



## Young Mr. Lincoln in Ford's Theater

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### ABSTRACT

In *Young Mr. Lincoln*, director John Ford and screenwriter Lamar Trotti engage an issue that is central to Ford's films and to Lincoln's political thought. That issue is the tension between individual greatness and the rule of law, a tension heightened in a democracy by the demos's passion for equality. In the film's portrayal of Lincoln, Ford and Trotti suggest a solution to this tension that is fundamentally consistent with the one Lincoln suggested in the Lyceum Address. To remain within the political community, the great man must hold a sincere reverence for the law and be willing to exhibit humility in declaiming his own superiority. In the context of these characteristics, greatness can be a force that preserves the law and protects the community from harm. The film depicts Lincoln as the paradigmatic combination of these characteristics and alludes to his mature leadership based on these commitments in his later career.

As a young statesman, Lincoln articulated his fear that demagoguery and the “mobocratic spirit” threatened to undermine the rule of law in the American polity.<sup>1</sup> In *Young Mr. Lincoln*, director John Ford and script writer Lamar Trotti tell a story that captures with striking clarity this central theme in Lincoln's political thought.<sup>2</sup> Portraying Lincoln as an emerging lawyer and politician in Springfield, Ford and Trotti resolve the tension among individual greatness, democratic politics, and the rule of law in the same way that Lincoln himself resolved it in his Lyceum Address: by modeling the way in which individual greatness and ambition can serve the rule of law and tame the passions of the mob. They, like Lincoln, conclude that democratic leadership threatens to become, but need not be, Caesarism.

Moreover, Ford's repertoire is a fitting medium for treating the tension between greatness and the rule of law as it dovetails seamlessly with the central theme of Ford's most famous and enduring westerns: the heroism and manly strength needed to make the West safe for communities—to establish the rule of law—is ill at ease in the civilized communities they help create.

While *Young Mr. Lincoln* has been a popular subject of examination by historians and film critics alike, its rich discourse on the tension between greatness and the rule of law has received scant attention. Indeed, as J. E. Smyth points out, recent historical scholarship on the film has been guilty of “dismissing the film as a historical travesty and a folksy perversion of Lincoln's most

famous legal case.”<sup>3</sup> One historian, whose statement Smyth identifies as the characteristic view, concludes: “It is unfortunate that *Young Mr. Lincoln* has come to be regarded by many as one of the greatest portrayals of all time, because the film's script and Henry Fonda's performance do not accurately reflect the Lincoln of history.”<sup>4</sup> Smyth gives Ford and Trotti their just due in discounting the condemnation of these historians.

In evaluating *Young Mr. Lincoln* solely for its lack of chronological accuracy and relentlessly clinging to their one ironclad criterion, historians have failed to notice the ways in which the film-makers may have deployed contrasting views of the past and even embedded subtle meditations on the formation of the Lincoln myth within the film.<sup>5</sup>

Smyth goes on to conclude that *Young Mr. Lincoln*, in contrast to chronologically accurate films, provided a more accurate portrayal of Lincoln insofar as it demonstrated the ambiguities of Lincoln's character and thought. That is to say, the film provided a contrast to the monolithic portrayals of Lincoln that tended to remove any sense of sophistication and complexity from his character. The account presented below moves past Smyth's insofar as it argues that Ford and Trotti “embedded subtle meditations” on a theme that was common to Ford's films and Lincoln's political rhetoric, namely, the tension between individual greatness and the rule of law in a democracy.

## Greatness and the Rule of Law in Ford's Westerns

In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, Ford implies a sharp tension between greatness, manifested by Tom Doniphon (John Wayne), and the rule of law, represented by a young attorney named Ransom Stoddard (Jimmy Stewart). “Ranse” follows Horace Greely’s advice and goes west to find fame and fortune. What he finds in the western expanse is lawlessness and peril. After being waylaid on his journey by the territory’s resident outlaw, Liberty Valence (Lee Marvin), Ranse resolves to bring law and order to the town of Shinbone. But Tom is quick to enlighten Ranse as to the uselessness of law books. The only law in Shinbone, Tom tells Ranse, is enforced at the business end of a gun. While Ranse is courageous and intelligent, he does not possess the physical prowess to best a man like Liberty Valence. As Tom tells the zealous young lawyer, Liberty Valence is “the toughest man South of the Picketwire—except for me.” When Ranse finally confronts Liberty, wielding a gun he does not know how to use, Tom covertly guns down the outlaw from the shadows. Everyone thinks that Ranse was responsible for Liberty’s demise—even Ranse himself is under the illusion that his shot killed the outlaw. He thus becomes famous in the territory as “the man who shot Liberty Valence” and goes on to lead the territory to statehood and eventually to serve in the U.S. Senate, building his entire political career upon this legend. Ranse remains ignorant of Tom’s intercession until Tom tells him later in the film. Years later, when Ranse returns to Shinbone for Tom’s funeral, he finds that few even know who the great Tom Doniphon was. Thus, we learn that the greatness necessary to establish the rule of law is superfluous, if not antithetical, to political life. With the establishment of law, greatness is relegated to the outskirts of the community.

Upon the aging Ransom Stoddard’s return to Shinbone, the editor of the local paper starts nosing around to find out why the great senator has taken interest in the death of an unknown bachelor. For the first time, Ranse divulges the whole truth, revealing to the editor that he in fact was not the man who shot Liberty Valence and that the community owed its liberty (from Liberty) to the unknown man lying in a pauper’s coffin in the next room. Having learned the whole tale, the editor—in one of film’s most memorable scenes—crumples his notes and tosses them in an iron stove. Explaining his rationale for destroying such a provocative story, he tells Ranse that “when the legend becomes fact, print the legend.” The community needs to believe that its statesmen, its lawmakers, are strong enough to rid them of lawless men like Liberty Valence—and strong enough to hold

them at bay. The community cannot cope with the notion that the kind of man necessary for establishing the rule of law is not capable of living under it. The myth of the man who shot Liberty Valence must, therefore, be perpetuated.

Ford offers a number of alternatives to this irresolvable tension between the rule of law and individual greatness, the most prominent of which is Wyatt Earp. In *My Darling Clementine*, Wyatt is both capable of imposing order by the law of the gun and sufficiently civilized to live under the rule of law once established. Earp, it would seem, can wield the gun and submit to the law. As Mary Nichols observes, he reconciles individual strength and excellence with the limitations of the rule of law. Wyatt is able to appreciate the good things of civilization: family, romance, theater, public worship, and friendship. He sees the connection between the maintenance of order and the enjoyment of the best things in life. He is not, therefore, relegated to a solitary life of wandering, alone in his greatness, but neither is he tame. Wyatt uses his strength in the preservation of the law and the community.<sup>6</sup>

## Ford’s Portrayal of Lincoln

Yet another candidate for the reconciliation of heroism and community is the gangly young lawyer in *Young Mr. Lincoln*. This film is of particular interest because, in Lincoln, Ford finds a protagonist whose own speeches and actions—particularly his address to the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield in 1837—explored the tension between greatness and the rule of law. And, unlike *Liberty Valence* and *My Darling Clementine*, both *Young Mr. Lincoln* and the Lyceum Address add to this already rich tension between greatness and the rule of law a third variable: the mob spirit.

Lincoln, like Wyatt Earp and Tom Doniphon, is quickly presented to the viewer as a man among men. At one point in the film, Lincoln settles a legal dispute between two farmers by threatening violence. “Gentlemen,” he asks while standing between the two men, “did ya ever hear about the time in the Blackhawk War when I butted two fellas’ heads together and busted both of ’em?” Later that day, he wins the rail splitting contest in the Independence Day fair.

Throughout the film (and even more so in Trotti’s script) Lincoln’s ability to exercise rhetorical leadership over an impassioned mob depends on his physical superiority to other men.<sup>7</sup> The film begins with one of Lincoln’s stump speeches for the state legislature. Lincoln is shy and fidgety, unsure of himself before a crowd. Though Ford eventually cut the scene from the film,

Trotti's script prefaced Lincoln's stump speech with a violent altercation around the whiskey barrel, "an inevitable adjunct of electioneering" in the 1830s.<sup>8</sup> Having been cut off by the rowdies, Lincoln catches one of them "by the nape of the neck and the seat of the britches, propels him around the corner of the store and dumps him into the rainbarrel."<sup>9</sup> This becomes a pattern in which Lincoln's displays of physical power (and later humor) incline the audience to listen to him.

In the key scene, a mob has gathered on the night of the Independence Day fair to lynch two innocent young brothers, Matt and Adam Clay, for the killing of a local deputy. A lynching on the Fourth of July is a scene pregnant with meaning. Lincoln finally talks down the crowd, appealing to the better angels of their nature. But his ability to woo the crowd and shame them into conformity with the law is only made possible by his brute strength and his quick wit, by his appeal to the fears and passions of the mob. His contest with the mob begins by throwing his own body into the jailhouse doorway, against which the mob is hurling a battering ram. When the crowd refuses to listen, Lincoln, with ready fists, defies the mob. "Now gentlemen, I'm not here to make any speeches. All I got to say is: I can lick any man here hands down." The town tough, Buck, with broad shoulders and jutting front teeth, momentarily accepts the challenge. "I'm the biggest buck in this lick," he declares. But Lincoln knows the strength of his own reputation. "Well, come on up and wet your horns," he replies. Realizing that Lincoln is serious, Buck backs down, pointing to a sore tooth that has serendipitously begun bothering him.

While this show of brute strength convinces the men present that they want no trouble with Lincoln, they still want into the jail. Lincoln has not successfully abated the mob's thirst for blood, but the crowd is now willing to listen to what he has to say. Brute strength may not be enough to educate the community in reverence for the law, but it can create room for discourse. Having quieted the crowd by his demonstration of strength and courage, Lincoln proceeds to charm them with his famous wit. "All joking aside," he says while fending off the battering ram still poised before the door, "let's look at this matter from my side. Why, you all know I'm just a fresh lawyer tryin' to get ahead, but some o' you boys act like you wanna do me outa my first clients. [Laughter] I'm not saying you fellas are not right. Maybe these boys do deserve to hang, but with me handlin' their case, don't look like you'll have much to worry about on that score [more laughter]." "We've gone to a heap of trouble," shouts a man holding a noose, "not to have at least one hanging." Lincoln is quick to respond. "Sure you have, Mack, and if these boys had more than one life, I'd say go ahead. Maybe a little hanging mightn't do 'em any

harm, but the sort o' hangin' you boys would give 'em would be so ... so *permanent* [crowd erupts into laughter]."

Humor eases the tension, paving the way for Lincoln's quite serious appeal to the conscience of the crowd. Filling the doorway with his hands in his pockets, Lincoln continues gravely, "Trouble is when men start taking the law into their own hands, they're just as apt in all the confusion and fun to start hangin' somebody who's not a murderer as somebody who is." Echoing his condemnation of mob justice in the Lyceum Address, Lincoln reminds them all that a mob can hang an innocent man as easily as a guilty one. "We seem to lose our heads in times like this. We do things together that we'd be mighty ashamed to do by ourselves." Now that he has their attention, he singles out a respectable, God-fearing man in the crowd and, naming him, ponders whether he might return home and take down a "certain book" and read there these words: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." So deftly has he shown his superiority in strength, wit, and moral rectitude (all while proclaiming his own simple-mindedness), that he authoritatively dismisses the crowd with a simple salutation. "That's all I've got to say, friends. Good night."

### Greatness and the Problem of Political Ambition

Lincoln's jailhouse speech in the film stops here. The threat to the rule of law stems from the assembled citizens' willingness to do together what they would not dare to do alone. Thus, the task of statesmanship is moral suasion—an appeal to conscience—and its product is moral rectitude in the community.

But the Lyceum Address goes on to observe that mob justice undermines the very constitutional order that supports the rule of law and forms the foundation of liberty. Eventually, mob justice will cease to be just; it will instead become simply anarchical and arbitrary. No strong attachment to the laws will remain, for the good man will cease to feel secure. Once the people's confidence in the law is undermined, as it must be by the mobocratic spirit, some great man of genius will rise up to restore order and re-found the political order, for great men will not be satisfied perpetuating a political order that others have fashioned. Instead, such men will take advantage of lawlessness to refashion the political community in their own image. Thus, the subject of Lincoln's speech to the Lyceum is not simply the injustice of mob violence but the "perpetuation of our political institutions," pointing to well-constructed institutions and their preservation as the solution to mob rule.<sup>10</sup>

In the Lyceum Address, Lincoln proposes to ameliorate the threat to our political institutions by propagating

a “political religion” that holds the law in reverence and raises the Founders to mythic status. There are two components in this resolution: reverence for the law on the part of the statesman and humility about one’s own status in relation to the framers of the law. In accordance with this remedy, the film seems to suggest that Lincoln’s greatness poses no danger, for he speaks from and in the name of a love for law and denies his own greatness. We have seen that Lincoln is able to awe the crowd by his superiority in strength, wit, and moral rectitude. Not only does he abate their thirst for vengeance, he also reshapes the community by teaching a new reverence for the “pomp and circumstance” of the law. Of course, the faculties necessary for such influence over the community are identical to those necessary for the success of the demagogue about whom the Lyceum Address warns us. But throughout the film, Lincoln repeatedly denies the superiority of his own faculties and the salience of his own ambitions, even while demonstrating his greatness in defense of the law.

The film points to this resolution early on by connecting Lincoln’s infatuation with the law to his unspoken political ambitions. A family of settlers passing through New Salem on their way out West gives Lincoln a few law books, including Blackstone’s *Commentaries*, in exchange for some supplies from his store. Coincidentally, this is the Clay family to which the two brothers whom Lincoln will later defend belong. Thus, Abigail Clay provides Lincoln with the means of saving her sons. It is ironic that the Clays actually declare the law books worthless when they give them to Lincoln. “They won’t be worth nothin’ where we’re headin’,” Abigail Clay tells young Lincoln. After all, what has the law to do with the frontier? There is a subtle kinship between the settler who sets out into the wild without law books and the lawyer who lies down in safety without a weapon. Ford’s westerns seem to suggest that both are tragically short sighted. But Lincoln is visibly elated by the prospect of reading law—and as we know possesses the physical prowess that Ransom Stoddard lacks. Indeed, a subsequent scene portrays him reading from Blackstone beneath a tree by the Sangamon River. Ann Rutledge, in whom he has a romantic interest, disturbs his quiet contemplation and asks in a roundabout manner whether he plans to study law and enter politics. She cites her father’s high opinion of Lincoln’s talents for public leadership. After receiving the young man’s ambivalent response, Ann declares that underneath all of Lincoln’s humble professions lies a deep-seated ambition. “I know how smart you are, how ambitious you are too.” Lincoln does not deny the truth of her assertion. “Ambitious?” he asks with some incredulity. “You are,” Ann retorts, “deep down underneath, even if you won’t admit it.” She

assumes, perhaps rightly, that his infatuation with the law is driven, at least in part, by ambition.

Ann’s insight is soon confirmed. The next scene finds Lincoln at her graveside, mourning her untimely death. He is trying to decide whether to enter the legal profession and feigns an experiment of chance to determine the question. “Ann, I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” he says, “I’ll let the stick decide.” Standing a stick on its end beside Ann’s grave, he tells her that if the stick falls her way when released, he will become a lawyer. It is not surprising that the stick falls toward the grave. “Well, Ann, you win. The law.” As the frame fades from view, Lincoln admits to her that he may have given the stick just a little push in that direction. “Wonder if I could have tipped it your way just a little,” he says with a smile. He can admit his ambition to the dead, though he must continue to profess his humility to the living.

The ambivalent relationship between ambition and the rule of law thereby arises very early in the film. As we have seen, this ambition is later complemented by the manifestation of Lincoln’s greatness when he faces down the mob. Trotti had sought to explore the resulting tension in the script through two additional scenes, but Ford cut them, feeling some apparent hesitation over recognizing the ambitious side of Lincoln’s character. Most notably, Trotti originally scripted an intimate conversation with Mary Todd that continued and amplified the theme of Lincoln’s ambition. In the script Mary inquires why Lincoln has not called on her and he cites the class distinctions that “mean so much in Kentucky” and divide the two of them socially. “I know all about your origin,” Mary replies. “And it makes no difference to you?” Lincoln asks. “Whatever I am I am!” Mary replies, “*Of course* I want position and importance! *Of course* I seek a place in society! But only if I can lead it! My people have always been *leaders*...” Not knowing how to respond, Lincoln compliments her. “You don’t have to make pretty speeches to me, Mr. Lincoln,” she fires back, “I’m not looking for flattery in men, but intelligence—and the courage to seize from life all that it has to offer. Something in me—my woman’s intuition perhaps—tells me you can be that kind of man if you wish to be—that you can go on—and on—and...” Lincoln, in his self-effacing manner, brushes aside her suggestion. “You haven’t by any chance got me mixed up with Mr. Douglas, have you? *My name’s Lincoln*.” “Mr. Douglas is that kind of man too!” she replies, “Perhaps *he will be the stronger*.” “With a woman like you—to egg him on—he might be at that,” Lincoln observes with apparent detachment. “I’d make him!” she exclaims, “I’d make him have courage—and faith in himself!”

Even more vividly, in the final scene Trotti’s script had envisioned Lincoln descending the steps of the



courthouse through a “now cheering crowd” (by contrast with a formerly bloodthirsty mob). As if to emphasize the point, Mary Todd steps from the crowd, jubilant, “Mr. Lincoln! I know now that you can go on—and on—and on! I’m so glad you won!” But Ford again cut the scene and replaced it with a victorious, but humble young Lincoln seeking the backdoor for a quiet exit. In Ford’s edited version, it is only through the intervention of a bystander that he turns to meet the cheering crowd.

Although Trotti had sought to establish a recurring theme of ambition as a spur to greatness in the narrative—to present more directly the problem of ambition as a groundwork for democratic leadership—Ford relegates Lincoln’s ambition to a briefly suggested nudge moving him into law and out of the obscurity of New Salem. Ford thus emphasizes that it is Lincoln’s love of justice, not his thirst for distinction, that propels him into the limelight. He may be greater than common men, but no more ambitious than they. There is nothing calculated or ulterior about his decision to take on the Clay case. Just as there is nothing of ambition in his having set up a dire crisis of a house divided in 1858 to secure his place as Douglas’s challenger in the Illinois senate race. Ford’s Lincoln sees a miscarriage of justice and comes to the aid of the law against the forces of anarchy.

The divergence between Trotti’s script and Ford’s finished film on this point is significant. Trotti lifts the hood on Lincoln’s democratic statesmanship, laying bare the need for a forward looking ambition that seeks not only to educate the public through appeals to conscience in the present but to establish and maintain the political institutions over which he must ultimately preside in the future. Trotti’s willingness to bring political ambition to the fore suggests his openness to politics (and not merely civic education) as the secure foundation of the rule of law. Institution building and preservation must themselves be a field of ambition. By contrast, Ford’s desire to highlight Lincoln’s humility and keep it untainted obscures the need for the ambitious statesman. It is on this ground that Trotti’s script excels as a reflection of the Lyceum Address.

Nonetheless, Ford’s final version is perhaps defensible. He is not naïve and does not fall into the trap of idealizing Lincoln. Indeed, his editing of the film would suggest that he feels acutely the problem of ambition and even its positive function as a precondition for statesmanship. But the statesman’s act of preservation, like Lincoln’s stand in the jailhouse doorway, must be public spirited, not self-interested, ambition. Perhaps the film furnishes us with the very political religion that Lincoln had proposed in the Lyceum Address. However well-constructed

institutions may be, their preservation rests on effective rhetorical leadership and a corresponding civic virtue. Institutions cannot compensate for a vicious citizenry, nor can they manufacture a commitment to the rule of law. As O’Brien aptly put it in his essay for the Criterion edition of the film, “Ford seeks a cinematic language fit for democratic myth, and finds no easy resolution of the paradox that Lincoln, the great democratic hero, triumphs by a real intellectual and moral superiority (not to mention the physical superiority of the champion rail-splitter) over his fellows.”<sup>11</sup> Ford presented his audience with the superior man who, through oratory, channeled his intellectual and moral superiority to secure the rule of law and ennoble the demos. This example would, to an audience in 1939, stand in stark contrast with the plebiscitary leadership of Hitler and his cult of personality.

Whatever the difference in emphasis, Ford’s film and Trotti’s script offer a resolution to the tension between greatness and law consistent with Lincoln’s own resolution in the Lyceum Address. As long as ambition and greatness are complemented by reverence for the law, greatness will manifest itself in acts that preserve the law. By having Lincoln ease the tension of the crowd—the tension he himself had created by his display of strength—with a display of wit and self-effacement, Ford and Trotti demonstrate their understanding of the need for humility. The great man, if he is to lead, must demonstrate his greatness, but never acknowledge it.

### Lincoln’s Mature Statesmanship

While the Lyceum Address shares its fundamental concern about greatness with *Young Mr. Lincoln*, it is not the only important component of Lincoln’s career engaged by the film. In a subtle way, the film also engages Lincoln’s political rhetoric regarding slavery and the secession crisis. In doing so, it contrasts the simplistic or ideal images of law and statesmanship portrayed in the film with the complexities of Lincoln’s later political career. By providing this contrast, the film, like Lincoln’s Lyceum Address, engages the viewer in an assessment of Lincoln’s mature statesmanship.

The issue of slavery subtly emerges when, early in the film, Lincoln is reading *Blackstone* by the river. Laying down the book, he rearticulates what he has gleaned from his reading.

Law: that’s the rights of persons and the rights of things; [long pause] the rights of life, reputation, and liberty; [pause] the rights to acquire and hold property. Wrongs are violations of those rights. [pause] By jing, that’s all there is to it, right and wrong. Maybe I ought to begin to take this up serious.

Some scholars have interpreted this scene in conjunction with the later trial as a commentary upon the tension between due process and economic inequality in the United States. According to Virginia Wright Wexman, this tension is the product of movement away from an agrarian economy, under which property posed little danger to equality, toward a commercial economy, in which wealth is more easily concentrated. In the new money-based society, the observance of due process, which is normally the safeguard of equality, is no longer sufficient. According to this view, simply observing due process will result in the mistreatment of small farmers, in this case the Clay brothers. Lincoln instead uses his own strength and wit to see justice done despite the flawed legal process. Just as he had been forced to stand in for an incompetent sheriff when he faced down the mob, he must now stand in for an inadequate legal process to defend agrarian ideals from corrosive commercialism. This train of thought leads Wexman to an erroneous conclusion. “The implication is clear: the future president knows the law because he receives it from God; his judgments do not require the ratification of a humanly sanctioned legal code. He is therefore fully justified in using his strength—or whatever means he deems necessary—to impose his will.”<sup>12</sup> Not only does this fly in the face of Lincoln’s commitment to the rule of law, which is clearly reaffirmed by the film, but it also makes the point of reference for the scene a class conflict *subconsciously* engaged by Trotti and Ford. She thereby denies agency to Ford and Trotti in shaping the themes and messages of the film.

While this connection with economic inequality and the legal process is not wholly unfounded, it certainly takes second chair to a connection with Lincoln’s own political rhetoric regarding slavery. Smyth comes closer in interpreting Lincoln’s recitation of Blackstone. His argument is worth quoting at length.

Here is a constructed moment which alludes to a crucial argument in Civil War history. Lincoln’s great Constitutional struggle with the Southern states in 1860 was motivated by the South’s belief that the Constitution and the tenets of Republican liberty sanctioned the protection of private property. Since slaves were defined as property, slavery was therefore protected by the Constitution. Lincoln’s summation, ‘That’s all there is to it—right and wrong’, functions on many levels. Lincoln may see only right and wrong in reading Blackstone... Later in his political life he will understand that right and wrong are not so narrowly defined. Pitted against Lincoln’s ending of slavery are the unconstitutional lengths he went to in the Emancipation Proclamation, attacking the concept of private property.<sup>13</sup>

Smyth is correct in calling Lincoln’s assumption that legal rights and wrongs are equivalent to moral right and

wrong simplistic. He is also correct in contrasting slavery under the Constitution with this simplicity. The institution of slavery occasions a tension between the right to “life, reputation, and liberty” on the one hand and the right to “acquire and hold property” on the other. The South did indeed argue that slaves were simply property and that their possession was therefore secured by the Constitution. If one accepts this reading of the Constitution, as Smyth suggests Lincoln did, then the emancipation of slaves does in fact require an unconstitutional act. On this assumption, Smyth argues that Lincoln is forced into a choice between doing what is right and upholding the positive law of the Constitution. Smyth further claims that it was Ford and Trotti’s intention to contrast the simplicity of Lincoln’s remarks in the film with the complexity of the ultimatum Lincoln later faced: either abolish slavery or obey the Constitution. If the slave question did pose a dichotomous choice between the Constitution and justice, then my contention that Ford and Trotti are making a case for Lincoln as the great man who teaches reverence for the law is flawed.

The argument that Ford and Trotti were alluding to the complexity of the slave question by way of contrast is, I think, persuasive. It certainly makes more sense than the class conflict theory propounded by Wexman, particularly in light of Trotti’s research on Lincoln’s early career. Nonetheless, Smyth’s description of the nature of the slave question is flawed. Lincoln did not face an ultimatum between the Constitution and his conscience. Indeed, he was meticulously careful to clothe his actions regarding the slave question with constitutional authority, a fact that Trotti could hardly have missed in his study of Lincoln. Toward this end, Lincoln justified the Emancipation Proclamation, not on the ground of justice but as a measure necessary to the successful prosecution of the war. The proclamation was intended to weaken the South by inciting slave revolts and was therefore only given effect in states actually in rebellion. Lincoln consistently maintained that the abolition of slavery in the Union would have to be accomplished by an amendment to the Constitution.<sup>14</sup> If anything, the proclamation represented a refusal on Lincoln’s part to make any decision between justice and the Constitution. Instead, he avoided the conflict by framing emancipation in terms of his war powers.

One of the film’s most intriguing scenes points to this exceptional exercise of war powers. During the Fourth of July festivities, Lincoln takes part in a tug-of-war. Belatedly entering the contest, he takes his place as the anchor. The other team seems to be getting the better of Lincoln, but he holds it together. On the verge of defeat, Lincoln hitches the rope to a nearby wagon. *Lincoln cheats*. And he exhibits no remorse over his deception.

The scene is puzzling until one remembers that the game is tug-o-war. Rules operate quite differently in a life-or-death contest. The festivities thus gave subtle expression to the various facets of Lincoln's statesmanship, hinting at his resolve before the mob: awkward and ill-suited to the fashionable company of Stephen Douglas's circle, with which he briefly socializes, but very much at home amidst the loafers and laborers splitting rails with a hickory maul and dogwood glut; amiably fickle as judge of the entries in the pie contest, wavering back and forth in the arbitrary contest between apple and peach, but decisive and bold when the stakes are high in the tug-o-war. Lincoln, we are to understand, knows when a thing is a matter of social pretension or mere taste and when it is a matter of life and death.

Even more problematic for Smyth's account is the fact that Lincoln did not extend constitutional protection to slaves as *property*. Instead, he denied that the federal government possessed adequate legislative power to abolish slavery. Nothing in Article I, section 8 (which contains an enumeration of Congress's legislative powers) permitted Congress to regulate the "domestic institutions" of the states.<sup>15</sup> Congress had no more power to abolish slavery than to pass a divorce law. The verity of Lincoln's argument may be subject to challenge on the grounds of the Republican Guaranty Clause or naturalization power, but it was in fact his position and it was miles away from the claim that slaves are a protected form of property.

All of this is rather beside the point, though, because the complexity to which Trotti's script more likely refers is the issue of slavery in the territories. In his famous series of debates with Stephen Douglas—whom Lincoln encounters repeatedly in the film—and in the infamous *Dred Scott* decision, the central issue was the status of slaves as mere property. The slaveholding interest, with Chief Justice Taney as its mouthpiece, maintained that citizens could not be prevented from taking their rightful property, including slaves, into any territory or state in the Union. Lincoln's rebuttal to this argument exploded the simplicity of the Southern view. While a person was free to transport mere property, such as a horse, into a territory without restraint, the same could not be said for slaves. For slaves, unlike livestock, had to be counted as "persons" within the meaning of the Constitution; slaves possessed certain rights that pushed back against the property rights of the slave owner. Lincoln did, therefore, move beyond the simplistic formulation of law as right and wrong, but he did it in a way that maintained the legitimacy of the law. He sought to mitigate the supposed rights of slave owners by opposing to them the rights of slaves. Lincoln thus remained within the terms he had learned from Blackstone while coming to understand the complexity of applying the law in everyday life. Lincoln

is still holding the law in reverence and submitting himself to its dictates.

The film likewise manifests a connection to secession by reference to Lincoln's association with Henry Clay and the American System. The film opens on the front porch of Lincoln's store in New Salem in 1832. John T. Stuart, the district's congressman, has just finished his stump speech, railing against Andrew Jackson to the delight of his audience.<sup>16</sup> Having finished his tirade, he summons young Lincoln to address the small assembly of residents "on behalf of the great and incorruptible Whig Party." The scene depicts a stump speech from one of Lincoln's early campaigns for a seat in the Illinois legislature. "My politics are short and sweet, like the old woman's dance. I'm in favor of a national bank, of the internal improvement system, and high protective tariff." These three policies are, of course, the centerpiece of Henry Clay's American System, which formed the basic platform of the Whig Party, of which Lincoln was a member in his early career. It is significant that South Carolina nullified the tariff in November 1832, the same year in which the scene is set. The nullification doctrine articulated by John C. Calhoun to justify South Carolina's actions would later form the basis for the right of secession claimed by the Southern states in the 1850s. Ford and Trotti thus immediately place Lincoln in the position of defending Henry Clay's nationalist policies against the secessionist claims of the South.

Given this context, it is unlikely that Trotti's decision to give the defendants in the trial the name Clay was merely coincidental. There is good evidence for seeing this allusion to Clay and Whig nationalism as a connection with Lincoln's actions in the Civil War. In the film Lincoln successfully defends the Clay brothers from the anarchic demands of the mob—standing in as analogs of secessionist efforts—without the actual employment of force. Given a fair trial, justice is done. Later in his career, Lincoln will attempt to defend the Union against secessionists by the threat of force and by appeal to constitutional principle. In that case, however, he will be brought to make good his threat and, as we know, he shows that he actually possesses the resolve he only claimed for himself in the film. Once again, what seemed simple in his youth—talking down a mob—will prove vastly more complicated, and deadly, in his later career.

### Conclusion: The Fate of the Great Man

It seems fitting, in conclusion, to situate this portrayal of democratic statesmanship in the broader sweep of Ford's work. I have argued that in *Young Mr. Lincoln* John Ford and Lamar Trotti are engaging an issue that is central both to Ford's films and to Lincoln's political thought.

That issue is the tension between individual greatness and the rule of law, a tension heightened in a democracy by the demos's passion for equality. In the film's portrayal of Lincoln, Ford and Trotti suggest a solution to this tension that is fundamentally consistent with the one Lincoln suggested in the Lyceum Address. To remain within the political community, the great man must hold a sincere reverence for the law and be willing to exhibit humility in declaiming his own superiority. In the context of these characteristics, greatness can be a force that preserves the law and protects the community from harm. The film depicts Lincoln as the paradigmatic combination of these characteristics and alludes to his mature leadership based on these commitments in his later career. Despite the film's portrayal of Lincoln as the paradigmatic resolution of the tension between greatness and the rule of law, it sees no need to gloss over his humanity. Throughout the film, he exhibits the faux pas of a flawed person. He is somewhat awkward and gangly, he cannot dance very well, and he even cheats in a tug-of-war contest by tying his end of the rope to a wagon. But then, there is no need to conceal the humanity and imperfection of this hero.

Ford's Lincoln thus avoids the fate of Ransom Stoddard, the young attorney in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* who built his political career on a noble lie. Neither will Lincoln be relegated to wander or disappear into obscurity like Tom Doniphon. Smyth has argued that Ford and Trotti sought to set a more human Lincoln in contrast to the mythologized versions usually portrayed in films and that they were not, by doing this, seeking to debunk Lincoln's greatness.<sup>17</sup> Smyth is right for more reasons than he realizes. Lincoln actually did have the strength to fight when words failed and the wits to speak when violence was imprudent. Why ought we to conceal his humanity and preach noble lies when the truth is not destructive, when we might learn to emulate the great man's reverence for the law? There is no need to print the legend when greatness, humility, and submission to the law are combined in the same figure.

As the contrasts with Ransom Stoddard and Tom Doniphon suggest, Ford's confidence that a resolution between greatness and the rule of law could be found eroded over the course of his career. *Young Mr. Lincoln* represents an optimistic point of departure in 1938 and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* an ambivalent conclusion in 1962. In between ranged a number of reprisals of the basic theme. As we have already had occasion to note, *My Darling Clementine* presented viewers in 1946 with another exercise in democratic myth-making that set up Wyatt Earp (played by Henry Fonda) as a model. Two years later, *Fort Apache* exposed the folly of towering ambition and the thirst for distinction in the form of

a military commander, Lieutenant Colonel Owen Thursday (again, played by Henry Fonda), who defies democratic norms in pursuit of greatness and whose rash brinksmanship must be recast by his successors as an act of heroism. Notably, this case study in the deleterious effects of ambition takes the form of a fictional figure, but one that stands in as a vivid analog for General George Custer. As if to emphasize the implicit criticism, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, the next installment in Ford's cavalry trilogy, opens with a veteran officer (played by John Wayne) receiving the news of Custer's last stand. But even this gloss on the dangers of ambition pales in comparison to the deep skepticism on display in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, in which preservation of the rule of law may require perpetuating a falsehood and not merely recasting folly as heroism. Together, these later films convey the impression that great ambition is more likely to breed rash pursuit of honor than preservation of the law and that humble submission to the rule of law is unlikely to be combined with the strength necessary to defend it.

One might object that this reads too much into the contrast between *Young Mr. Lincoln* and *Liberty Valence*. Perhaps Ford's confidence did not erode over time; it is simply the case that Lincoln is genuinely exceptional and his model cannot guide ordinary politics. But the film itself defies this reading by setting Lincoln's statesmanship in decidedly ordinary circumstances. In this regard, *Young Mr. Lincoln* as well as *My Darling Clementine* stand in stark contrast with Ford's later films, which convey the conviction that greatness cannot suffer an ordinary existence. Though Trotti's script, with its insistence on grounding Lincoln's statesmanship in the ambition to rule, may have been rejected by Ford in 1938, it anticipates his eventual view remarkably well. Greatness must have a constructive field of ambition to harvest, or else it will languish in obscurity or exhaust itself in pursuit of distinction.

As much as Ford might have minimized the problem of political ambition in the film, he could not eliminate it. This is vivid in the final scene, in which Lincoln is seeing off the Clay family on the outskirts of Springfield. Lincoln's companion asks him if he will be returning to the town. Lincoln, looking off down the road, declares his intention to carry on and "walk up to the top of this hill." Some have misread this ending, concluding that Lincoln is leaving behind a flawed legal process to pursue a career in politics, that he is abandoning the work of the law to incompetent men.<sup>18</sup> But this interpretation sells Ford and Trotti short, for it is Lincoln's statesmanship before the mob that enables the legal process to operate in the first place. Thus, he can just as easily be said to enter



politics to further secure the legal process as to abandon it—his political ambition and his superiority to other men eventually prove more a bulwark than a threat to the rule of law and, ironically, to democratic equality.

## Notes

1. See Abraham Lincoln, “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions: Address before the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, January 27, 1838,” in Don E. Fehrenbacher, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: A Documentary Portrait through His Speeches and Writings* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1964), 34–43. Hereafter cited as “Lyceum Address.”
2. Two scripts may be found in the Lilly Library at the University of Indiana-Bloomington (John Ford Papers, box 4, folders 11–13). Quotes are from the “revised final” script dated February 27, 1939. The other script (not used herein) in the collection is marked “final” and dated January 27, 1939. I am grateful to David Frasier and Sue Presnell of the Lilly Library for their patient assistance obtaining Trotti’s script.
3. J. E. Smyth, “*Young Mr. Lincoln*: Between Myth and History in 1939,” *Rethinking History* 7, no. 2 (2003): 193.
4. Mark S. Rheinhardt, quoted in Smyth, “*Young Mr. Lincoln*,” 194.
5. Smyth, “Young Mr. Lincoln,” 194.
6. Mary P. Nichols, “Heroes and Political Communities in John Ford’s Westerns: The Role of Wyatt Earp in *My Darling Clementine*,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 31, no. 2 (2002): 78–84.
7. In his first description of Lincoln in the script, Trotti highlights the importance of Lincoln’s physical prowess. “At this time he is in the full flower of his manhood, with a physical strength which has already made him favorably known throughout the county” (Trotti, *Young Mr. Lincoln*, 4).
8. Trotti, *Young Mr. Lincoln*, 3.
9. Trotti, *Young Mr. Lincoln*, 5.
10. Lincoln, “Lyceum Address,” in Fehrenbacher, *Abraham Lincoln*, 34–43.
11. Geoffrey O’Brien, “Hero in Waiting,” *Criterion Collection*, 2006, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/413-young-mr-lincoln-hero-in-waiting>.
12. Virginia Wright Wexman, “Right and Wrong; That’s [Not] All There Is to It!”: *Young Mr. Lincoln* and American Law,” *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 3 (2005): 20–24, 29.
13. Smyth, “Young Mr. Lincoln,” 206.
14. Lincoln, “Emancipation Proclamation,” in Fehrenbacher, *Abraham Lincoln*, 210–12.
15. Lincoln, “First Inaugural,” in Fehrenbacher, *Abraham Lincoln*, 151–53.
16. Funny enough, in the script Trotti actually acknowledges that “as a matter of record, the Jackson men probably outnumber the Whigs two-to-one” in New Salem in 1832 (Trotti, *Young Mr. Lincoln*, 3).
17. Smyth, “Young Mr. Lincoln,” 200–04.
18. Norman Rosenberg, “Young Mr. Lincoln: The Lawyer as Superhero,” *Legal Studies Forum* 15, no. 3 (1991): 214–29.

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