



ITEF COMMENT



Volume 15, Issue 5

Report on Current Public Policy

February 9, 2009

Third in a series of articles examining the Lincoln myth vs. reality

By Jerry Kohn

In announcing the criminal charges against Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich, U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald commented, “The conduct would make Lincoln roll over in his grave.” Like many Americans, Fitzgerald was likely taught in school that Lincoln was a paragon of wisdom and integrity – that he rose above the crooked and petty politics of his time. Lincoln, however, was very much a politician of his time and no more wise or honest than any of today’s politicians.

Far from the humble “rail splitter” he is often portrayed as, Lincoln was one of the wealthiest and most well connected attorneys in Illinois. A prominent member of the Whig Party, Lincoln, as a state representative, strongly promoted government subsidies for his friends and supporters. In 1837, Lincoln and his Whig Party pushed through twelve million dollars in state subsidies for what were called “internal improvements.” The money was spent, but the projects were never finished. Even Lincoln’s law partner, William Herndon, called Lincoln’s projects “reckless and unwise.” For years the state’s taxpayers struggled to pay off this debt. As a result of Lincoln’s wastefulness, the state enacted a new Constitution in 1848 that expressly forbid expenditure of tax dollars for any private business enterprises.

Representative Lincoln also shilled for the state’s biggest bankers. In 1840 when Illinois Democrats were poised to pass a bill requiring one of the state’s biggest banks to make payment in gold or silver rather than paper, Lincoln and his fellow Whigs attempted to leave the chamber to prevent the vote. Finding the door blocked, they jumped from a first floor window, leading Democrats to label them “Lincoln and his flying brethren.” After leaving the state legislature, Lincoln found employment representing the Illinois Central Railroad and several other railroads. As their highly paid counsel and lobbyist, Lincoln traveled about the country in a private rail car and rubbed elbows with some of the wealthiest and most powerful railroad barons in the country.

Once elected President, Lincoln did not disappoint his patrons. Lincoln pushed for high protective tariffs for the benefit of big manufacturers, supported “greenback” paper money inflation for the benefit of war profiteers and big bankers, and promoted railroad subsidies for his old friends in the rail industry.

Lincoln ruthlessly prosecuted the war against the Confederacy not out of sympathy with the slaves (many of whom were being held in bondage in Union territory) but to maintain the union and ensure the collection of federal taxes to fund his programs. In his first inaugural address Lincoln declared, “The power confided to me will be used to hold, occupy, and possess the property and places belonging to the Government and to collect the duties and imposts....”

Under President Lincoln, federal government spending exploded, and the various railroad subsidy programs and other boondoggles spawned by Lincoln would later morph into the infamous Credit Mobilier scandal that engulfed the Grant Administration. Far from rolling over in his grave at the sight of Rod Blagojevich, Abraham Lincoln would more likely roll his eyes and scoff, “Amateur!”

Jerry Kohn is a Policy Analyst for the Illinois Taxpayer Education Foundation.