

# Celebrating Abraham Lincoln on Law Day

In 1958, the American Bar Association proposed that May 1 be designated Law Day as a peaceful answer to the traditional May Day military displays in Communist countries, particularly the former Soviet Union. President Eisenhower agreed, and thus the Law Day tradition was born.

In 1961, a congressional resolution pronounced Law Day a way for Americans to celebrate the ideals of equality of justice under law. Law Day is still celebrated and is seen as a way to demonstrate the difference between the rule of law versus the rule of force.

This year, Gov. M. Jodi Rell has declared that Law Day be celebrated on Friday, May 1, and the theme is, "A Legacy of Liberty: Celebrating Lincoln's Bicentennial."

In his bicentennial year, Lincoln is everywhere. Even late-night comedian Conan O'Brien praised him as a humorist. Repeated polls of historians rank Lincoln among the greatest presidents in history, often in first position. Lincoln is portrayed as personifying classical values of honesty and integrity, as well as respect for individual and minority rights, and human freedom in general.

Lincoln made extraordinary efforts to attain knowledge while working on a farm, splitting rails for fences and keeping store at New Salem, Ill. He was a captain in the Black Hawk War, spent eight years in the Illinois Legislature, and as a lawyer rode the circuit of courts for many years. His law partner said of him, "His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest."

Lincoln emerged from humble beginnings and held firmly to the belief in every man's "right to rise." He venerated the Declaration of Independence and it was the basis of his personal and political phi-

## The Civic Beat Charlene LaVoie

losophy. His own writings and speeches reflect this: The Gettysburg Address, First Inaugural and Second Inaugural, among others.

Lincoln first visited Connecticut in 1848. But in March 1860, he toured the state to campaign for candidates. He spoke in Hartford, New Haven, Meriden, Norwich and Bridgeport. In his speeches here, Lincoln addressed the slavery issue: "Whenever this question shall be settled, it must be settled on some philosophical basis. No policy that does not rest upon some philosophical public opinion can be permanently maintained." Lincoln was a man of ideas.

There were not many people who strongly influenced Lincoln's moral and intellectual development and perspectives.

There was no teacher, mentor, church leader, community leader or peer that Lincoln would credit in later years as a strong influence on his intellectual development. Lacking a formal education, Lincoln's personal philosophy was shaped by "an amazingly retentive memory and a passion for reading and learning." It was Lincoln's reading, rather than his relationships, that was most influential in shaping his personal beliefs.

The philosophical basis for Lincoln's beliefs regarding slavery and other issues of the day was due to his exposure to the ideas of the Lockean Enlightenment and classical liberalism. He was a strong supporter of the American Whig version of liberal capitalism.

Lincoln would often use the Declaration of Independence as the philosophical and moral expression of these philosophies. In a Feb. 22, 1861, speech

at Independence Hall in Philadelphia Lincoln said,

"I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence... It was not the mere matter of the separation of the Colonies from the motherland; but that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but, I hope, to the world, for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weight would be lifted from the shoulders of all men. This is a sentiment embodied in the Declaration of Independence."

Lincoln found in the Declaration justification for Whig economic policy. Claiming that all men were created free, Lincoln and the Whigs argued that this freedom required economic advancement, expanded education, territory to grow and the ability of the nation to absorb the growing immigrant population.

It was the Declaration of Independence that Lincoln most relied on in order to oppose any further territorial expansion of slavery. He saw the Declaration as more than a political document. To him it was, foremost, a moral document that set forth valuable criteria in shaping the future of the nation.

Gov. Rell's proclamation urges all citizens, schools, business, legal professionals and the media of Connecticut to use the occasion to preserve and strengthen the rule of law. Lincoln would approve.

There are more books about Abraham Lincoln than about any other American. Three favorites are "With Malice Toward None," by Stephen B. Oates, "Lincoln," by Gore Vidal, and "Team of Rivals," by Doris Kearns Goodwin.

To learn more about the Lincoln Bicentennial, visit [lincolnbicentennial.gov](http://lincolnbicentennial.gov).

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*"I view [education] as the most important subject which we as people can be engaged in."*

— Abraham Lincoln