**Abe Lincoln, the Storyteller 1+2**

\*adapted from “Lincoln Tells a Story” by Louis P. Masur (*New York Times, 1/27/2012)*

On Tuesday, Jan. 28, 1862, George Templeton Strong, a lawyer from New York, and Henry Ward Bellows, a Unitarian minister and president of the United States Sanitary Commission, called on the president to discuss reform of the Army medical bureau. The next day, Strong, who kept a diary, wrote at length about the meeting and included a Lincoln story in dialect so as to capture the president’s diction. The elitist Strong described the backwoods president as a “barbarian”, “yahoo”, and a “gorilla”, but also described Lincoln as a “most sensible, straightforward, honest old codger.” **3**

The president was also good with a yarn. “He told us a lot of stories,” Strong reported. In response to a discussion about the pressure from abolitionists for the president to take action against slavery, Lincoln said:

*Wa-al that reminds me of a party of Methodist parsons that was travelling in Illinois when I was a boy, and had a branch to cross that was pretty bad — ugly to cross, ye know, because the waters was up. And they got considerin’ and discussin’ how they should git across it, and they talked about it for two hours, and one on ’em thought they had ought to cross one way when they got there, and another another way, and they got quarrellin’ about it, till at last an old brother put in, and he says, says he, ‘Brethren, this here talk ain’t no use. I never cross a river until I come to it.* **4**

It was a characteristic Lincoln moment. He deflected the question of what he would do about slavery; he used the story as a device to explain his policy; in a display of folksy wisdom, he got his listeners to laugh.

Lincoln loved to tell stories. Anyone who met with him commented on his endless supply of anecdotes and jokes. Adam Gurowski, a Polish exile who worked in the State Department, observed, “In the midst of the most stirring and exciting — nay, death-giving — news, Mr. Lincoln has always a story to tell.” Ralph Waldo Emerson found it delightful: “When he has made his remark, he looks up at you with a great satisfaction, shows all his white teeth, and laughs.” Walt Whitman saw something else in Lincoln’s storytelling; he thought it was “a weapon which [Lincoln] employ’d with great skill.” **5**

The president’s storytelling and joke-making served multiple purposes. No doubt the verbal skills, honed while working as a Western lawyer, helped make him popular with judges and juries alike. His ability to tell a funny story and laugh heartily must have raised his spirits and help offset the other extreme of his temperament (that often left him saddened and depressed). If his physical appearance was gawky, even off-putting, his joke-telling drew people to him and made him likable. Lincoln shrewdly used stories and parables in more complex ways as well. They would disarm opponents, or offer an easily-digestible truth that seemed to support whatever position he might be taking. **6**

Not everyone was charmed. Richard Henry Dana, United States attorney for Massachusetts, complained that Lincoln “does not act or talk or feel like the ruler of a great empire in a great crisis.” What bothered Dana the most was that the president resorted to parables where answers were needed: “He likes rather to talk and tell stories with all sorts of persons who come to him for all sorts of purposes than to give his mind to the noble and manly duties of his great post. It is not difficult to detect that this is the feeling of his cabinet.” **7**

Dana did not comprehend what Lincoln’s friends well understood: Storytelling was at the core of the president’s character. “The habit of story-telling,” recalled Hugh McCulloch, Secretary of the Treasury under Lincoln, “became part of his nature and he gave free rein to it, even when the fate of the nation seemed to be trembling in the balance. … Story-telling was to him a safety-valve, and that he indulged in it, not only for the pleasure it afforded him, but for a temporary relief from oppressing cares…”.

One of the best accounts of Lincoln’s use of stories comes from Henry C. Whitney’s “Life on the Circuit with Lincoln,” published in 1894. Whitney, Lincoln’s friend from Illinois and a frequent visitor to the White House, recounted “on excellent authority” that a distinguished visitor left the White House disgusted after being interrupted by “a silly, grotesque, and inapplicable [story].” The visitor complained to one of Lincoln’s secretaries, “Now, you say that Lincoln’s stories always have some object or moral; please tell me what object or moral such an absurd, irrelevant, clownish story could possibly have?”

“What object?” exclaimed the secretary. “The most necessary object in the world at that time: to get rid of you and get to his business, and, according to your own story, he did it.” **8**

**Questions**

1. Abraham Lincoln was known for being a great story-teller. Make a guess: Do you think this helped or hurt him in his life?

Explain why --

1. Look at the political cartoon on the board. Write down one (1) thing you think nobody else will notice and three (3) other details you notice.

* Nobody else will notice \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Based on his descriptions of Lincoln, do you think Strong liked or disliked Lincoln?

I think Strong \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Lincoln because \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

1. What question was Lincoln asked? Based on the story, what was the answer?
2. Question:
3. Answer:
4. Based on the views in this paragraph, do you think most people liked or disliked Lincoln’s storytelling? (give one piece of textual evidence to explain your answer)
5. List 5 purposes Lincoln’s storytelling served:



1. Why didn’t Richard Henry Dana appreciate Lincoln’s storytelling?
2. Using three (3) pieces of textual evidence, argue whether Lincoln’s storytelling helped or hurt him in his life: (1 paragraph)