God and Great Men

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In the beginning, God smiled on the United States. Americans in the 19th century looked upward and smiled back. Their relationship with their deity, the closeness they felt in their personal union with God, meant that they lived in a world very different from our own. This is not to say that they lacked shared human qualities that have always transcended place and time: They loved and lost, laughed and cried, lived and died, just as we do. Nor does it mean that modern Americans have spurned Christianity. But for Americans living in the six decades before the Civil War, when they looked outside of themselves toward the world that lay at their feet and that passed by in the bustle of city streets, or when they gazed toward the Paradise that existed beyond the light blue of the heavenly sky above them, they knew, in their hearts and souls, that life happened and that all events unfolded because there was a moving force in the universe behind all actions, all happenstances, all great moments in the long history of mankind. Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, and Frederick Douglass—three Great Men of the 19th century—conceived of God's providence as the determining force of the universe, including all humankind, but they regarded Christian religiosity and especially their personal relationships with the Almighty differently, each to his own set of beliefs.

To the greatest degree, religion was the only means by which Americans could comprehend why things, good or bad, happened to them or to others—why blessings poured down on them, why disasters struck individuals and communities and nations, why some prayers were answered and others were not. In their day, they possessed relatively little understanding of how science and mathematics could elucidate the workings of the world, except for Newtonian natural laws or Euclidean geometry, or how science could sometimes explain the inexplicable. More important, religion—and not science—defined their worldview and made life, with all its inherent mysteries, mostly intelligible, so long as one accepted the idea that human affairs operated according to God's will and God's purpose could not be known.

Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2023

Religion also brought order to their lives, unity to their towns, and a personal sense of where they belonged in the world. During the decades before the Civil War, in fact ever since the founding of English colonies in the New World, Americans saw and fathomed their world according to their faith in an immanent Protestant God who determined all things, all actions, every movement under the sun. Even the Founding Fathers—whose Enlightenment idea of the Creator transformed God into a Master Clockmaker who had put all of history into motion and then stepped back to watch its gyrating movements and its interlocking gears as time wore on—recognized that ordinary people, the mass of the middling sort, held fast to their Protestant beliefs and remained loyal to their denominations. In fact, most of the Founders embraced religion rather more fondly than their reputations suggest.

With the rise of democracy in the decades following the American Revolution and the ratification of the Constitution, the Enlightenment came to an end, having been replaced by the caustic realities of the marketplace, the expanding country, and the enthusiastic Christianity of evangelical Protestantism. The deist days were not entirely over, but popular religion, spurred by tumultuous religious revivals, rose with the spread of democracy, egalitarianism, and individualism. Communalism coexisted with individualism, which perhaps explains why so many different Protestant sects and denominations came into being during the height of the Second Great Awakening. In a similar fashion, Enlightenment ideas of separation of church and state, religious freedom, and the disestablishment of religion in the different states ended up democratizing religion in ways that the Founders could not have foreseen. In the years between Thomas Jefferson's first term as president and James Buchanan's only term, faith and piety structured the lives of ordinary Americans and made plain to them far more about the known universe than science or technology at the time ever could, although the irony was that these same Americans lived through one of the greatest eras of invention and technological advancement in human history. At the crux of things, their religion helped foster a feral anti-intellectualism that remains a permanent vestige in American life. Their worldview—an ideological and spiritual understanding of their place in the cosmos—rested almost entirely on a belief in God's will and omnipotence. Individuals placed their destiny in the hands of a "true and living God" who determined the initiation and outcome of every step taken by man. Toward the end of her life, when her mind may not have been as clear as it had once been, Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851),

stiffly maintained that she had not written the novel: "God wrote it. I merely did his dictation."[1]

It is safe to say that evangelical Christian Protestantism, more than any other force in the nation, sculpted the contours of American society during the first half of the 19th century and beyond. That Protestantism—despite the religious diversity, white and black, that had already taken root in the country—forged a national culture that contained elements based not only on fundamental evangelical Christian beliefs but also on republican ideology and democratic principles. A year before Mrs. Stowe's famous book was serialized in newspapers, another novelist, Herman Melville, wrote this in a fictional account of his experiences at sea:

> We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. Seventy years ago [roughly, 1781, the end of the War for Independence] we escaped from thrall; and, besides our first birth-right—embracing one continent on earth—God has given to us, for a future inheritance, the broad domains of the political pagans, that shall yet come and lie down under the shade of our ark, without bloody hands being lifted. God has predestinated, mankind expects, great things from our [American] race; and great things we feel in our souls.

Americans could not know themselves or their nation without first knowing God and the avowed terms of their covenant with him. Indeed, as the Reverend Lyman Beecher, Harriet's father, pointed out in 1831, the very survival of the United States—the Union—might very well depend entirely on acknowledging God's role in holding the country together: "The government of God is the only government which will hold society, against depravity within and temptation without; and this it must do by the force of its own law written upon the heart. This is the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace which alone can perpetuate national purity and tranquility—that law

1. Charles Stewart to George William Stiles, May 4, 1861, in *Letters of the Hon. Joseph Holt, the Hon. Edward Everett, and Commodore Charles Stewart, on the Present Crisis* (Philadelphia, 1861), 44; Annie Fields, ed., *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1897), 377.

of universal and impartial love by which alone nations can be kept back from ruin."[2]

Even Americans less influenced by the wave of religious enthusiasm that broke across the nation in the antebellum decades saw that God's will reigned supreme in all matters. During the height of the Civil War, when the fate of the Union remained uncertain, Abraham Lincoln wrote to a Quaker, Mrs. Eliza P. Gurney, to say that "the purposes of the Almighty are perfect, and must prevail, though we erring mortals may fail to accurately perceive them in advance."[3] Although Lincoln's own religious beliefs, beyond his firm trust in the preordination of fatalism—or what, in Lincoln's case, might be more accurately called secular determinism or, even more precisely, predeterminism—did not readily conform to the prevailing evangelical Protestant tenets of the time or even to Calvinism's infralapsarian view of predestination. Yet his belief in a higher force seems indubitable and actually seems to have increased over time, especially as the tragedy of war brought him face to face with an almost endless quotient of human misery. Lincoln's religious beliefs are difficult, if not impossible, to know fully. As a young man he believed in God, or what he called the "Sufficient Cause"; this higher power had already determined all that had ever happened in the past and all that would ever happen in the future.[4] Exactly what constituted the "Sufficient Cause," Lincoln never spelled out. But his views about God changed as the times changed. By the time of his presidency, he more confidently spoke of God as God, in a manner recognizable to American Protestants. He came to believe in God as the prime mover of all events and the actions of humankind.

Like many other Americans, Lincoln believed that God alone knew how the Civil War would unfold, including every occurrence, great

2. Herman Melville, *White-Jacket* (1850), in G. Thomas Tanselle, ed., *Redburn: His First Voyage; White-Jacket or The World in a Man-of-War; Moby-Dick or, The Whale* (New York, 1983), 506; Lyman Beecher, "The Necessity of Revivals of Religion to the Perpetuity of Our Civil and Religious Institutions," *Spirit of the Pilgrims*, 4 (1831), 471.

3. Lincoln to Eliza P. Gurney, September 4, 1864, in Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, for the Abraham Lincoln Association, 1953–55), 7:535.

4. William H. Herndon to the Editor, after December 4, 1882, *Herndon on Lincoln: Letters*, Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds. (Urbana: Knox College / University of Illinois Press, 2016), 147. The letter was published in *The Truth Seeker*, 10 (February 24, 1883), 114, under the headline "Abraham Lincoln's Religious Beliefs."

and small, from beginning to end. As to Lincoln's personal religion, he skillfully avoided revealing precisely what he believed, other than to make known his lack of affinity to organized religion, including the Christianity of Protestant sects. It seems likely that he consciously aroused confusion over his religious beliefs, hoping to keep his soul from public scrutiny. After his death, Mary Lincoln told William H. Herndon, her husband's former law partner, that he

> had no hope & no faith in the usual acceptance of those words: he never joined a Church: he was a religious man always, as I think: he first thought—to say think—about this subject when Willie [their son] died [in 1862]—never before. He felt religious More than Ever about the time he went to Gettysburg: he was not a technical Christian: he read the Bible a good deal about 1864.

With penetrating insight, and with more depth than Mary's assertions, Herndon keenly discerned the nub of Lincoln's particular spirituality: "All this is no evidence of a want of religion in Mr. Lincoln; it is rather an evidence that he had his own religion."[5]

5. Mary Lincoln, Interview, [September 1866], in Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana and Chicago, 1998), 360; William H. Herndon to Truman Bartlett, October 1887, in *Herndon on Lincoln: Letters*, 265. The scholarly debate over Lincoln's religious beliefs is a tangled one, largely because nearly all historians and biographers have sought to explain his religion as, what one might call, a mighty fortress—a systematic set of religious ideas that began with overt infidelity and evolved over time into his expressed acceptance, in the Second Inaugural Address, of God's mysterious providence. In those differing scholarly interpretations, little room is allowed for Lincoln's unsystematic musings and for all the resplendent inconsistencies and contradictions found in the extant evidence. For the most relevant studies of Lincoln's religion, an analytical endeavor that has no end, see William E. Barton, *The Soul of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1920); Harlan Hoyt Horner, *The Growth of Lincoln's Faith* (New York, 1939); William J. Wolf, *The Religion of Abraham Lincoln* (1959; New York, 1963); David C. Hein, "The Calvinistic Tenor of Abraham Lincoln's Religious Thought," *Lincoln Herald*, 85 (Winter 1983), 212–20; David C. Hein, "Lincoln's Theology and Political Ethics," in Kenneth W. Thompson, ed., *Essays on Lincoln's Faith and Politics* (Lanham, Md., 1983), 103–79; Glen E. Thurow, "Abraham Lincoln and American Political Religion," in Gabor S. Boritt and Norman O. Forness, eds., *The Historian's Lincoln: Pseudohistory, Psychohistory, and History* (Urbana, Ill., 125–43; Wayne C. Temple, *Abraham Lincoln: From Skeptic to Prophet* (Mahomet, Ill., 1995); Allen C. Guelzo, "Abraham Lincoln and the Doctrine of Necessity," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 18 (Winter 1997), 57–81; Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1999); Lucas E. Morel, *Lincoln's Sacred Effort: Defining Religion's Role in American Self-Government* (Lanham, Md., 2000); Stewart Winger, *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics* (DeKalb, Ill., 2003); Joseph. Fornieri, *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith* (DeKalb, Ill., 2003); Mark Noll, "Lincoln's God," *Journal of Presbyterian History*, 82 (Summer 2004), 77–88;

At the core of his religious beliefs, or his lack of them, was something Lincoln called his "Doctrine of Necessity." This doctrine, which actually constituted Lincoln's worldview, was the presumption that an individual's future had been preordained and there was nothing he or she could do to alter its outcome. It resembled Calvinistic predestination, like that of the Puritans or Baptists (a radical offshoot of Puritanism), but it did not hold that God's plan for every individual had been decided beforehand and that the Almighty watched remotely from heaven as those plans unfolded. Thus, Lincoln's fatalism did not accept the deists' image of God as a clockmaker who had no propensity to interfere in the affairs of mankind. In opposition to fatalism was evangelicalism, which allowed for individual free will and the ability of humans to determine a more perfect union with God by achieving His grace and then salvation. Rationalism and Unitarianism, in contrast, acknowledged the existence of God but placed a higher value, as the Transcendentalists did, on man's reason and the laws of nature.[6]

But Lincoln's fatalism did not adhere to an *idée fixe*; his fatalistic persuasion changed and developed over time. Sometimes Lincoln's quest for religious surety shifted from one foot to the other, and sometimes he stood on both feet at once, especially when he realized that God's purposes could not be humanly known or understood. On many occasions, especially when he felt downcast or melancholic, he thought that God's will was inalterable, that preordination prohibited

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Richard Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power* (New York, 2006), 32–44, 56–57, 222–28, 246–47, 276–79, 299–300, 313; Joseph R. Fornieri, "Tocqueville and Lincoln on Religion and Democracy in America," in Fornieri and Sara Vaughn Gabbard, eds., *Lincoln's America, 1809–1865* (Carbondale, Ill., 2008), 28–54; Carwardine, "Lincoln's Religion," in Eric Foner, ed., *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World* (New York, 2008), 223–48; Noll, "American Religion," in ibid., 72–93; Ronald C. White, Jr., *A. Lincoln: A Biography* (New York, 2009), 35–36, 54–55, 122–23, 180–84, 403–4, 511–12, 523–24, 606–8, 622–27, 662–66; Stephen Mansfield, *Lincoln's Battle with God: A President's Struggle with Faith and What it Meant for America* (Nashville, Tenn., 2012); Douglas L. Wilson, "'Nothing Equals *Macbeth*': Notes on Lincoln's Fatal Attraction," in Kenneth L. Vaux and Melanie Baffes, eds., *Nation and World, Church and God: The Legacy of Garry Wills* (Evanston, Ill., 2014), 83–99; Douglas L. Wilson, "William H. Herndon on Lincoln's Fatalism," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 35 (Summer 2014), 1–17; Ferenc Morton Szasz and Margaret Connell Szasz, *Lincoln and Religion* (Carbondale, Ill., 2014); Guelzo, *Redeeming the Great Emancipator* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016); Stephen J. Vicchio, *Abraham Lincoln's Religion* (Eugene, Ore., 2018); Guelzo, "God and Mr. Lincoln," *Lincoln Lore*, No. 1917 (Spring 2018), 15–20.

6. Guelzo, "Abraham Lincoln and the Doctrine of Necessity," 57–81; Noll, "Lincoln's God," 77–88; Carwardine, *Lincoln*, 4, 34–35, 39–40, 42–44, 313; Wilson, "William H. Herndon on Lincoln's Fatalism," 1–17; Guelzo, "God and Mr. Lincoln," 15–20.

any manifestation of free will. Other times, when he was optimistic or believed, for instance, that the war effort was going well, he believed that mankind had enough free will to alter God's plan toward what seemed to be an irrevocably different outcome (which, of course, might have been God's plan all along). Does this mean that Lincoln was sometimes confused over God's meaning and purpose? Was he in a quandary about his own life and his destiny? Was he worried about the fate of his soul? Was he troubled by the destiny of his nation? Indeed, he was.

More than anything else, he seemed much like the English Seekers of the 17th century, a loose group of Christians who split from Puritanism, rejected all organized religions and denominations as corrupt, advocated religious liberty and toleration, and believed that only God's revelation could reveal the true church. Roger Williams—the founder of Rhode Island and a friend of another Seeker, the poet and intellectual John Milton—practiced his own brand of Seekerism, but only after experimenting with Anglicism, Puritanism, Separatism, and Baptism. In the end, Seekers, who cast aside the idea of apostolic succession, all church rituals, and religious idolatry, worshiped together in informal meetings, but sometimes, as in the case of Roger Williams, their radical ideas—often considered heretical by other Protestant denominations—sadly resulted in individuals becoming a congregation of one.[7] It is unlikely that Lincoln knew anything at all of Williams's theology, although his habit of reading widely in books and newspapers, especially as a young man, might have conceivably let him stumble upon the name and beliefs of Rhode Island's founder or the English Seekers. One thing is certain: Lincoln did not heavily ponder theology in any concerted or profound undertaking. His Christian-leaning beliefs, even when he seemed caught in the vise-like grip of fatalism, tended to be a persuasion rather than a holistic system of theistic faith and principles. He seems not to have had a soteriology, for he could never be sure how God chose his saints or if he was among the saved—things he seems not to have contemplated. Indeed, the doctrine of salvation largely escaped his attention, and

7. Vernon Lewis Parrington, "Roger Williams—Seeker," in *Main Currents in American Thought*, 3 vols. (New York, 1927), 1:62–75; Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (New York, 1978), 94–95, 112, 156–57, 224–26. On the Seeker movement in England, see Champlin Burrage, *The Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research, 1550–1641*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1912), 1:365–367; Rufus M. Jones, *Mysticism and Democracy in the English Commonwealth* (1932; New York, 1965), 58–104; Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London, 1972), 148–75.

when pressed for answers he swayed back to fatalism, in which the future was unknown and unknowable.

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In contrast, Ulysses S. Grant, the Union's greatest general, believed more traditionally in God and the Almighty's implacable will. Grant's first sentence of his celebrated *Memoirs*, written 20 years after the end of the war, was a simple statement: "Man proposes and God disposes," an aphorism that simplified God's relationship with mankind.[8] Because Grant kept any introspection he may have performed to himself, his attitude toward religion is more difficult to assay. In the reckoning of Jesse Root Grant, the general's youngest son, his father was an agnostic, but there is some good evidence to suggest otherwise, including the first sentence of his *Memoirs*. Young Jesse Grant claimed that he never "heard father express any religious or non-religious views," which given the elder Grant's secular frame of mind was probably true. Despite the Methodist piety of his parents, he was never baptized until he lay on his deathbed in 1885, when a minister administered the sacrament while the general was unconscious; when he woke up and learned what had happened "he expressed his surprise at the action."[9] As a child, Ulysses Grant attended Sunday services at the Methodist church in Georgetown, Ohio, where he grew up, but his parents did not impose their religious beliefs on him, except to insist that he respectfully observe the Sabbath. In his adulthood, he overlooked this parental guidance and regularly broke the Sabbath without thinking about it or even being aware of it.

8. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, 2 vols. (New York, 1885), 1:7. On Grant's religious beliefs, see Ronald C. White, *American Ulysses: The Life of Ulysses S. Grant* (New York, 2016), 138, 400, 491–92, 641–42. White promises his readers a look at Grant's "religious odyssey," by which he implies that the general grew in his piety over time; xxv. But White demonstrates no such thing. He makes statements like Grant "inherited some of his mother's piety," which is something he cannot prove; 20.

9. Jesse Root Grant to Hamlin Garland, December 1, 1896, Hamlin Garland Papers, University of Southern California. The baptizing Methodist minister John P. Newman, D.D., vowed that the general was conscious during the baptism, and he recorded that the dying man said "I am much obliged to you, Doctor. I intend[ed] to take that step myself." See quotation from Newman's diary in Stefan Lorant, "Baptism of U.S. Grant," *Life*, 30 (March 26, 1951), 93. Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens) said of Newman that "if one might trust his daily reports[,] the General had conceived a new and perfect interest in spiritual things. It is fair to presume that the most of Newman's daily reports originated in his own imagination." Harriet Elinor Smith et al., eds., *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, 3 vols. (Berkeley, Calif., 2010–15),1:99.

He seems to have believed in God, and, as he matured and became a very well-known figure, he knew how to invoke God's name for the sake of his public reputation. In May 1864, at a public reception in the White House, he accepted Lincoln's commission as a lieutenant-general by saying, "I feel the full weight of the responsibilities now devolving on me and know that if they are met it will be due to those armies, and above all to the favor of that Providence which leads both Nations and men." As with Lincoln, organized religion did not appeal to him, and he rarely spoke of God or Divine Providence, mostly because he could not muster a sustaining faith in Jesus Christ, unlike his mother and wife, who both fell victim to the vicissitudes of the Second Great Awakening. On one occasion, he admitted his want of faith: "Oh, if I could only have the faith that my sister, Mrs. [Mary] Cramer, has. Her trusting nature would meet this trouble and see a bright outcome to it better than I can." Grant carved out little room in his life for religion and prayer. His oldest son, Frederick Dent Grant, told Mark Twain that his father was "perfectly willing to have family prayers going on, or anything else that could be satisfactory to anybody, or increase anybody's comfort in any way; but he also said that while his father was a good man, and indeed as good as any man, Christian or otherwise, he was *not* a praying man."[10]

If 19th-century Americans believed in God's will as determining the course of human history and each nation's destiny, they also believed that great men could assert their own ideas and actions in conformity to God's great plan; more to the point, these great men ensured that God's will would be carried out on earth. Americans lauded the activities of great men and perceived them as heroes. Most of the anointed heroes came from the political and military realms, and Americans readily worshipped them as God's instruments—men who fulfilled God's desires but who may not necessarily have been imbued with God's grace. God, after all, did work in mysterious ways. He assembled a group of religious skeptics and deists, individuals steeped in the rational philosophy of the Enlightenment, to rebel against Great Britain, declare independence, and establish the United States of America. These Founders were the nation's greatest heroes. Among them, the greatest of all, was George Washington, who, as a general, won independence on the battlefield and, who, as the country's first president, ensured its destiny and fulfilled what many Americans believed to be

10. Grant, Speech, [March 9, 1864], in John Y. Simon et al., eds., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, 32 vols. (Carbondale, Ill., 1967–2009), 10:195; "The General's Sturdy Piety," *New York Times*, July 24, 1885; Smith, ed., *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, 1:99.

God's highest goal for the rising glory of the new United States. Even before his death in 1799, his countrymen called him the "Father of His Country," a sobriquet made permanent by the popularity of Mason L. Weems's fanciful biography of Washington, published soon after the Founder's death.[11]

The adoration of Great Men, like George Washington, served as a defining and unifying factor in American culture during the 19th century. Weems alone could not have elevated his subject to a hero's pedestal, but the force of Washington's character and demeanor did rise to seraphic heights, making his greatness evident to his contemporaries and to subsequent American generations.[12] Great Men captured people's attention and held it fast. It was Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish historian, who stood as the foremost proponent of the Great Man Theory, and he put forth how these extraordinary men had shaped the history of the world. Carlyle succinctly articulated his theory when he wrote: "The History of the world is but the biography of great men." In his view, great men qualified as gods to worship. In the United States, Ralph Waldo Emerson (a man of narrow face, broad interests, a hawk's profile, and a corvid's intelligence) took up the task of being one of Carlyle's most devoted disciples. Emerson and Carlyle met in 1833 in Scotland; after returning to America, Emerson worked as Carlyle's literary agent in the states. Reflecting Carlyle's heavy influence on him, Emerson wrote that "there is properly no history; only biography."[13] Both writers, Scottish and American, believed that by learning about great men and heroes, by coming to know the trials and triumphs they had experienced and overcome, the reader would discover his own heroism and, at the same time, his own virtues. The Great Man, in other words, although just an individual bobbing about on the sea of mankind, could ascend to his calling, make a difference in society, and thereby change the entire course of history, sometimes by self-will alone. As examples, Carlyle narrated the life stories of Muhammad, Shakespeare, Luther, Rousseau, Pericles, and Napoleon—all great men, all great heroes.

Yet time and modernization spelled doom for the veneration of Great Men. By the beginning of the 20th century, the Great Man Theory fell into disfavor by many American historians who criticized it as

11. Mason L. Weems, *The Life of George Washington* (Philadelphia, 1800), 177.

12. Marcus Cunliffe, *George Washington: Man and Monument* (Boston, 1958).

13. Thomas Carlyle, "The Hero as Divinity," in Carlyle, *Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841), *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, 30 vols. (New York, 1903), 5:29; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History" (1841), *Essays: First Series*, in Joel Porte, ed., *Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York, 1983), 240.

blind hero-worship. Nevertheless, the theory retained a certain hold over other scholars and writers who routinely wrote biographies of the country's most prominent leaders and noteworthy literary figures. To avoid the pitfalls of the panegyric Great Man Theory, however, modern biographers used a warts-and-all technique to portray their subjects more realistically and less reverentially. At the same time, biographers in our day have mostly conceded that it's best to like one's subject before getting ensnared in reconstructing his or her life because a totally negative assessment of a historical figure can make readers wonder if the author, through some sort of hidden agenda or nasty streak, has purposely set out to write a scathing critique rather than a balanced life story. Nevertheless, even these modern biographers too often succumb to teleological explanations of how greatness is achieved by individuals who self-make themselves in a steady march from ordinary to extraordinary by climbing the ladder of success one rung at a time, always upwards, until they reach the top.[14] According to these writers, the accumulation of life's experiences

14. See Richard Hofstadter, "Abraham Lincoln and the Self-Made Myth," in Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York, 1948), 93–136; Daniel Walker Howe, "Self-Made Men: Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass," in Howe, *Making of the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997),136–56; Kenneth J. Winkle, "Abraham Lincoln: Self-Made Man," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 21:2 (Summer 2000), 1–16. On Grant as a self-made man, see Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Lives and Deeds of Our Self-Made Men* (Hartford, Conn., 1872), 111–51, although Grant's father, Jesse, more fully fits the 19th-century definition of self-made. Frederick Douglass also saw himself as a self-made man and praised others who by their own efforts had risen to heights greater than their stations at birth. See Douglass, "The Trials and Triumphs of Self-Made Men," January 4, 1860, in John W. Blassingame et al., eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews—Volume 3: 1855–1863* (New Haven, Conn., 1985), 289–300; Douglass, *Self-Made Men: Address Before the Students of the Indian Industrial School, Carlisle, Pa.* (Carlisle, Penn., 1874). In the later, revised speech, Douglass mentioned Lincoln as a worthy self-made model. See also John Stauffer, *Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 2008). For self-made men in the American context, see Charles C. B. Seymour, *Self-Made Men* (New York, 1858); Irvin G. Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth of Rags to Riches* (New York, 1966); Ronald Preston Byars, "The Making of the Self-Made Man: The Development of Masculine Roles and Images in Antebellum American" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Michigan State University, 1979); Gary J. Kornblith, "Self-Made Men: The Development of Middling Class Consciousness in New England," *Massachusetts Review*, 26 (Summer/Fall 1985), 461–74; E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformation in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York, 1993), 18–25. Henry Clay is credited with coining the neologism "self-made men" in 1832; that attribution, however, is now in dispute. See Jim Cullen, "Problems and Promises of the Self-Made Myth," *Hedgehog Review*, 15 (Summer 2013), 8–22.

and a conscious will to rise up in the world is enough to lay bare the process by which great men (and women) become great. Greatness, in other words, can be achieved by an individual as the outcome of being self-made. Knowing that someone has achieved greatness creates an obligation by such biographers to explain precisely those aspects of a life that contributed to their subject's renown.[15]

The trouble is that no one, in the past or now, is truly a self-made person, despite the mythical place the phrase holds in the ethos of the American Dream. No matter how hard an individual tries to control his or her character and personality, no matter how much someone wants to transform him- or herself, there are always outside forces that influence who someone is and will become, beyond their own plans and desires. All this directly relates to biographies of Lincoln and Grant, both of whom have been described as self-made men. Lincoln very purposefully fostered his image as a self-made man; Grant seems not to have cared one way or another.[16]

The notion of a self-made individual is, upon close examination, an offshoot of the Great Man Theory. Knowing this should, by rights, make biographers more cautious in their work. With all of our supposedly modern sensibilities, including those influenced by psychology and other social sciences, it is extremely difficult to accept the idea that men and women, filled with moral certitude and a relentless purpose in life, can *make* themselves—all by themselves—into great or successful people. They can alter their perceptions, cast aside or acquire preferences, think new thoughts and bury old ones, pursue new and different goals, change jobs or professions, gain education or special knowledge, or, more fundamentally, shift their world view. But no one standing on his own or playing out a carefully planned life scheme can actually *make* himself. Everyone must live in the world—a reality that even America's most renowned loner, Henry David Thoreau,

15. For recent Lincoln biographies that are teleological in their interpretations and arguments, see, for example, Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 2005); Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, 2 vols. (Baltimore, 2008); White, *A. Lincoln*; David S. Reynolds, *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times* (New York, 2020); Jon Meacham, *And There Was Light: Abraham Lincoln and the American Struggle* (New York, 2022). To be fair, though, most biographies of famous people are, by their very nature, teleological, for they cannot avoid telling life stories in which an individual develops over time from childhood obscurity to adult greatness. In other words, great men and women acquire greatness; they are not born with it.

16. For a similar argument in relation to Lincoln's life, see James Oakes, "Lincoln and His Commas," *Civil War History*, 54 (June 2008), 176–93. See also Mike Myatt, "Self-Made Man—No Such Thing," *Forbes*, November 15, 2011, http://www.forbes.com/sites/mikemyatt/2011/11/15/self-made-man-no-such-thing.

fully understood and accepted. Life, in the end, is no Walden Pond. There is always that jolting railroad whistle shrilling in the distance, indifferently breaking nature's sublime silence and quelling the peace in one's heart.

Like other Americans, Abraham Lincoln worshipped George Washington as a great man without parallel. When he addressed the New Jersey state senate on February 21, 1861, on his inaugural journey to Washington, D.C., Lincoln mentioned his childhood fondness for Weems's book and its account of the battle of Trenton, which Washington and his ragtag army won in a surprise attack against the Hessians who held the town in December 1776. He also cherished the thoughts that came to him as a boy when he realized that the American soldiers at Trenton must have been fighting for something greater than "National Independence," something "that held out a great promise to all the people of the world." He hoped "that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle."[17] He understood deeply, as if it were a credo, that the Founding Fathers had not only won the colonies' independence from Great Britain but had, in the process, created a new nation where none had existed before.

His idealization of Washington and the Old Revolutionaries was not unique, however. When he was six or seven, Ulysses S. Grant also read Weems's biography of Washington. His adoration for Washington was so deep that on one occasion it became necessary for him to defend the deceased general's honor. During a visit from a Canadian cousin named John (or Jack), Grant heard him call George Washington "a traitor, a rebel" against the British crown. An outraged Ulysses replied: "When Washington is assailed, and especially by an English boy, I shall defend the Father of my country." The boys fell into a fistfight that ended with Ulysses giving his cousin "a thorough beating." When Hannah saw that her son had been in a fight, she reminded him that she had repeatedly warned him against scraping with other boys. Ulysses explained the circumstances of the fight, but his mother thought he should receive some sort of punishment for disobeying. But before she could think the matter through, his father intervened and declared that their son should not be chastised. "In my judgment,"

17. Lincoln, Address to the New Jersey Senate at Trenton, New Jersey, February 21, 1861, in Basler, ed., *Complete Works*, 4:235–36.

said the elder Grant, "he did exactly right; for the boy who would not fight to defend Washington is not worthy to be the son of Jesse and Hannah Grant."[18]

Across the land, Americans valued the honor and memory of the Founders, especially George Washington, who seemed to later generations almost the perfect leader and the perfect man. The best eulogy to Washington that anyone could give, suggested Charles Campbell in 1843, "would be for Americans to study his character, impress his farewell address . . . upon their hearts, and then bow their hearts before Heaven, and in a spirit of pious patriotism fervently ask 'make me like Washington.'" Henry Lee, father of Robert E. Lee, delivered a funeral oration soon after Washington's death in which he famously said that the first president was "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."[19] After the deaths of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams on July 4, 1826, and the death of James Madison, the last of the Founders, on June 28, 1836, some Americans argued that the era of the Old Revolutionaries was over and that it was time for the next generation to make their own contributions to the nation's betterment, but many others believed that the memory of the Founders' great deeds would live forever. This veneration of the Founding Fathers, including Washington, sprang from a national longing, once the Founders died and no longer occupied the American landscape, to reinstate the glory and achievements of the Revolutionary age, to sustain a touchstone with the Founders that would in essence defy their death and grant them an American immortality, and to use these great men as moral models for the next generation of heroes.

The hero, the truly great man, ripened over time. It was the same process by which Emerson himself had achieved greatness. "The great man makes the great thing," he said.[20] Along the same lines, an edi-

18. Major Penniman [Charles Wheeler Denison], *The Tanner-Boy and How He Became Lieutenant-General* (Boston, 1864), 20; F. W. H. Stansfield, *The Life of Gen'l. U. S. Grant* (New York, 1864), 22; Denison, *Tanner-Boy*, 22.

19. Charles Campbell, "To Whom does Washington's Glory Belong?" *Southern Literary Messenger*, 9 (October 1843), 589; Henry Lee, *Funeral Oration on the Death of George Washington* (Boston, [1800]), 14.

20. Emerson, "The American Scholar," August 31, 1837, in Porte, ed., *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 65. It is not clear whether Emerson meant that a great man *is* a great thing or that a great man produces a great result. Whatever the meaning, it is manifest that Emerson, like many great men, was conscious of his own greatness, although his humility prevented him from saying so. What he did say in an essay entitled "Greatness" was this: "Every man I meet is my master in some point, and in that I learn from him." See Emerson, "Greatness," *Letters and Social Aims* (1868), reprinted in Edward Waldo Emerson, ed., *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 12 vols. (Boston and New York, 1904), 8:313.

torial writer from Worcester, Massachusetts, supposed that "when the Almighty intrusted great faculties to any man, he placed him in adverse circumstances, in order that the majesty and might of those powers might be better exhibited by their fierce struggles with outward foes." For some Americans, however, the worship of great men could go only so far. In the early 1840s, an anonymous writer in the *Boston Courier* bemoaned that the country was overflowing in great men. "In years past," he wrote, "I used to be a great admirer of great men; but lately, these progenies have thickened round us to such a degree, that my admiration is minced up into very small bits, if I give every one of them a share."[21] Nevertheless, in the time of Emerson, which was also the time of Lincoln and Grant, Americans paid homage to those men, past and present, whom they called heroes or great. They believed that great men worked to push history along a path of an inevitable progression toward the betterment of mankind, a belief based on the commonly held assumption that great men and any individual great man could change, through the irresistible power of his greatness, the destiny of a people or a nation.

While other Americans celebrated the Founders and other great men, Ulysses S. Grant, for all his warrior-like defense in his youth of George Washington, showed no interest in such heroic figures. He did remark once, while studying at West Point, that he had seen several great men of his time, including President Martin Van Buren, Brigadier General Winfield Scott, Joel Roberts Poinsett (Secretary of War), James K. Paulding (Secretary of the Navy), Washington Irving, "and lots of other big bugs." Grant liked the fact that a house George Washington had lived in was on the grounds of the military academy, and across the river stood the house of Benedict Arnold, whom he called "that *base* and *heartless* traiter *to* his country and his God."[22] But the president, members of his cabinet, and General Scott were not heroes in Grant's estimation; he only reported that he had *seen* them in person and nothing more. In fact, Grant's reticence and his lack of any deep introspection during his entire lifetime (including when he wrote his *Memoirs* just before his death) kept him from revealing whom his heroes might have been—if, that is, he had any at all.

If Grant chose any man for that role, it was probably Colonel Zachary Taylor, who became a breveted brigadier general during the Mexican

21. "Great Men," *Worcester National Aegis*, January 3, 1849; [ ] to the Editor, *Boston Courier*, June 7, 1841.

22. Grant to R. McKinstry Griffith, September 22, 1839, in Simon, ed., *Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, 1:5–6.

War. Grant served in that war under Taylor and preferred him to the more stuffy Major General Winfield Scott, who, as commander of the army, directed the military campaigns against the Mexicans from March 1847 until the end of the war. Grant liked Taylor as a general because of his informality and nonchalance. "General Taylor," Grant wrote in his *Memoirs*, "never made any great show or parade, either of uniform or retinue." Taylor never wore a uniform, even on the battlefield, and his civilian clothes, which included a broad-brimmed straw hat, gave no indication of his rank. Grant said the general "dressed himself entirely for comfort," a practice Grant would follow during the Civil War, when he wore a private's simple blouse with his shoulder straps and stars pinned to his shoulders. Grant also liked the manner in which Taylor led his troops. "He moved about the field in which he was operating to see through his own eyes the situation," another practice that Grant tried to follow as often as possible in the Civil War; when circumstances prevented Grant from using his own eyes to assess a military situation, it usually led him into making errors. He admired how "Taylor saw for himself, and gave orders to meet the emergency without reference to how they would read in history."

But more than Taylor's insouciance and his hawk-eyed approach to waging war appealed to Grant. "Taylor was not a conversationalist," he wrote, "but on paper he could put his meaning so plainly that there could be no mistaking it. He knew how to express what he wanted to say in the fewest well-chosen words, but would not sacrifice meaning to the construction of high-sounding sentences."[23] Here is a hint as to where Grant learned how to practice an economy of words, both oral and written, in his communications with others, a practice that lasted until his death in 1885. It does not mean that Grant simply mimicked Taylor, for his own brevity in what he wrote and what he spoke had begun from the days of his early childhood. But Grant's comments about Taylor do reveal that he consciously cultivated clarity and concision in how he expressed himself as an adult. The passages on Taylor in Grant's *Memoirs* are not only praiseful, they disclose how important Taylor's unpretentious style and his casual manner were to Grant, how they fit his own notions of how a man and a soldier should express himself, and how he took Taylor's example and followed it as tightly as he could. It must have expended a great deal of energy to do so, to keep such rigid control over one's impulses, but it is also likely that Grant, the man of profound silences, never felt compelled to open up with anyone, other than his wife and children. It is impossible

23. Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 1:100, 138–39.

to know if Grant thought of Taylor as a personal hero, although it is easy to conclude that he considered him a great man. In talking and writing only sparingly, Grant not only modeled himself on Taylor, but he also effectively found a way to keep himself—particularly his private, personal self—from view.

For Lincoln, a far more open man than Grant, his heroes—the great men he most revered—were the Founders, who inspired many other Americans besides him. In the 19th century, Americans, who may have sensed the declension of the Founders' historical reputations, actively sought to get right with those great men and to promote and advance the revolutionary legacy of liberty. Lincoln's attachment to the Old Revolutionaries sprang from his autodidactism, his voracious consumption of newspapers, and his frontier sensibility of the meaning of liberty. In a speech given in 1838 to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, he described the Founders as

> a forest of giant oaks; but the all-resistless hurricane has swept over them, and left only, here and there, a lonely trunk, despoiled of its verdure, shorn of its foliage, unshading and unshaded, to murmur in a few more general breezes, and to combat with its mutilated limbs, a few more ruder storms, then to sink, and be no more.[24]

By emphasizing the loss of the Founders to the chill hands of death and by implying that in their absence their legacy nearly had been lost, Lincoln exaggerated his own and his countrymen's detachment from the Old Revolutionaries. Many Americans in Lincoln's time remembered the Founders (Henry Clay of Kentucky, another of Lincoln's political heroes, and Daniel Webster very purposely visited Thomas Jefferson at Monticello) or knew veterans of the War for Independence as members of their own extended family, or, as in the cases of Robert E. Lee, his own father, and of Lincoln, his own grandfather.

Be that as it may, Lincoln proposed a means by which the memory of the Founders could be reclaimed and reinvigorated. "The answer is simple," he said. "Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well wisher to his posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never tolerate their violation by others." He was concerned about mob violence that seemed to be spreading exponentially across the country. Although he did not mention it explicitly, his concern may have been

24. Lincoln, Speech to Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, January 27, 1838, in Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, 1:115. The speech was entitled "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions."

prompted by violence committed with a "mobocratic spirit" against Elijah P. Lovejoy, a Presbyterian minister and abolitionist, whose newspaper office in Alton, Illinois, was attacked by proslavery advocates in November 1837. The mob threw Lovejoy's printing equipment into the Mississippi and then, in a spirited gun battle with the abolitionist and his supporters, instantly killed him with a shotgun blast. Lincoln also worried, as the Founders did in their own time, that mob action signaled the breakdown of law and order and the efficacy of the nation's governmental framework. Successful mobs, using their murderous and destructive violence, could easily provide an opportunity for tyrants to rise up out of their midst. To combat such a possibility, Lincoln appealed to his audience:

> Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap—let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges;—let it be written in Primmers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;—let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the *political religion* of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars."[25]

It was Lincoln's first major speech. He was 28 years old.

* * *

On May 25, 1886, Frederick Douglass, the famous black abolitionist, orator, and editor, gave a lecture on John Brown, the insurrectionist who had been hanged more than 25 years earlier for leading an armed raid on the federal armory and arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), which many people—including Douglass—believed to be the first shots fired in the Civil War. To him, Brown was a great man and his own personal hero. During and after the Civil War, Douglass was also a great man and a hero to countless people, black and white, including those who knew he had played a crucial role in the antebellum abolitionist movement and in persuading President Lincoln that the time had come for emancipation. During and after the war, Douglass delivered his lecture on John Brown again and again to audiences around the country. It was his speech of choice, the one he never grew tired of giving after his first public oration of it in 1860. He had most famously delivered the speech in the spring of

25. Ibid., 1:111–12. In time, AL would discard the orotund writing style he used in this speech.

1881 at Storer College, an African American school on a hilltop above the village of Harpers Ferry. On this spring 1886 evening in Worcester, Massachusetts, Douglass would give yet another rendition of his Brown lecture, perhaps the most famous of all his speeches, which had been heard or read by thousands of people in the United States, Europe, and beyond.

Douglass, then in his late sixties, was the most famous black American in the world. Born in slavery in either 1817 or 1818, Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey (who later changed his name to Douglass) was the son of Harriet Bailey, a slave, and an unidentified white man. Like Abraham Lincoln, Douglass was an autodidact, but one who had to secretly learn to read and write. After working as a caulker in Baltimore, he attempted to buy his freedom, but his master refused. In September 1838, he escaped from Maryland, taking refuge first in New York and then in New Bedford, Massachusetts. He found work in the seaport caulking ships, changed his name so slave catchers would be hard-pressed to find him, and joined the abolitionist movement then under the leadership of William Lloyd Garrison in Boston.

Soon after meeting Garrison, he became a paid lecturer for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. His fellow abolitionists and audiences praised his eloquence and his professional delivery as an orator (although some doubted that a former slave could be such an accomplished public speaker). In 1845, he published his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*, which made him famous. Always fearful of slave catchers, he spent 20 months in England, Scotland, and Ireland, promoting the international cause of immediate emancipation. Supporters in England were so taken with him that they raised enough money to buy his freedom from his former master and to pay for his passage back to the United States. In Rochester, New York, he began a new career publishing newspapers that argued for abolition, black civil rights, and women's rights. He also resumed his travels on the lecture circuit, although in many places he was accosted for the color of his skin and his dedication to abolitionism. Doubting the effectiveness of moral suasion, the tactic of the Garrisonians, he split from them and pondered the efficacy of violence—namely in the form of slave rebellions—as the best means for eliminating the noxious institution of slavery.

After the passage of a strengthened Fugitive Slave Law by Congress in 1850, Douglass took steps toward increasing his political activism. He called on Northern free blacks and whites to oppose the federal law, joined ranks with the new Republican Party, operated as an agent for the Underground Railroad, and argued rhetorically for

slave insurrection, although he never joined or organized any revolt. Nevertheless, he did admire John Brown and defended the white abolitionist's violent acts in Kansas, where a civil war had broken out between slavery proponents and free-soilers. Douglass knew Brown personally and commiserated with him in 1847 over plans for the creation of a "Subterranean Pass Way" (S.P.W.), which would set off a series of slave rebellions in the South, with the overall purpose of funneling unshackled slaves north to freedom; as Brown's plan evolved over the following decade, he plotted a raid on Harpers Ferry as the first spark to touch off the S.P.W. powder keg.[26]

Relying on his gruff, but formidable, powers of persuasion, Brown helped convince Douglass to accept violence as an appropriate means to bring about the end of slavery. Both Douglass and Brown, like so many other Christians of their era, believed that the country, and so the world, stood on the precipice of an impending apocalypse, a time of tribulation that would, through the fury of fire and brimstone, transform their age of corruption and sin into a new heaven on earth, a golden age ruled by Christ incarnate and lasting a thousand years. To a certain degree, Lincoln also embraced millennial doctrine in his own fatalism and in his more optimistic hope that the Almighty had already predetermined America's progress toward becoming a land of greater, rather than lesser, liberty. For Douglass and Brown, however, they came to see that violence directed against the sinful institution of slavery would achieve two ends: the eradication of that sin and an obedience to God's will.

Brown, filled with a fervent conviction that God guided his every action, invited Douglass to participate in the Harpers Ferry raid, but he declined, considering the plan too risky and impractical. The fact that Brown claimed God had spoken to him in his dreams did not bother Douglass; he simply could not imagine how Brown could make the scheme work. He was right. The raid, launched on the night of October 16, 1859, came to an end the next day when Colonel Robert E. Lee, commanding a detail of U.S. Marines from Washington, D.C., attacked Brown and his followers, killing some, wounding others,

26. Frank A. Rollin, *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delaney* (Boston, 1868), 87–88; Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford, Conn., 1881), 337–43; Richard J. Hinton, "About John Brown," *Evansville Journal*, November 12, 1885. For Frederick Douglass, see David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York, 2018); on John Brown, see Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (Amherst, Mass, 1984). On Douglass and Brown, see John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002).

and taking the surviving conspirators prisoner. A jury found Brown guilty of treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia, and he was hanged for his crime on December 2nd.[27]

Afraid he might be sought by the authorities as one of Brown's accomplices, Douglass speedily fled the country, first to Canada, then to England. He returned to the United States in 1860, after giving a passionate speech in Edinburgh, Scotland, about Brown. He told a crowded audience in Queen Street Hall that Brown was a "brave, heroic, and Christian man," and that the statements Brown had made from his cell before his execution proved that the insurrectionist "was not mad—that he was not even wicked—but that he was a noble, heroic, and Christian martyr, animated by a desire to do unto others as he should himself be done unto." In the remainder of the lecture, Douglass dismissed Brown's many critics and reiterated his own commitment to violence as a necessary weapon against slavery: "There was one thing, however, which all would agree in, and that was, that when a man had been reduced to slavery he had a right to get his freedom—(applause)—peaceably if he could, forcibly if he must. (Prolonged applause.)"[28]

More than 25 years later, at the Church of the Unity, a Universalist parish in Worcester, Douglass mounted a platform stage at the head of the nave to give his famous lecture on Brown. An enthusiastic audience filled the pews, including many friends who, since his early days as an abolitionist speaker, had helped and supported his reform efforts. Much had changed since his first lecture on Brown in Scotland. The Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Thirteenth Amendment had brought an end to slavery, but Douglass pushed forward in his crusade to ensure equal rights for his fellow black Americans, a fight made necessary despite the ratification of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution. Douglass opened his speech with a standard line:

> Not to fan the flame of sectional animosity, how happily in the process of rapid, and I hope, permanent extinction; not to keep alive a sense of shame and remorse for a great national transgres-

27. Tony Horwitz, *Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid That Sparked the Civil War* (New York, 2011); David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York, 2005), 309–70.

28. Douglass, "John Brown and the Slaveholders' Insurrection," 316. For his part, Lincoln condemned Brown as "insane," but he warned that such rebellions would continue "where slavery exists." Lincoln, Second Speech at Leavenworth, Kansas, December 5, 1859, in Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, 3:503. It was politically significant that Lincoln made these comments in Kansas, Brown's old battleground.

> sion for which the nation has been sorely punished; not to recount the long list of wrongs inflicted upon colored Americans by more than two centuries of cruel bondage, but to pay a just debt long due, to the memory of John Brown, one of the world's greatest heroes and martyrs[,] is my mission this evening.[29]

Denying that he had anything to do with the raid, Douglass—perhaps still guilt-ridden for not accompanying Brown to Harpers Ferry and for falling back on rhetoric rather than action—said that he could work, as he had done for decades, "for the negro, but John Brown could fight for him." Douglass could "live for the negro, but John Brown could die for him."

In Douglass's opinion, Brown did not fail in his mission. He went to Harpers Ferry "to abolish slavery and he did it." Comparing Brown to Christ, Douglass said that Old Ossawatomie had been "mighty with the sword of steel, but mightier with the sword of the spirit." It was Brown's action that began the war over slavery, but it was the Union soldiers, black and white, under Abraham Lincoln's direction, who had ended it.[30]

To his Worcester audience, Douglass underscored the historical necessity of great men who, he believed, were called by God to perform their appointed tasks in the unfolding of mankind's history. Out of his own belief in the doctrine of progress, he had seen and understood the purpose of great men who emerged to fulfill God's great design, including great men who removed America's original sin of slavery by means of a noble, redeeming clash of arms. "Had there been no slavery," he told his Worcester friends, "there would have been no John Brown. Had there been no war Ulysses S. Grant might have gone on tanning leather all his life in Galena. Had there been no war Abraham Lincoln might have died a commonplace man." Douglass saw God as providing great men, great heroes, when mankind most needed them. History, though, did not forge ahead in a straight line of progress, like a bird in flight or a flatboat softly floating on the current down the Mississippi; it moved forward not inexorably, but according to contingencies, unpredictable occurrences and human judgments,

29. "John Brown—Frederick Douglass' Tribute to the 'Saint and Hero' of Harper's Ferry," *Worcester Daily Spy*, May 26, 1886; Frederick Douglass, A Lecture on *john brown*, Delivered at Harper's Ferry and Sundry Other Places, n.d., typescript with handwritten emendations, Frederick Douglass Papers, LC. See also Douglass, *John Brown: An Address by Frederick Douglass at the Fourteenth Anniversary of Storer College*, May 30, 1881 (Dover, N.H., 1881).

30. "John Brown: Frederick Douglass' Tribute," *Worcester Daily Spy*, May 26, 1886.

good and bad, that determined events and how their participants would react. Only God knew the outcome of those events, which he had put into motion in the first place.[31]

According to Douglass, there was no accident, no coincidence, no mystery in the appearance of great men during times of need. In the moral world, Douglass believed, there existed

> a force, a principle, a law[,] call it by what name you will, retributive justice, logic of events, revenges of time, or judgements of God, which has asserted itself all along the sweep of human history, and the instruments employed in its enforcement, whether dying on the gallows, on the cross[,] or at the stake, have compelled the world to recognize them as its heroes, martyrs, and saviors.

Thus "God called John Brown to awaken the nation to the impending danger, and he came."[32]

And so, too, did Lincoln and Grant. It was slavery that these men—Brown and Douglass, Lincoln and Grant—would kill, like saints slaying dragons in the days of old. But it would be as John Brown predicted it must be. On his way to the gallows, he handed a guard this note: "I John Brown am now quite *certain* that the crimes of this *guilty, land: will* never be purged *away*; but with Blood. I had *as I now think: vainly* flattered myself that without *verry much* bloodshed; it might be done."[33] There would be no escaping the cataclysm to come. God could not stop it. Great men would have to fight it out.

31. Ibid. In an undated version of his John Brown lecture, Douglass mentioned Lincoln and Grant somewhat differently: "Without the war, Grant might have been but little known outside of Galena; without slavery Lincoln's fame might have been confined to Springfield; and but for slavery, John Brown would have lived and died in comparative obscurity." See Frederick Douglass, John Brown, n.d., typescript, Frederick Douglass Papers, LC. On Douglass's opinion of Lincoln, which changed over time, see also Douglass, *An Oration . . . in Memory of Abraham Lincoln . . . April 14, 1876* (Washington, D.C., 1876); Douglass, "Abraham Lincoln, The Great Man of Our Century," February 13, 1893, in John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, eds., *Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One, Speeches, Debates, and Interviews—Volume 5: 1881–95* (New Haven, Conn., 1992), 535–45.

32. Douglass, A Lecture on *john brown*, Douglass Papers, LC; "John Brown: Frederick Douglass' Tribute," *Worcester Daily Spy*, May 26, 1886.

33. John Brown, Statement, December 2, 1859, in Louis Ruchames, ed., *John Brown: The Making of a Revolutionary* (New York, 1969), 167.