

February Adventure Sports Outdoors Column

Lesson from Lincoln

This month we will be observing the 200th birthday of one of the most beloved and respected presidents of all time: Abraham Lincoln. While the title of this column if properly researched and reported would constitute entire books, I offer it here in order to discuss an pre-presidential Lincoln lesson from his brief one term in Congress from 1847 – 1849.

The Mexican War dominated Lincoln's short stint as a United States Representative from Illinois. As we all know, the war began when President James Polk sent soldiers into a section borderland that was disputed with Mexico. Clashes with the Mexican Army in this area lead the President to declare that American blood had been shed on American Territory and required a response. Lincoln, on the other hand, did not believe all the territory was American and called on the President to prove that the land in dispute was United States Territory. He felt the president was influenced more by popular opinion than by fact.

When a vote came before congress on the war, Representative Lincoln voted in favor of declaring the war unnecessarily and unconstitutionally commenced by the President. The measure failed and the war continued. When asked to vote on supplies and reinforcements for the soldiers, Lincoln brook with his political party and voted to supply the troops. While he did not think the war was entered into properly, after the decision was made he supported the cause in terms of supplies.

Lincoln knew that his vote against the way the President started the war would be unpopular, but voted the way he thought was right. While it is true that Lincoln was not very happy in his role as a member of congress, Lincoln's vote on this mater was still driven more by principle and the wish to what is right, even if it is not popular.

Those that question the power of this one dissenting vote only need to look years later at the Lincoln-Douglas debates. In Ottawa, Illinois, in 1858 during one such debate Lincoln responded to attacks on his votes on this subject by saying:

“And so I think my friend, the judge (Douglas), is equally at fault when he charges me at the time when I was in Congress of having opposed our soldiers who were fighting in the Mexican War. The judge did not make his charge very distinctly, but I tell you what he can prove, by referring to the record. You remember I was an Old Whig, and whenever the Democratic Party tried to get me to vote that the war had been righteously begun by the President, I would not do it. But whenever they asked for any money, or land-warrants, or anything to pay the soldiers there, during all that time, I gave the same vote that Judge Douglas did. You can think as you please as to whether that was consistent. Such is the truth; and the judge has the right to make all he can of it. But when he, by general charge, conveys the idea that I withheld supplies from the soldiers who were fighting in the Mexican War, or did anything else to hinder the soldiers, he is, to say the

least, grossly and altogether mistaken, as a consultation of the records will prove to him.”

Lincoln did not just vote along party lines, or take a public survey to determine how he should vote. Lincoln vote for what he thought was right. And in doing so, at this point in time, voted him self out of office. This to me was the great lesson here; Lincoln was willing to do what he thought was right and was willing to except the cost, political and other wise, of making such a decision. Such determination to do what was right would serve him well later as President and is one of the reasons he is so beloved today.

This is also a lesson we need to look for in our politicians of today. In this modern time, when we are constantly hammered with one political opinion pole after another about every single imaginable decision we are to make, it is hard to sit back and just look at what is right. In a time when political movement and ascension means more than knowledge of the subject and depth of the topics, polling can be an all too tempting easy way to success at the cost of what is right. But, as is said often, right is right, even if it appears to be unpopular, because when all is said and done, I personally believe the majority of people would rather have the individual that votes the material rather than the individual that votes the popular opinion. And, as was the case with Lincoln, we see were such a coarse could lead.

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