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Expert Strives to Honor Abe

Lincoln Society of Virginia head helps kick off celebration of bicentennial of 16th president's birth.

By MICHAEL W. FREEMAN

ORLANDO | An up-and-coming Illinois politician seeks his party's presidential nomination, after having served just a few years in the Congress. But he's viewed as an underdog against a popular New York senator initially thought to be the frontrunner.



Philip C. Stone
Provided to The Reporter

The Illinois politician secures the nomination by a narrow margin, goes on to win the presidency, and then reaches out to the former rival, appointing the New York senator as his secretary of state.

If that sounds like the familiar scenario between President Barack Obama and former New York senator-turned-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, this scenario actually played out nearly 150 years ago. That was when Abraham Lincoln, a former congressman from Illinois, won the Republican Party's nomination for president against William Henry Seward. It's the kind of historical trivia and ironic twist that Phillip C. Stone enjoys so much.

"Lincoln defeated a major candidate of the Republican Party, Seward, who was from New York, and Lincoln later made him secretary of state, so the connections to today continue," Stone said.

Stone, the president of Bridgewater College in Bridgewater, Va., is also president of the Lincoln Society of Virginia, a member of the Advisory Board of the Lincoln Forum and a member of both the national and Virginia Advisory Committees of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial. He was in Orlando last week for the kickoff of the Lincoln Bicentennial Celebration at the Orange County History Center. President Lincoln was born on Feb. 12, 1809.

In addition to the birthday celebrations, though, Stone said he's been fascinated at how often Lincoln was praised on the campaign trail last year. On election night, Obama, newly elected as the nation's 44th president, made reference to fellow Illinois resident Lincoln, the 16th president, quoting Lincoln's first inaugural address in 1861.

"He sets out a model for the presidency," Stone said of the new president. "I think that's what Obama has his eyes on. He's really motivated to be like Lincoln."

It wasn't just Obama who looked to Lincoln for inspiration, though. As Stone noted, former President George W. Bush also cited Lincoln as an inspiring leader. Stone said he sees parallels between the Lincoln and Bush presidencies. Both men spent a good part of their administrations waging wars that became highly controversial and unpopular. Both men had highly negative ratings during their terms, although Lincoln has gone on to become recognized as one of the nation's greatest presidents, if not the greatest of them all.

"Waging an unpopular war probably appealed to Bush, and Lincoln was very unpopular in his day," Stone said.

But it isn't just politicians who are rediscovering Lincoln, Stone noted. The general public appears fascinated with the man who led the nation through the Civil War and the end of slavery, until his assassination at the hands of John Wilkes Booth on April 15, 1865.

"There's a book a week coming out on Lincoln," Stone noted. Amazon.com alone lists more than 66,000 books about the president.

The 16th president's reputation extends well beyond the shores of this country, Stone noted.

"That reputation of Lincoln is borne out in the way he is viewed around the world," Stone said. "If you go to India, you will find a street named after Lincoln. If you go to London, they have a statue of Lincoln. If you go to Paris, they have a statue of Lincoln. They see Lincoln as a symbol of our nation as a model of democracy.

"Now President Obama is saying, in effect, 'He is my hero, too,'" Stone added.

But while Presidents Lincoln and George Washington are generally considered the two greatest presidents in American history, the Virginia college professor noted, Lincoln's popularity was never strong in the South. Even today, Stone said, if he gives an interview about Lincoln to the media or participates in a public ceremony honoring the man, he gets bombarded with letters and e-mails from Southerners sharply criticizing him.

"I still get hate mail to this day," he said. "They tell me, 'Lincoln was a racist, Lincoln was a tyrant, Lincoln abolished civil liberties.'"

These critics often claim Stone doesn't understand the South's resentment toward Lincoln because he's not originally from this region, but Stone said that's a mistaken impression.

"I grew up in Virginia," he said. "I've never lived outside of Virginia. If you want to understand how I see Lincoln from a southern point of view, it depends on which Southerner you're asking. Lincoln is the most popular president in our nation's history, but Lincoln was very unpopular in the South. They didn't like him from the beginning."

That resentment doesn't extend to the Orange County Historical Society, which was happy to honor the 16th president during this bicentennial celebration.

"Nationally, the Lincoln Bicentennial is being celebrated, and they created a commission, and their goal was to help historical societies and museums to find ways to honor Lincoln," said Cynthia Cardona Melendez, curator of the historical society in downtown Orlando. "We decided to get in on that. We decided to be a part of that by having this program."

The tribute kicked off on Jan. 22 with a special presentation about Lincoln by Stone. The historical society's bicentennial celebration continues through March 8 with an exhibit of rarely seen artifacts that provide glimpses into Lincoln's personal and private life, including an 1837 letter he wrote to Mary Owens, the woman Lincoln wanted to marry before Mary Todd, and an 1865 letter from Frederick Douglass to Mary Todd Lincoln written after the president's assassination.

Upcoming events include Lincoln's 200th birthday party on Feb. 12, and a Civil War fashion show on March 3.

Stone said he was pleased to see so many museums and historical societies around the nation taking part in honoring Lincoln.

"I started a Lincoln Society partly to continue the local connections and to save the landmarks," Stone said. "The third thing was to try to counter what I've heard about Lincoln. A few years ago, I was in Richmond, Va., for the dedication of a memorial to Lincoln, the only one in the confederacy, and as I was speaking I could see people in the crowd holding placards saying 'Long Live John Wilkes Booth' and 'Lincoln is a murderer.' I thought I would start a society, because we need to make sure kids have a different view of the man who saved the union."

Although the Orlando ceremony mainly focused on President Lincoln, there was some history about Florida's role in the Civil War, provided by Jeff Grzelak, a Civil War buff who attended the event wearing a Civil War uniform, portraying an officer with the 17th Connecticut Infantry.

"In the last 18 months of the war, they were stationed in Saint Augustine," he said of the infantry. "Florida's biggest contribution to the war was food and salt. Our number one contribution was beef. During the end of the war, all the food was coming from Florida."

For more information on the Lincoln Bicentennial Celebration, log on to www.thehistorycenter.org or call 407-836-8500.