

Abraham Lincoln's Wit and Humor

Remarks of William J. Bowe at a Dinner Celebrating Film Critic Roger Ebert

The Cliff Dwellers

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When Eve Moran asked me if I'd like to make a few observations about Abraham Lincoln's wit and humor from a Cliff Dweller's point of view, I jumped at the chance, because I've always had a close affinity for Lincoln. He was from Illinois. I'm from Illinois. He was a lawyer. I'm a lawyer. He married a girl living in Springfield. I married a girl from Springfield. Mary Todd Lincoln suffered from mental illness. My wife is a nutcase. Lincoln was tall and thin. Well, perhaps I come up short there, so to speak.

When you go looking for Lincoln bon mots, as I did during the recent bicentennial celebration of his birth in 1809, you don't find a passel of knee-slappers. You do find that Lincoln had a gift for the terse truths found in aphorisms.

Here are a few celebrated Lincoln nuggets:

- 'Tis better to be silent and be thought a fool, than to speak and remove all doubt.
- It has been my experience that folks who have no vices have very few virtues.
- Tact is the ability to describe others as they see themselves.
- Whatever you are, be a good one.
- When you have got an elephant by the hind leg, and he is trying to run away, it's best to let him run.
- Most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be.
- No matter how much cats fight, there always seem to be plenty of kittens.
- Things may come to those who wait, but only the things left are by those who hustle.

By the way, here's a characterization by Lincoln that brings to mind our Club's palaverous President, Brian Bernardoni:

He can compress the most words into the smallest ideas better than any man I ever met.

Lincoln delivered a bit of graveyard humor when a senior official in the post office died. A job seeker quickly waylaid President Lincoln as he left the White House. "Mr. Lincoln, may I take his place?" Lincoln answered, "It's all right with me, if it's all right with the undertaker."

We had an echo of this in Illinois' current political corruption scandals. Do you remember the Tribune's John Kass applying funereal monikers to two of our most hapless politicians? Kass early on named our Blago, "Dead Meat Blagojevich."

Also, I bet you all remember when Blago appointed Roland Burris to the Senate. About that time, the AP reported that Burris had gotten a jump-start on the afterlife by building a mausoleum for himself in Oak Woods Cemetery. This cenotaph was inscribed "Trail Blazer," and had a list of Burris's great accomplishments, with space left for more. This prompted Kass to call him "Tombstone Burris." Burris had had a distinguished career before all this. Now some people think that Burris's greatest accomplishment was his retirement from public life. Others think his greatest gift to the people will be when he enters the hereafter and, as a champion of sustainability, puts his tomb to full use. [Not delivered.]

An anecdote from Lincoln's early years, speaks to his creativity and grace under pressure. When Lincoln was captain of the "Bucktail" Rangers in 1832, he was ignorant of drill and tactics. On one occasion his troop, marching in platoon formation, was confronted by a fence. Lincoln had no idea of the proper order. "Company dismissed for two minutes. At the end of that time, fall in on the other side of the fence."

President Lincoln greatly enjoyed telling stories in which he was the object of the joke. He especially liked this one: "When I was nominated at Chicago, I had never before sat for a photograph. One fellow began selling photographs of me all over the country. I happened to be in Springfield when I heard a boy selling them on the streets. 'Here's your likeness of "Abe" Lincoln! He'll look a lot better once he gets his hair combed!'"

Finally, and along the same lines, Lincoln knew he wasn't handsome. This prompted his famous utterance, "If I were two-faced, would I be wearing this one?"