness was perfectly fitted to the task of mobilizing the country and the press to deal with voracious monopolies and the inequities of the Industrial Age. We could say the same of Franklin Roosevelt, whose confidence and infectious optimism restored the hope and earned the trust of the American people through both the Great Depression and World War II—or of Lyndon Johnson, whose southern roots and legislative wizardry ideally fitted him for the great civil rights struggle that altered the face of the country.

Four case studies will reveal these vastly different men in action during defining events of their times and presidencies. These four extended examples show how their leadership fit the historical moment as a key fits a lock. No key is exactly the same; each has a different line of ridges and notches along its blade. While there is neither a master key to leadership nor a common lock of historical circumstance, we can detect a certain family resemblance of leadership traits as we trace the alignment of leadership capacity within its historical context.

* * *

There is little question that the first three leaders studied here—Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Franklin Roosevelt—rank among our greatest presidents. Despite flawed decisions and mistaken judgments, all have been accorded a stable and honored place in communal memory.

The case of Lyndon Johnson is more problematic. I have wrestled with his place in history since the days when I worked with him in the White House as a twenty-four-year-old White House Fellow. That White House fellowship nearly came to an unceremonious end before it had even gotten started. Like many young people in my generation, I had been active in the anti–Vietnam War movement. Several months before my selection, a fellow graduate student and I had written an article, which we sent to *The New Republic*, calling for a third party candidate to challenge Lyndon Johnson in 1968. *The New Republic* published the article days after my selection as a Fellow had been announced. I was certain I would be dismissed from the program, but surprisingly, President Johnson said: “Oh bring her down here for a year and if I can’t win her over no one can!” I stayed on after the fellowship and when his presidency was over accompanied him to the Texas ranch to assist him with his memoirs.

While Johnson’s conduct during the war will continue to tarnish his legacy, the passing years have made clear that his leadership in civil rights and his domestic vision in the Great Society will stand the test of time.

* * *

Lyndon Johnson entered Congress as a protégé of Franklin Roosevelt. From his desk in the Oval Office, Johnson gazed directly across to a painting of his "political daddy" whose domestic agenda in the New Deal he sought to surpass with his own Great Society. As a young man, Franklin Roosevelt had daydreamed of his own political ascent molded step by step upon the career of Theodore Roosevelt. From childhood, Theodore Roosevelt's great hero was Abraham Lincoln, whose patient resolve and freedom from vindictiveness blazed a trail that Theodore Roosevelt sought to follow all his life. And for Abraham Lincoln, the closest he found to an ideal leader was George Washington, whom he invoked when he bade farewell to his home in 1861, drawing strength from the first president as he left Illinois to assume a task "greater than that which rested upon Washington." If George Washington was the father of his country, then by affiliation and affinity, Abraham Lincoln was his prodigious son. These four men form a family tree, a lineage of leadership that spans the entirety of our country's history.

It is my hope that these stories of leadership in times of fracture and fear will prove instructive and reassuring. These men set a standard and a bar for all of us. Just as they learned from one another, so we can learn from them. And from them gain a better perspective on the discord of our times. For leadership does not exist in a void. Leadership is a two-way street. "I have only been an instrument," Lincoln insisted, with both accuracy and modesty, "the antislavery people of the country and the army have done it all." The progressive movement helped pave the way for Theodore Roosevelt's "Square Deal," much as the civil rights movement provided the fuel to ignite the righteous and pragmatic activism that enabled the Great Society. And no one communicated with people and heard their voices more clearly than Franklin Roosevelt. He absorbed their stories, listened carefully, and for a generation held a nonstop conversation with the people.

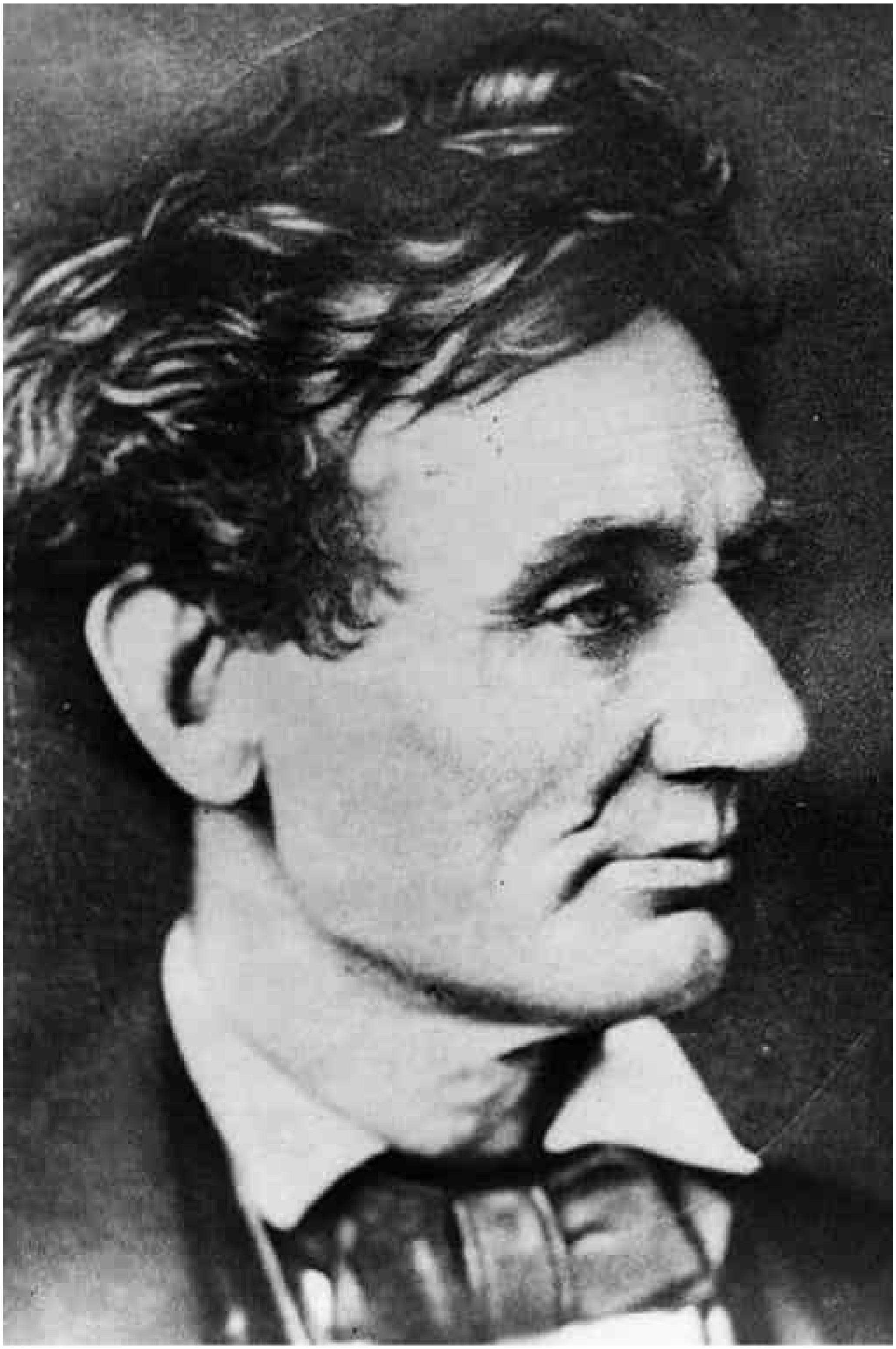
"With public sentiment, nothing can fail," Abraham Lincoln said, "without it nothing can succeed." Such a leader is inseparably linked to the people. Such leadership is a mirror in which the people see their collective reflection.

I

AMBITION AND THE RECOGNITION OF LEADERSHIP

ONE

ABRAHAM



Lincoln was only twenty-three years old on March 9, 1832, when he declared his intention to run for a seat in the Illinois state legislature. The frontier state had not yet developed party machinery to officially nominate candidates. Persons desiring to run simply put forward their own names on a handbill expressing their views on local affairs.

“Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition,” Lincoln began. “I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition is yet to be developed. I am young and unknown to many of you.”

For many ambitious young men in the nineteenth century, politics proved the chosen arena for advancement. While Lincoln’s ambition was as central to his makeup as his backbone, it was, almost from the start, two-fold. It was not simply for himself; it was for the people he hoped to lead. He wanted to distinguish himself in their eyes. The sense of community was central to the master dream of his life—the desire to accomplish deeds that would gain the lasting respect of his fellow men.

He asked for the opportunity to render himself worthy: “I was born and have ever remained in the most humble walks of life. I have no wealthy or popular relations to recommend me. If the good people in their wisdom shall see fit to keep me in the background, I have been too familiar with disappointments to be very much chagrined.”

Where did this ambition come from, his “strong conviction,” as one friend described it, “that he was born for better things than seemed likely or even possible”?

When asked later to shed light on his beginnings, Lincoln claimed his story could be “condensed into a single sentence: The short and simple annals of the poor.” His father, Thomas, had never learned to read, and, according to his son, never did “more in the way of writing than to bunglingly sign his own name.” Trapped in an exitless poverty, Thomas cleared only sufficient land for survival and moved from one dirt farm to another in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois. While traces of the life of Lincoln’s mother, Nancy Hanks, are sketchy, those who knew her agreed “she was superior to her husband in Every way.” She was described as “keen—shrewd—smart,” endowed with a strong memory and quick perception. "All that I am or hope ever to be I get from my mother," Lincoln later said.

When Abraham was nine, Nancy Hanks died from what was known as milk sickness, a disease transmitted by way of cows that had eaten poisonous plants. After her burial, Thomas abandoned his young son and his twelve-year-old daughter, Sarah, for a period of seven months while he returned to Kentucky to find a new wife. They were left on their own in what Lincoln described as "a wild region," a nightmarish place where "the panther's scream filled the night with fear and bears preyed on the swine." When Abraham's new stepmother, Sarah Bush Johnston, returned with Thomas, she found the children living like animals—"wild—ragged & dirty." She was stunned to find that the floorless cabin lacked even a door. Inside, there were few furnishings, no beds, and scant bedding. From the store of goods she had brought with her in the wagon, the industrious Sarah created a "snug and comfortable" home. A floor was laid, door and windows hung, and she provided clothing for the children. How, within the confines of this desolation, did Lincoln develop and sustain a grand, visionary ambition, a belief that he was meant for higher and better things?

The springboard to the development of Lincoln's ambition can be traced to his recognition, even as a young boy, that he was gifted with an exceptionally intelligent, clear, and inquisitive mind. Schoolmates in the ABC school in rural Kentucky where he was taught to read and write at the age of seven recalled that he was able to learn more swiftly and understand more deeply than others. Though he was able to attend school only sporadically, when his father didn't require his labor on their hardscrabble farm, he stood without peer at the top of every class. "He was the learned boy among us unlearned folks," one classmate recalled. "He carried away from his brief schooling," his biographer David Herbert Donald observes, "the self-confidence of a man who has never met his intellectual equal." A dream that he might someday be in a situation to make the most of his talents began to take hold.

In the age-old debate about whether leadership traits are innate or developed, memory—the ease and capacity with which the mind stores information—is generally considered an inborn trait. From his earliest days in school, Lincoln's comrades remarked upon his phenomenal memory, "the best," the most "marvelously retentive," they had ever encountered. His mind seemed "a wonder," a friend told him, "impressions were easily made upon it and never effaced." Lincoln told his friend he was mistaken. What appeared a gift, he argued, was, in his case, a developed talent. "I am slow to learn," he explained, "and slow to forget what I have learned. My mind is like a piece of steel—very hard to scratch anything on it, and almost impossible after you get it there to rub it out." His stepmother, who came to love him as if he were her own son, observed the arduous process by which he engraved things into his memory. "When he came upon a passage that Struck him, he would write it down on boards if he had no paper & keep it there until he did get paper," she recalled, "and then he would rewrite it" and keep it in a scrapbook so that he could preserve it.

While his mind was neither quick nor facile, young Lincoln possessed singular powers of reasoning and comprehension, unflagging curiosity, and a fierce, almost irresistible, compulsion to understand the meaning of what he heard, read, or was taught. "When a mere child," Lincoln later said, "I used to get irritated when anybody talked to me in a way I could not understand. I do not think I ever got angry at anything else in my life." When he "got on a hunt for an idea" he could not sleep until he "caught it," and even then was not able to rest until he had "bounded it north and bounded it south, and bounded it east and bounded it west."

Early on, Abraham revealed a keystone attribute essential to success in any field—the motivation and willpower to develop every talent he possessed to the fullest. "The ambition of the man soared above us," his childhood friend Nathaniel Grigsby recalled. "He read and thoroughly read his books whilst we played." When he first learned how to print the letters of the alphabet, he was so excited that he formed "letters, words and sentences wherever he found suitable material. He scrawled them in charcoal, he scored them in the dust, in the sand, in the snow—anywhere and everywhere that lines could be drawn." He soon became "the best penman in the neighborhood."

Sharing his knowledge with his schoolmates at every turn, he soon became "their guide and leader." A friend recalled the "great pains" he took to explain to her "the movements of the heavenly bodies," patiently telling her that the moon was not really sinking, as she initially thought; it was the earth that was moving, not the moon. "When he appeared in Company," another friend recalled, "the boys would gather & cluster around him to hear him talk." With kindness, playfulness, wit, and wisdom, he would explain "things hard for us to understand by stories—maxims—tales and figures. He would almost always point his lesson or idea by some story that was plain and near as that we might instantly see the force & bearing of what he said." He understood early on that concrete examples and stories provided the best vehicles for teaching.

He had developed his talent for storytelling, in part, from watching his father. Though Thomas Lincoln was unable to read or write, he possessed wit, a talent for mimicry, and an uncanny memory for exceptional stories. Night after night, Thomas would exchange tales with farmers, carpenters, and peddlers as they passed along the old Cumberland Trail. Young Lincoln sat spellbound in the corner. After listening to the adults chatter through the evening, Abraham would spend "no small part of the night walking up and down," attempting to figure out what they were saying. No small part of his motivation was to entertain his friends the next day with a simplified and riotous version of the arcane adult world.

He thrived when holding forth on a tree stump or log captivating the appreciative attention of his young audience, and before long had built a repertoire of stories and great storytelling skills. At the age of ten, a relative recalled, Abraham learned to mimic "the Style & tone" of the itinerant Baptist preachers who appeared irregularly in the region. To the delight of his friends, he could reproduce their rip-roaring sermons almost word for word, complete with gestures of head and hand to emphasize emotion. Then, as he got older, he found additional material for his storytelling by walking fifteen miles to the nearest courthouse, where he soaked up the narratives of criminal trials, contract disputes, and contested wills and then retold the cases in lurid detail.

His stories often had a point—a moral along the lines of one of his favorite books, *Aesop's Fables*—but sometimes they were simply funny tales that he had heard and would retell with animation. When he began to speak, his face, the natural contours of which gave off a sorrowful aspect, would light up with a transforming "winning smile." And when he reached the end of his story, he would laugh with such heartiness that soon everyone was laughing with him.

Not all his humorous gifts were filled with gentle hilarity, and he would learn to muzzle his more caustic and mocking rejoinders. An early case in point was one Josiah Crawford who had lent Lincoln his copy of Parson Weems's *Life of Washington*. During a severe rainstorm, the book was damaged. Crawford demanded that Lincoln repay the value of the book by working two full days pulling corn. Lincoln considered this unfair, but nonetheless set to work until “there was not a corn blade left on a stalk.” Later, however, he wrote a verse lampooning Crawford’s unusually large, ugly nose, reciting “Josiah blowing his bugle” for the entertainment of his friends.

If he was the hub of his young circle’s entertainment, he was also their foremost contrarian, willing to face their disapproval rather than abandon what he considered right. The boys in the neighborhood, one schoolmate recollected, liked to play a game of catching turtles and putting hot coals on their backs to see them wriggle. Abe not only told them “it was wrong,” he wrote a short essay in school against “cruelty to animals.” Nor did Lincoln feel compelled to share in the folkways of the frontier—a harsh culture in which children learned, for survival and for sport, to shoot and kill birds and animals. After killing a wild turkey with his father’s rifle when he was eight years old, he never again “pulled a trigger on any larger game.”

These attitudes were not merely moral postures. The young boy possessed a profound sense of empathy—the ability to put himself in the place of others, to imagine their situations and identify with their feelings. One winter night, a friend remembered, he and Abraham were walking home when they saw something lying in a mud hole. “It was a man, he was dead drunk,” and “nearly frozen.” Abe picked him up and carried him all the way to his cousin’s house, where he built a fire to warm him up. On another occasion, when Lincoln was walking with a group of friends, he passed a pig caught in a stretch of boggy ground. The group continued on for half a mile when Lincoln suddenly stopped. He insisted on turning back to rescue the pig. He couldn’t bear the pain he felt in his own mind when he thought of the pig.

Lincoln’s size and strength bolstered his authority with his peers. From an early age, he was more athletic than most of the boys in the neighborhood, “ready to out-run, out-jump and out-wrestle or out-lift anybody.” As a young man, one friend reported, he “could carry what 3 ordinary men would grunt & sweat at.” Blessed with uncommon strength, he was also favored with robust health. Relatives recalled that he was never sick. Lincoln’s physical dominance proved a double-edged sword, however, for he was expected, from the age of eight to the age of twenty-one, to accompany his father into the fields, wielding an axe, felling trees, digging up stumps, splitting rails, plowing, and planting. His father considered that bones and muscles were “sufficient to make a man” and that time in school was “doubly wasted.” In rural areas, the only schools were