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Not a Lincoln, But a Fraud

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As Bush runs down to his last months as the nation's chief executive, and his popularity continues to sink into hitherto unheard-of depths, his retainers remain concerned about the "Bush Legacy." Efforts are underway on several fronts to attempt to burnish his record. And one figure regularly trotted out to help prop up the Great Leader is the nation's greatest president, Abraham Lincoln. Two examples of this effort came in an extended exclusive interview that Bush granted to Fox News's Bret Baier, for a documentary entitled "George W. Bush: Fighting to the Finish." In the course of the interview, Bush repeatedly compared himself to Abraham Lincoln. Here's how Baier previews it:  
<<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,324614,00.html>>

We talked a lot about President Lincoln. And there's going to be a lot of people out there who watch this hour and say, is he trying to equate himself with Lincoln? I tell you what — he thinks about Lincoln and the tough times that he had during the Civil War. 600,000 dead. The country essentially hated him when he was leaving office. And the President reflects on that. This is a President who is really reflecting on his place in history.

Baier's mastery of history is vintage Fox. In fact, Lincoln had just won re-election by a commanding majority and was emerging as an iconic political figure at the time he was shot down. (Harper's subscribers can burrow into the archives of the magazine and read the issues from the spring of 1865. The tones of adulation which appear are very different from the reports from the

early war years in which Lincoln was portrayed—well, as just another politician.) Poets and newspapers chronicled the passage of his funeral train back to Springfield, Illinois, on a long-arc through the country's heartland. Thousands made the trek to bid a tearful farewell to their great leader. Walt Whitman captured the mood in his powerful poem, "O Captain, My Captain," perhaps the greatest tribute penned to an American leader. No, Lincoln left life regarded by his contemporaries as an almost superhuman figure of greatness and a model of political leadership.

But then, this is hardly the only point on which the Bush fabulists have coined faux history to help their case. For instance, Alaska Republican Don Young <<http://thinkprogress.org/2007/02/16/young-lincoln/>> went to the floor of the House to present a quotation from Lincoln which was spun from whole cloth. "Congressmen who willfully take action during wartime that damage morale and undermine the military are saboteurs, and should be arrested, exiled or hanged," Young stated, claiming it was a statement of Lincoln's. Actually Young was simply quoting an op-ed by Neocon Frank Gaffney <<http://www.washingtontimes.com/>> published in the Washington Times which disseminated the same fraud. It wasn't, of course, a statement by Lincoln. In fact, Abraham Lincoln's attitudes were just the opposite. He was elected to Congress in the 1840's as an anti-war firebrand, and he delivered a number of acerbic attacks on the Polk Administration's conduct of the War with Mexico.

This campaign to make Bush into the New Lincoln has been in the works for some time, and the list of participants is impressive: Newt Gingrich, Glenn Beck and Bill Kristol, for instance, are regulars. In the summer of 2006, the White House noted that Bush's bedside reading included two books about Lincoln.

Recently, Karl Rove is spending much of his time in his exceedingly posh and isolated resort home in Rosemary Beach, Florida, close to the Alabama line. A few days ago, Rove went over to speak to a crowd in DeFuniak Springs about his boss and his legacy. The Associated Press reports:

<<http://www.mysuncoast.com/Global/story.asp?S=7815007>>

Rove says “Bush’s ability to get to the nub of the thing” was similar to Abraham Lincoln’s.

Just how Lincoln-like is Bush? Lincoln was, of course, a self-made man, who built a career in the law and entered public life as a bitter opponent of wars of choice. Writing in Salon, Garrett Epps

<[http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2006/08/23/bush\\_lincoln/index1.html](http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2006/08/23/bush_lincoln/index1.html)  
> looked at the desperate make-over and gave an effective retort:

The historical imagination rebels at the very idea of his swaggering around in the cavalry equivalent of Bush’s flight suit. He was always ready to sit down with his adversaries, favored compromise whenever possible and never held a grudge. “With malice toward none, with charity toward all” was for Lincoln more than a rhetorical flourish; it was the key to his greatness.

Most important, Lincoln was a lawyer. It is hard to find any sign that Lincoln thought himself above the law. He had none of Bush’s scorn for procedures and rights. He used executive authority in an emergency — and always dutifully reported to Congress and asked for its ratification as soon as a new session began. He restricted civil liberties temporarily, and without enthusiasm — he once compared his suspension of habeas corpus to the drugs doctors give to induce vomiting. Unlike this administration—which will not ask for legal authority even when it knows it will receive it — Lincoln never did anything to prove a point. He didn’t have an authoritarian bone in his lanky body. His objective was victory for the Union, not power for himself.

George W. Bush is Lincoln the way Dan Quayle is Jack Kennedy. Bush does, however, stack up quite nicely against Andrew Johnson, one of the least successful presidents in our history. That’s because, even though Bush has most of Johnson’s flaws, he runs almost no risk of being impeached by his own party.

Bush also decided to deliver remarks saluting Abraham Lincoln on his birthday. They were transmitted on February 10. But of course, Lincoln's birthday is today, February 12.

<[http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2006/08/23/bush\\_lincoln/index1.html](http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2006/08/23/bush_lincoln/index1.html)  
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