

Perspectives

To Understand Caesar, Not to Praise Him

by W. Todd Groce, Ph.D.

"HOW DISGRACEFUL FOR A SOUTHERN HISTORICAL SOCIETY to be praising/having a conference on Lincoln."

This one-line email landed in my inbox a few weeks ago from someone in Atlanta who's clearly unhappy about our upcoming *Profiles in Leadership* program on Abraham Lincoln. Although I generally don't respond to messages of this tone and nature, there is a common misperception here about the role of history and historical societies that needs to be addressed.

It's not the antipathy for the man who preserved the United States during its greatest crisis and in the process freed four million Southerners from slavery that got my attention. I've heard that before; it's not unusual to be told there's a party line that Southerners have to follow. What I found troubling is the notion that the Georgia Historical Society holds programs about historical figures so we can praise or condemn them.

This is not the first time that someone has expressed displeasure over what they perceive as an attempt by GHS to build up or tear down historical figures. A few years ago we examined Washington's and Jefferson's relationship with their slaves and were also criticized in advance for "bashing the founders." Conversely, I'm sure many people attended last year's lecture and exhibit on Robert E. Lee because they thought we were celebrating him; others no doubt stayed away for the very same reason.

The Lincoln program, like that on Lee before it, is not designed as a tribute. Instead, as the nation approaches the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth GHS will offer a balanced analysis of his place in American history. The purpose of this program, like all our others, is neither to applaud nor to condemn, but to understand. To paraphrase Shakespeare's Mark Antony, we come to understand Lincoln, not to praise him.

In order to comprehend the past we must acknowledge it—all of it. We must present the entire picture and tell the whole story, the good, the bad, and the ugly. How can we ever grow in our understanding if we restrict our discussion to people we personally admire, or only to topics that make us feel good, or to subjects that someone tells us are regionally appropriate? If we did there would never be another book published about Hitler or a program held on the rise of Communism, the slave trade, or the Holocaust.

A program on Lincoln by a Southern historical society is timely, important, and pertinent. Like it or not, the South of today is far different because of him, and for that reason he is worthy of exploration and analysis. It would only be disgraceful if we failed to hold such a program because we fear honest dialogue, refuse to open our minds, or because we let old animosities and hatreds guide our thinking.

So please join us in Atlanta on October 10 as we explore Lincoln, his leadership, and his legacy, and in the words of Thomas Jefferson, "follow truth wherever it may lead." *W. Todd Groce*

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