

Our country is what it is thanks to Lincoln — and that's no myth

■ The great man's words and ideas still burn bright

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — Myth has had a bad press in this country. It has come to be used as a synonym for falsehood ("just a myth") rather than as a truth greater than the facts — a story that illumines the nature of our existence, as in the Greek myths or the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden.

There is also such a thing as a national myth, a story about our origins and purposes as a people, as a citizenry, as a republic. One such story begins: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed with their Creator with certain unalienable Rights . . ."

Myth is truth in the making. Myth is a promise to be redeemed.

Historians and pseudo-historians offer various indices by which to judge the health of a civilization. By now generations of Americans have grown old hearing strained comparisons of their society with the last days of the Roman Empire. ("The End is Near!") It's not a game I'm inclined to play, but if there is a sure symptom of a nation's decline, I'd suggest that it is the loss of

PAUL GREENBERG



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myth. That loss seems almost palpable on this, Lincoln's Birthday, which now has been subsumed and almost lost in a vague Presidents' Day.

Abraham Lincoln was shaped by myth, and he in turn would shape ours. Standing in Independence Hall on the way to assume surely the gravest responsibility that ever faced an American president, for the Union itself faced its greatest peril, this tall, ungainly figure, whose measure had not yet been taken, went unerringly back to the mythic source of the Republic.

Those who had assembled to hear him at that uncertain hour must have come for assurance. They heard only about the past, and it was enough.

"I have never had a feeling, politically," Mr. Lincoln told them, "that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence . . ." And he proposed to act on them.

By the time he reached Washington, the Union was

already in a state of dissolution, but he would not cease to appeal to myth: "The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

Soon Abraham Lincoln himself would pass through history into myth. He would become part of the national narrative, indeed central to it. And each generation would seek its own meaning in his.

Contrary to popular assumption, nothing could be less about the past than myth. Myth is really about the future and about what we must become. It is about what another president in another critical time would call our rendezvous with destiny.

"Now he belongs to the ages," his secretary of war said when they closed the slain president's eyes for the last time. But there are those who will not let Abe Lincoln rest. They would rip him from myth and use him for their own purposes.

Lincoln, too, like Lee and Jefferson and Washington, must be deconstructed, his words taken out of context and time, his meaning obliterated. On that much, Lincoln's

detractors of separate but equally fierce persuasions can agree, if on nothing else. (Even now he unites them despite themselves.)

But it isn't easy to kill a myth. Even if one could make history a shambles, and shatter and rearrange it like the shards of a broken mirror so it would reflect only our own preoccupations, there would always be Lincoln's indelible words.

"A house divided against itself cannot stand."

"As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy."

"It is true that you may fool all the people some of the time; you can even fool some of the people all the time; but you can't fool all the people all the time."

From year to year, epoch to epoch, Americans do not just recount Lincoln's words. Then they would become only ornamental, ceremonial, brittle, futile. But we do not just recount them. We recreate them. That is the power of myth.

■ Paul Greenberg is editorial page editor at the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. Write him at Capitol Ave. and Scott, Little Rock AR 72201.