

UTS Speakers' Forum: Lincoln's Fascinating Character and Political Bent

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Dr. Isaacs

In spite of blustery winter weather, an attentive audience showed up at the Massena Mansion on Thursday, March 7, for yet another interesting and enlightening presentation by the Rev. Dr. Mark Isaacs, Assistant Professor of Ministry and Management at the Unification Theological Seminary, and pastor of the of St. Paul's Lutheran Church of Wurtemberg in Rhinebeck, NY.

Dr. Isaacs gave a fascinating PowerPoint presentation on the life of President Abraham Lincoln, delving into many interesting facets of our 16th President's nature and character, as well as his political affiliations and views.

Lincoln was far from the polished, proud, gentile, and well connected politicians of his day, who came from distinguished and wealthy families of high society, Dr. Isaacs explained. Rather, he came from a desperately poor family in Kentucky, where his father never could find any success as a farmer. He could hardly scrape together a living sufficient to care for his family.

As a teen, Abe worked hard on the family farm doing chores and taking care of the livestock. He had the unfortunate luck to have been kicked in the face by a horse, which may have been part of the reason his face appears to be quite lopsided. This, and the fact that his strict father thought him lazy because he would rather read a book than do farm work, and the death of his mother at an early age, all seemed to contribute to Lincoln developing a self-deprecating personality as he grew up.

Dr. Isaac noted that in response to a fellow politician who once said he was two faced, Lincoln responded, "If I was two faced, why would I be wearing this one?!"

But as a self-educated man, Lincoln's natural intelligence, penetrating thought, and determination propelled him out of the world of rural poverty to become a wealthy railroad lawyer in Springfield, Illinois and politician. After only one two year term in Congress, an amazing set of circumstances catapulted him into the presidency in 1860 at the age of 51.

Lincoln belonged to the Whig party of Henry Clay, and subscribed to their views of favoring less government interference in business, mercantilism—where government allows industrial monopolies and protectionism, a strong national bank, and a anti-slave position.

These views were strongly opposed by the Jefferson/Jackson Democratic Party, which favored the agrarian society, decentralized government, slavery in the South, and free trade. The two parties clashed over and over again for thirty years leading up to the Civil War, mostly over the economics of expanding slavery into the territories.

Lincoln became a nationally known figure through the well publicized Lincoln-Douglas debates over the race for a Illinois Senate seat. Lincoln was credited with winning most of the debates—not so much by his eloquence, which he lacked, but by the strength of his words and argument—but he lost the election. However, as Dr. Isaacs explained, that led to an invitation to speak at Cooper Union College in New York City. In the speech, Lincoln elaborated his views on slavery, affirming that he did not wish it to be expanded into the western territories and claiming that the Founding Fathers would agree with this position.

The powerful New York City newspapers, including the New York Tribune, and the New York Times praised Lincoln's speech, and Dr. Isaacs said it probably was one of the major factors that led him to the presidency.

Lincoln was a long shot for the nomination of the newly formed Republican Party, but after he got the nod, the breakdown of the Democratic Party over the slavery issue allowed Lincoln to win the presidency with only 39% of the vote.

Lincoln's innate sense of ethical and moral values, honesty and kindly heart, his incredible patience under fire, his amazing abilities as a master politician, and his total dedication to preserving the union all contributed to his success as president, all in spite of overwhelming odds against him, including his own cabinet of powerful men who at first thought they could control him, and a wife who was practically stealing government money to lavishly furnish the White House and herself with expensive decorations and clothes.

Dr. Isaac's insight into Lincoln's mind and character was enlightening, and was presented with his typical animated, humorous and intense presentation, and was enjoyed by all.