

“Lincoln the Orator”

From the article, “Lincoln the Orator” by Harold Holzer

I have heard it said from a reliable source, that Lincoln may have had a squeaky, raspy voice – or a voice unbecoming for public speaking. Before addressing the *gift of gab*, I want to address Lincoln’s gift of writing – of writing a speech or public address.

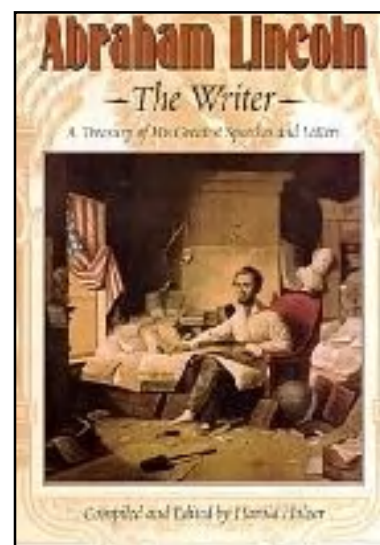
In our modern day of mass media, a voice and “a presence” can go a long way toward popularity and acceptance. In the first televised presidential debates (Jack Kennedy and Richard Nixon), the general consensus is that Jack’s appearance (on TV) was “the delimiter” in the debate. He simply looked better or was more appealing to the viewers.

Only a president or two ago, the expression “the president is looking very presidential...” was created (or used) on TV. This phrase caught my attention because it states the obvious: the president is presidential...because he (or she) is the president. I’m sure what the commentator was trying to convey was that the president was quite possibly acting like (or appearing as) a president...rather than something less. Whatever the message or meaning, the phrase did not *sit well* with me.

Appearance and perception are important. Those in Hollywood often depend on their video presence; the phrase sometimes applied is “the TV treats him well”. As with the actors of theater, the politicians and other public figures may lean toward TV appearances to capitalize on their physical attributes of image more than matter. I like radio or audio; that way, you can concentrate on the matter...

The form (or type) of writing performed for speeches or public addresses must have substance; but if it “sounds good” or is appealing, perhaps the **substance** (or matter) can be minimized – particularly if too much detail distracts from the theme, tone or intent. A president can offer a lofty speech on America’s hope in history; but avoid (or withhold) details or any substantive action or recovery plan. Sure, such content may give you a *warm and fuzzy* feeling but, as the old lady you to ask on the Wendy’s commercial, “Where’s the beef?”

It deserves repeating that Lincoln was personally opposed to slavery...or at least its expansion to western territories. Having argued or debated the issue in the backdrop of the *Dred Scott* decision and against such opposition as Stephen Douglas (not Frederick Douglas), Lincoln evidently developed his knowledge and passion against much opposition and public opinion. So, to argue against the expansion may have been one of the first cardinal violations of popularizing public speech: don’t speak on an unpopular viewpoint...or don’t tell them something they don’t want to hear.



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Lincoln’s record of public speaking was not stellar either; according to the author:
...Lincoln’s bumpy career as a professional lecturer, which had seen more failures than successes and had embarrassed him before his friends.

In preparing for this particular issue and opportunity (the expansion of slavery), the author of the article comments:

He employed no researchers to check references, no speechwriters to compose drafts. Lincoln wrote all his orations himself, pen to paper, word by word. Lincoln’s speeches came from exhaustive and solitary research, often at his cramped desk.

He concludes his article – and Lincoln’s gift for writing – by this description:
...that exhaustive research and solitary speechwriting became for Lincoln the rule, not the exception, marks him as one of the most gifted and dogged of all writer-presidents.

Well, was it his gift of writing or his oratory skills that made for such praise and esteem? Since we have no audio or video recordings of the president, we can never determine his skills as simply an orator; but with his speeches in full view is the obvious opportunity to appreciate both his professionalism and his passion for developing his public speeches. The substance of his speeches was clearly derived from both his professionalism and his passion as a writer; and his singular development of the content may have come from the countless hours that he devoted to self-education. He must have had a love for learning even more than for hearing his own squeaky voice.

Among the thousands of books and other writings on Lincoln are several that concentrate on his ability as a writer; yes, that’s right, *writings about a writer*...

Fred Kaplan wrote a book, “Lincoln, The Biography of a Writer”. In his book, Kaplan writes of Lincoln (the writer):

Lincoln struggled through his career to “find effective, accurate language to express his ideas about a complicated reality that readily lent itself to evasion, self-deceit, and linguistic trickery.” By the time he was president, Lincoln had not only achieved a voice wholly his own, a distinctive, American voice accommodating both oratorical heights and plain-spoken directness, **but he had also demonstrated that he was no “mere stump orator”...but a leader who had put his superior language skills in the service of a vision of a new nation...**

More than words of hope and victory, the writing of Lincoln formed words that offered a vision...