

Lincoln without myth

BY AL TOFFLER



TODAY, 96 YEARS after John Wilkes Booth shot Abraham Lincoln, scholars are out to assassinate another Lincoln—a plaster saint constructed of rumor, gossip and fiction.

Lincoln was a great man, and needs no fictional props to support his reputation. Yet no American has been the object of so much mythmaking. Words have been stuffed into Lincoln's mouth, glorifiers have tampered with the story of his love life, forgers have copied his signature and admirers have spun tall tales about everything from his physical prowess to his kindness to animals.

Lincoln experts now are trying by painstaking research to kill the fictional Lincoln to preserve the man beneath the myths. What they have found may surprise you.

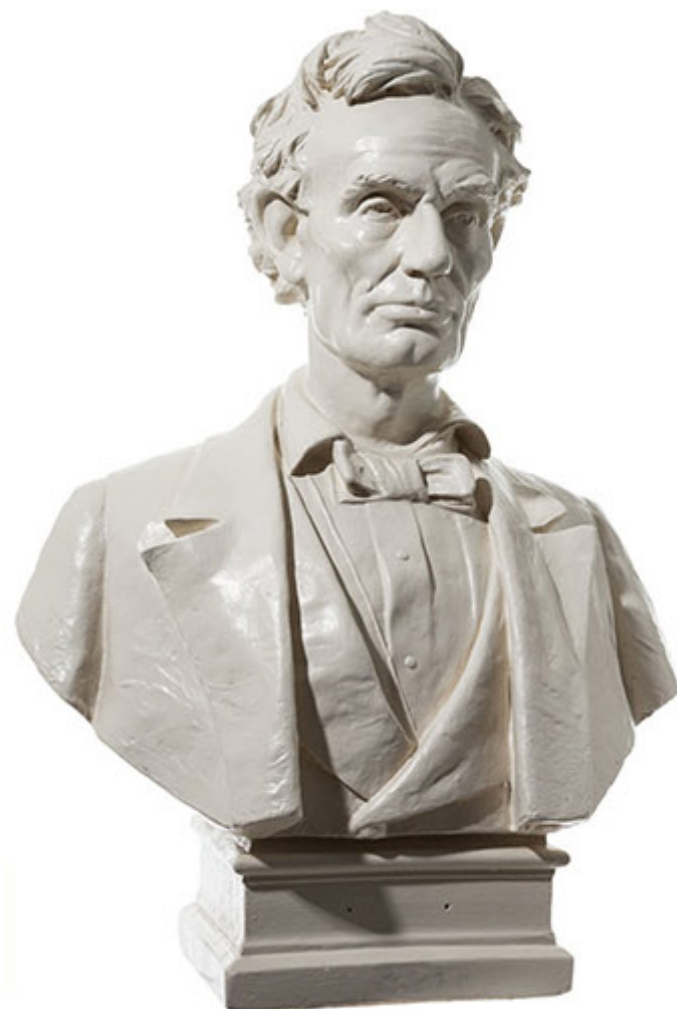
Take the by-now-immortal love story of Lincoln and Ann Rutledge. According to this yarn, Lincoln in 1835 was supposed to have been madly in love with an angelic, auburn-haired beauty named Ann Rutledge, who died before he could marry her. The tragedy supposedly

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marked Lincoln for life, turning him forevermore melancholy. This story, repeated, elaborated, encrusted with sugary anecdotes, has been told a thousand times. It is beautiful.

Yet no reputable Lincoln scholar today believes it.

The myth was first widely publicized on November 16, 1866 in a lecture given by William Herndon, Lincoln's onetime law partner, who had interviewed residents of New Salem, Illinois, where the romance



allegedly occurred. Although the only evidence he could turn up was second- and third-hand accounts fuzzed over by the passage of 31 years, Herndon presented the story as fact. He neglected to report that at least some of the people he interviewed had denied the story.



Years went by. Then one afternoon in the early fall of 1928, a woman named Wilma Frances Minor walked into the offices of the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine, and placed before its editors a packet of diaries and love letters that had supposedly passed between young Lincoln and the beautiful Ann.

The editors of the *Atlantic* were suspicious. They submitted the letters and diaries for testing by handwriting experts, chemists, Lincoln biographers. As the reports came in, however, excitement mounted. The papers were holding up under the most intense scrutiny. Accordingly, the magazine proceeded to publish its discovery in installments.

But while the readers ooh-ed and aah-ed, Paul M. Angle, secretary of the Lincoln Centennial Association, began his own analysis of the letters, finding discrepancies that others had missed. For example, the letters referred to "Kansas." Yet that name did not come into use until 20 years after their date. There were other holes in the story. The magazine gave Angle space to present his case, and he asserted that



“by no possibility can the Minor collection be genuine.”

After this, Angle analyzed the whole Rutledge-Lincoln romance story. His conclusion, accepted today by Lincoln experts everywhere, is blunt: “Of reliable evidence touching upon the romance itself there is not the slightest particle. No contemporary record containing even a hint has ever been discovered.”

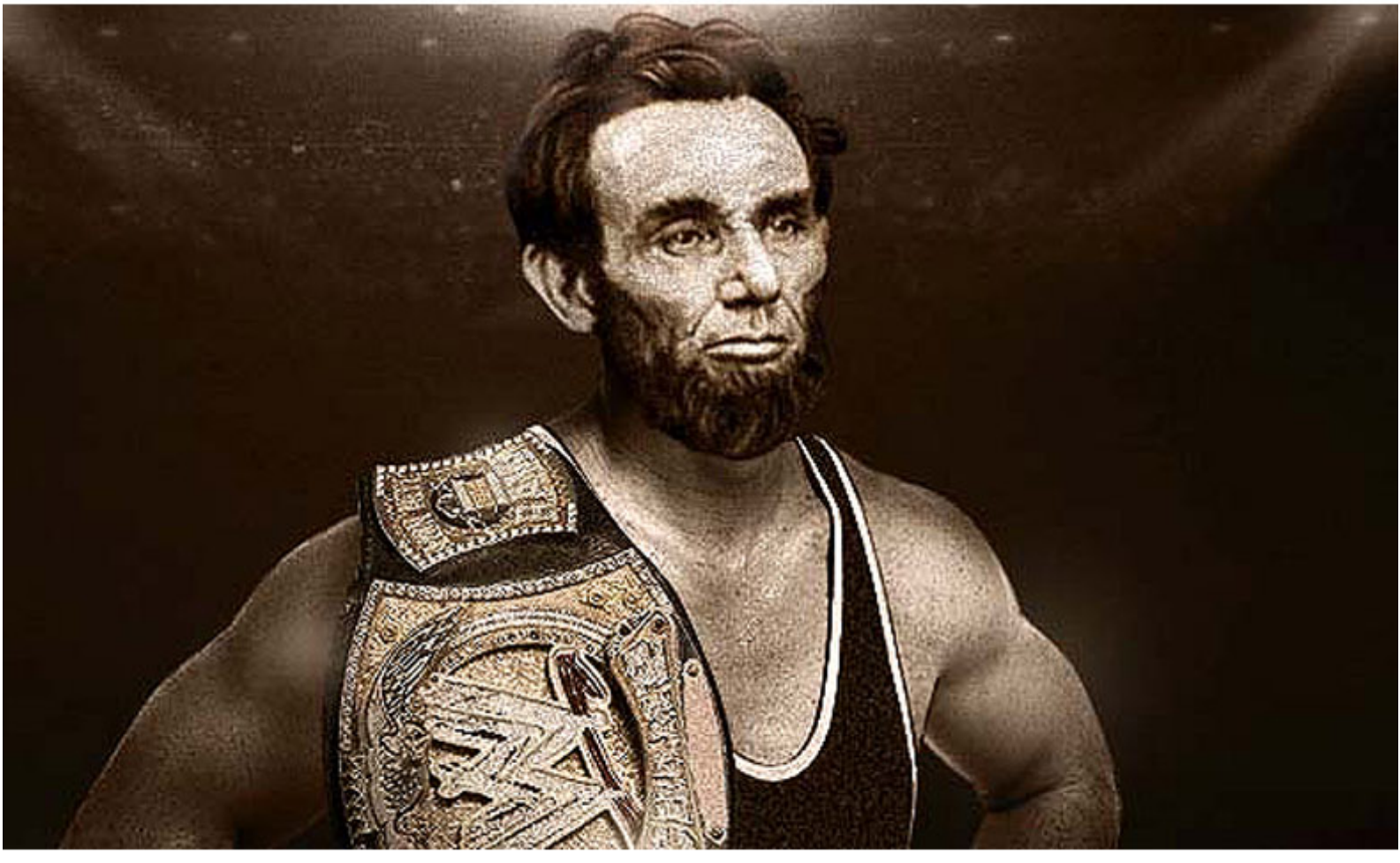
Which only goes to prove “you may fool all of the people some of the time; you can even fool some of the people all of the time; but you can’t fool all of the people all the time.” Or does it?

Of all the words attributed to Abraham Lincoln, few are repeated as frequently as those quoted above, supposedly from a speech at Clinton, Illinois, on September 2, 1858. Yet newspaper reports of the speech do not include this epigram, and according to David Mearns, editor of *“The Lincoln Papers,”* and chief of the manuscript division, Library of Congress, “The quote is not authentic at all.”

But even if a fiction, it is not a distortion of Lincoln’s probable beliefs. Such is not the case, however, with a quotation in which Lincoln was alleged to have declared that some day Catholicism “will have been forever swept away from our country.” The same quote has Lincoln saying: “I see a dark cloud on our horizon . . . coming from Rome. It is filled with tears and blood.” These lines are often attributed to Lincoln in anti-Catholic tracts. The fact is that Lincoln, who believed profoundly in religious freedom, never said them. They were penned by Charles Chiniquy, a defrocked Catholic priest whom Lincoln, as a lawyer, once defended in a slander suit.

One of the most notorious misattributions was the so-called “Ten Points.” These ten admonitions begin with “You cannot bring about prosperity by discouraging thrift” and end with “You cannot help men by having the government tax them to do for them what they can and should do by themselves.”

In 1950 Congresswoman Frances Bolton placed the “Ten Points” in the *Congressional Record* and *Look* magazine reprinted them, both the



lady and the magazine being under the impression that they were legitimate Lincoln utterances. In 1954 the maxims popped up in a speech by a member of the Cabinet. In 1956, during the Presidential election campaign many Republicans used them in speeches, literature or letters-to-the-editor.

The author of the Ten Points, however, was not Abraham Lincoln. He was the Reverend William J. H. Boetcker, who first copyrighted and printed them in 1916. The Republican National Committee has issued special instructions to its followers: "Warning: The Following Ten Maxims Are Not Lincoln's . . . Do Not Use Them As Lincoln's Words."

If some Republicans and conservatives have put self-serving words into Lincoln's mouth, so have Democrats and liberals. Former Vice President Alben Barkley, for example, at a dinner of labor officials once quoted Lincoln as saying: "All that harms labor is treason to America. . . . If any man tells you he loves America yet hates labor, he is a liar. If any man tells you he trusts America, yet fears labor, he is a fool. . . ."

Barkley's speech set well with his listeners, but it made the scholars squirm, for this is another "Lincoln" epigram that Lincoln didn't coin.

Time and again supporters of a high tariff have credited Lincoln with saying: "When an American paid \$20 for steel rails to an English manufacturer, America had the steel and England the \$20. But when he paid \$20 for the steel to an American manufacturer, America had both the steel and the \$20." A thorough search of Lincoln's speeches and writings reveals no source for the quotation. Furthermore the first steel rails to be rolled in the U.S. were rolled after Lincoln's death.

THOSE who want Lincoln on their side in a conflict have occasionally stooped to outright forgery. In 1920 Benito Mussolini's fascist newspaper, *Popolo d'Italia*, published a letter in which Lincoln in 1853 urged unification of Corsica with Italy. Nobody, apparently, stopped to consider why Lincoln in 1853, when he was still a lawyer in Illinois, should have been so up-to-date on Italian politics. The letter, as in-



vestigation has proved, was a fraud.

The manufacture of fake Lincoln letters became almost a profession for a shrewd forger named Martin Connelly, alias Joseph Cosey. Cosey used special paper watermarked in 1851. He managed to avoid trouble with the law because he never attempted to sell his forgeries as the genuine. He would merely sidle up to a prospective purchaser and ask, "Do you think this might be worth something?" The collector or dealer, eager to snap up what looked like a genuine article for a low price, would fall for his bait. The New York Public Library, which is a repository for phony Lincoln documents, has a considerable collection of Cosey's work and though he has dropped out of sight in the last eight years, it thinks of him affectionately as its "favorite forger."

The library also has numerous forged copies of one of Lincoln's most famous epistles, the so-called Bixby letter. The Bixby story, like the Ann Rutledge yarn, has been told and retold. Mrs. Lydia Bixby of Boston was said to have lost all five of her sons in the Civil War. Lincoln's letter expressed sympathy for her and was delivered to her on Thanksgiving Day, 1864, by Adjutant-General William Schouler of Massachusetts.

Schouler released the text of the letter to the press. In the letter Lincoln spoke of "the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom," and the Bixby letter has become one of the most widely reproduced of Lincoln documents.

It wasn't until the 1920s that a topnotch Lincoln expert, Dr. William E. Barton, checked the details. He found that Mrs. Bixby had not lost five sons "gloriously on the field of battle." Two had died as Union soldiers; one was captured by the rebels and returned to her in good health; the other two had deserted from the Union Army, one even



enlisting in the Confederate cause.

When Barton first tried to publish his findings, the press refused on grounds that the story of the Bixby letter was beautiful, even if not wholly true, and that the public prefers blissful semiknowledge to the unhappy truth.

The original letter has never been found, although countless forgeries of it have turned up. A facsimile of one of the forgeries even hung in the White House during Theodore Roosevelt's administration.

According to Reinhard H. Luthin, author of *The First Lincoln Campaign*, the heroic portrait of Lincoln often seen on the walls of public school classrooms has Abraham Lincoln's head resting on the impressive body of John C. Calhoun—who died a decade before Lincoln was elected President.

Why has Lincoln become the particular victim of the mythmakers? First: much of our information about Lincoln's early years comes from witnesses recalling events many decades after the fact. Second: these reminiscences were warped by the desire of the witnesses to bask in reflected greatness. Third: Lincoln did not often talk about his personal life. More important, the circumstances of his life, his dramatic assassination, the emotions connected with the Civil War, and his own rich personality all combined to make Lincoln a natural folk hero.

These reasons, and the human inclination to hang on to a good story—true or false—account for the hardihood of many myths about Lincoln. Misconceptions about him, even those which have been set aright repeatedly by the scholars, have a way of surviving. Thus, despite frequent denials by men who have devoted their lives to Lincoln research, many people still swear that Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address on the train on his way to that historic battlefield. It isn't so. He wrote part of it in Washington. The remainder is believed to have been written in his room in Gettysburg. Again, the idea that Lincoln's father, Thomas, was a shiftless, irresponsible lout, has been disproved by careful study of contemporary

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real estate and business records. Yet most people still accept it.

The characterization of Lincoln's marriage as unhappy has been upset by the scholars who say that there is no evidence at all to indicate that Lincoln was not an affectionate and reasonably content husband. But the fable lingers. The notion that Lincoln spent his youth in unusual squalor—even Woodrow Wilson referred to this—has been set aside after comparison of conditions in the Lincoln home with conditions among other pioneer families. But the belief in his allegedly penurious boyhood continues.

As for Ann Rutledge, the experts are resigned to her immortality. No matter how often the love affair is deflated, Ann manages to rise anew as Lincoln's "one and only" love.

And she probably always will. ●



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