

# *“Tokens of Respect” and “Heartfelt Thanks”*

## *How Abraham Lincoln Coped with Presidential Gifts*

HAROLD HOLZER

In the spring of 1982 President Ronald Reagan filed his income tax return for the previous year and, in making it public, unleashed a flurry of press coverage on a fascinating but seldom-discussed topic: the many gifts, both valuable and sentimental, that our Chief Executives seem inevitably to amass while in office. President Reagan's returns showed that he had received (and was prepared to declare as income) some \$31,000 in gifts, including such items as silver picture frames, a crystal wine cooler, three pairs of boots, a Chinese porcelain dinner service, and a horse blanket.<sup>1</sup>

While it lasted, the gift controversy was closely watched by the press. What was

overlooked, however, is the fact that presidential gift hoarding is not a new—even a twentieth-century—phenomenon. And it would probably surprise many observers that among the Presidents who cheerfully accepted valuable presents while in office was Abraham Lincoln, who not only never disclosed them publicly (he was not required to do so), but occasionally forgot even to thank his admirers and benefactors. Had the tax and disclosure laws of the 1980s prevailed during the 1860s, the Lincolns would surely have had to contend with embarrassing revelations of their own. But such scrutiny was unheard of during Lincoln's time, as was the ethic that today seems automatically to

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<sup>1</sup>*New York Times*, May 18 (p. A-15) and May 27 (p. B-15), 1982. The stories also pointed out that the President had acted in the absence of regulations governing the acceptance of gifts from domestic sources, but had turned over to the State Department all gifts from foreigners valued at \$100 or more. The President's office also issued a warning to donors not to use official acknowledgments for business purposes.

link such presentations to ulterior motives. Coincidentally, the news of the Reagan family's gift controversies broke in the press exactly 120 years after the daughter of a Dakota judge gave Lincoln a pair of pipestone shirt studs. Lincoln freely and without inhibition accepted them, thanking her for her "kindness," and telling his "dear young friend" that he thought the studs "elegant."<sup>2</sup>

Among the countless other items—including edibles and potables—that Lincoln collected during his Presidency were things he could not possibly have wanted or needed, even cases of alcoholic beverages. As his friend Ward Hill Lamson remembered, Lincoln "abstained himself, not so much upon principle, as because of a total lack of appetite." Once, nonetheless, a group of New York admirers "clubbed together to send him a fine assortment of wines and liquors," a White House secretary recalled. A dismayed Mary Lincoln was sure that her husband would object to keeping the gift at home, and so she donated the spirits to local hospitals. There, she hoped, doctors and nurses could "take the responsibility of their future."<sup>3</sup>

Edible gifts—fruits and dairy products, for example—the Lincolns seemed more than willing to keep and consume. And then there were the attractive and valuable presents: pictures, books, animals, garments, and accessories—which Lincoln almost always kept for himself. The following litany could be said, in a sense, to constitute Lincoln's own retrospective public accounting. The list serves as a reminder of how different the rules of conduct for public figures once were.

For this reason, the study is in no way intended as an indictment. No one who observed Lincoln ever thought him obsessed with personal gain or fashion. As Lamson said, "He was not avaricious, never appropriated a cent wrongfully, and did

not think money for its own sake a fit object of any man's ambition." But, as Lamson added, Lincoln also "knew its value, its power, and liked to keep it when he had it." Lincoln did, in fact, defend the aspiration to wealth, declaring once that "property is desirable . . . a positive good in the world."<sup>4</sup> He had even admitted, half-jokingly, back in 1836: "No one has needed favours more than I, and generally, few have been less unwilling to accept them."<sup>5</sup> That also would characterize his policy where gifts were concerned—gifts that began arriving soon after his nomination to the Presidency, and continued arriving right up until the day of his assassination.

The gifts came from sincere admirers and blatant favor-seekers, princes and patriots, children and old women. Some made presentations in person; others sent their presents by express. On at least one occasion, a simply-wrapped little package looked so suspicious that Lincoln seriously entertained the notion that it had been designed to explode in his face.

But most of the gifts—from modest shawls and socks to expensive watches and canes—seemed to reflect a deep and widespread desire among Lincoln's admirers, chiefly strangers, to reach out to the troubled President and to be touched back in

<sup>2</sup>Lincoln to Lulu Waldron, April 27, 1862, Roy P. Basler, ed., Marion Dolores Pratt and Lloyd Dunlap, asst. eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953–1955), V, 200 (hereafter cited as *Collected Works*).

<sup>3</sup>Lamson, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Boston: James R. Osgood, and Co., 1872), p. 480; William O. Stoddard in Rufus Rockwell Wilson, *Intimate Memories of Lincoln* (Elmira, N.Y.: Primavera Press, Inc., 1945), pp. 232–33.

<sup>4</sup>Lamson, p. 482; Lincoln's Reply to New York Workingmen's Democratic-Republican Association, March 21, 1864, *Collected Works*, VII, 259–60.

<sup>5</sup>Lincoln to Robert Allen, June 21, 1836, *Collected Works*, I, 49. In fairness, Lincoln made this particular statement in the course of *refusing* a favor, noting, "In this case, favour to me, would be injustice to the public."



French-born Thomas Doney of Elgin, Illinois, who presented Lincoln with a campaign print in June, 1860

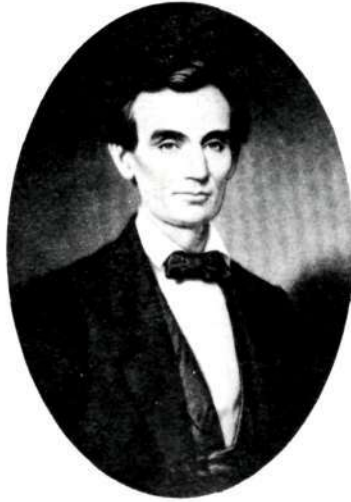
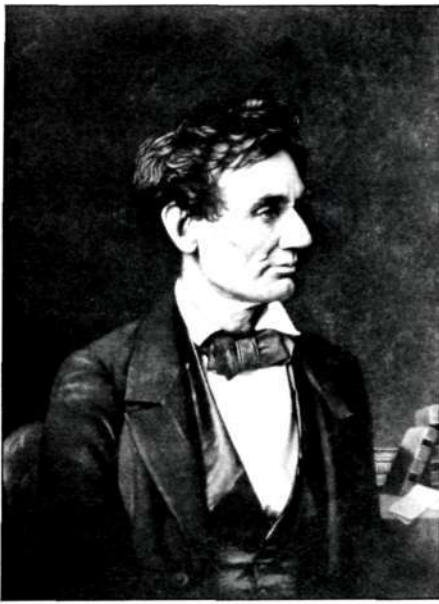
return by the acknowledgment that was certain to follow. It is difficult for the modern American living in the era of the so-called Imperial Presidency to comprehend the emotional and political simplicity inherent in these gestures. The inviting intimacy of the nineteenth-century Presidency—not to mention the code of conduct that encouraged such expressions of generosity—seems to have vanished. In Lincoln's day it thrived. And so the gifts began arriving after Lincoln won the Republican presidential nomination in 1860.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, IV, 137; John Comstock to Lincoln, Nov. 2, 1860, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as Lincoln Papers).

<sup>7</sup>Lincoln to Daniel P. Gardner, Sept. 28, 1860, *Collected Works*, IV, 122–23.

Lincoln received dozens of presents during the campaign, ranging from the potentially compromising to the presumptuous. In the former category was a barrel of flour that arrived “as a small token of respect for your able support of the Tariff.”<sup>6</sup> In the latter was a newfangled soap that inspired Lincoln to write self-deprecatingly to its inventor: “Mrs. L. declares it is a superb article. She at the same time protests that *I* have never given sufficient attention to the ‘soap question’ to be a competent judge.” Nonetheless, Lincoln admitted that “your Soap . . . [has] been used at our house.”<sup>7</sup>

Whether or not the soap improved Lincoln's appearance can only be judged by looking at period pictures—and the candidate received a number of those as gifts also. “Artists express their happiness in supplying him with wretched wood-cut representations,” reported journalist Henry Villard. Lincoln admitted that his “judgement” was “worth nothing” when it came to art, but that did not stop art publishers from sending him examples of their work, possibly eager for endorsements that could be marketed to enhance sales. Engraver Thomas Doney, for example, sent a copy of his mezzotint portrait of the nominee, and Lincoln admitted that he thought it “a very excellent one.” But he cautioned: “I am a very indifferent judge.” Chicago lithographer Edward Mendel won a more enthusiastic endorsement (written by a secretary, signed by Lincoln) for his so-called “Great Picture” of the nominee. Acknowledging its receipt, Lincoln called it “a *truthful* Lithograph Portrait of myself.” A month later, the full text of his letter was reprinted in a newspaper advertisement offering the print for sale. A possibly more careful Lincoln signed a more noncommittal acknowledgment when a Pennsylvania jurist shipped copies of an engraving whose costly production he had underwritten. Though it was a far better



Thomas Doney's 1860 mezzotint engraving (left) was described by Lincoln as "very excellent." The center print, by Samuel Sartain, was engraved after a life portrait by John Henry Brown and published by James Irwin in 1860. Pennsylvania jurist John M. Read, who commissioned Brown, sent Lincoln a copy but retained the original on ivory for a time. Many decades later it was sold with the possessions of Lincoln's direct descendent, Lincoln Isham, adding credence to the legend that Mary Todd Lincoln convinced Judge Read to give the ivory miniature to her. Another print that Lincoln received in 1860 was a 24" by 28" lithograph by Edward Mendel (right). The artist later offered copies for sale as "Mendel's Great Picture of Abraham Lincoln . . . acknowledged by all his friends to be a perfect likeness."

print than any other received by the President—and was the only one based on life sittings—Lincoln expressed thanks but no opinion. Perhaps he truly was a "very indifferent judge."<sup>8</sup>

What Lincoln really thought about some of the odder gifts that arrived in Springfield in the summer of 1860 can only be imagined. The "Daughters of Abraham" sent what Lincoln described as "a box of fine peaches," accepted with "grateful acknowledgment." A "Bag of books" arrived in the mail. From Pittsburgh came a "Lincoln nail"—which had been manufactured, according to its presenter, "in a moving procession of 50 000 Republican Freemen" on "a belt run from the wheel of

a wagon connected with a nail machine." Each of the "Lincoln nails" had the initial *L* carved on the nailhead. "Show it to your

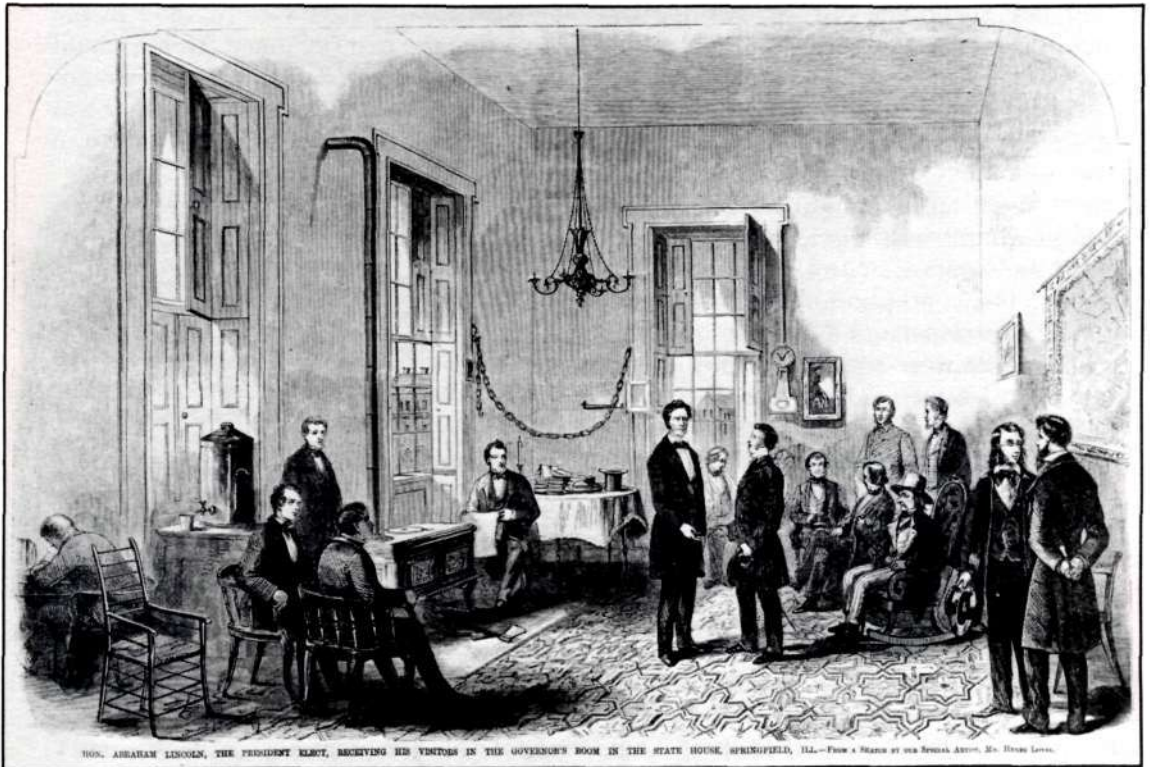
<sup>8</sup>Harold G. Villard and Oswald Garrison Villard, eds., *Lincoln on the Eve of '61: A Journalist's Story* by Henry Villard (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), p. 28; Lincoln to James F. Babcock, Sept. 13, 1860, *Collected Works*, IV, 114; Lincoln to Doney, July 30, 1860, *ibid.*, 89; Lincoln to Mendel, June 8, 1860, in Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln: Supplement, 1832–1865* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1974), p. 55; *Tazewell Republican* (Pekin), July 13, 1860, p. 2, col. 1; Lincoln to John M. Read, Oct. 13, 1860, *Collected Works*, IV, 127; Harold Holzer, Gabor S. Boritt, and Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Lincoln Image: Abraham Lincoln and the Popular Print* (New York: Scribner's, 1984), pp. 22–23, 32–34, 57–66.

little wife, I think it will please her curiosity," wrote the Pittsburgh man, adding: "I hope God that the American people may hit the nail on the head this time in your election—please accept this little token enclosed [as] a tribute of respect to yourself & the greater cause of Truth and Justice which you represent."<sup>9</sup> With similar gifts arriving almost daily, Lincoln's temporary office in the Springfield State

<sup>9</sup>Lincoln to Harriet Snedeker, Aug. 13, 1860, *Collected Works . . . Supplement*, p. 59 (peaches); Lincoln to Francis E. Spinner, Sept. 24, 1860, *Collected Works*, IV, 120–21 (books); Samuel Greer to Lincoln, Sept. 28, 1860, *Lincoln Papers* (nail).

House began soon to look like "a museum, so many axes and wedges and log-chains were sent the candidate." According to the daughter of Lincoln's private secretary John G. Nicolay, the future President "used them in his explanations and anecdotes of pioneer days, making them serve the double purpose of amusing his visitors and keeping the conversation away from dangerous political reefs." Perhaps the best known of the office props—a familiar accessory visible in the background of period engravings—was the oversized wood-link chain, "sent to Mr. Lincoln by some man in Wisconsin," Nicolay wrote, "who . . . being a cripple and unable to

*The wooden rail-link chain visible on the wall in the background of this published sketch was presented to the President-elect by a crippled Wisconsin admirer. It was displayed in the Governor's Room of the Illinois State House (now the Old State Capitol), Lincoln's temporary office during his campaign and after the election. The woodcut appeared in the November 24, 1860, issue of Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper.*



1860. ABRAHAM LINCOLN, THE PRESIDENT-ELECT, RECEIVING HIS VISITORS IN THE GOVERNOR'S ROOM IN THE STATE HOUSE, SPRINGFIELD, ILL.—FROM A SKETCH BY STEPHEN ARNOLD, JR., DRAWN BY LITTLE.

leave his bed . . . had the rail brought in from the fence, and amused himself by whittling it out." The resulting "neat wooden chain," the *New York Tribune* cautioned, while made from a rail, was not made from "a Lincoln rail, as everybody is disposed to think." Another gift received around the same time, "a pair of first-class improved wedges, for splitting logs," proved similarly misleading. "Everybody persists in looking upon [them] as relics of Mr. Lincoln's early life," the *Tribune* observed, "but which really were sent to him only about a fortnight ago, together with a fine ax."<sup>10</sup>

In June came a historic relic, a "rustic chair" that had stood on the platform of Chicago's Wigwam when Lincoln was nominated. It was made of thirty-four different kinds of wood, "symbolizing the union of the Several States, including Kansas," explained the college professor assigned to forward the memento to the candidate. "Though rude in form," the chair was meant to serve as "an Emblem of the 'Chair of State,' which . . . it is believed you are destined soon to occupy." Lincoln "gratefully accepted" both the chair and "the sentiment" but, with secession no doubt much on his mind, wondered: "In view of what it symbolizes, might it not be called the 'Chair of State and the Union of States?' The conception of the maker is a pretty, a patriotic, and a national one."<sup>11</sup>

Many gifts were similarly inspiring—or at the very least, friendly. If ever there was danger to Lincoln in accepting every package that came through the mails, it could never have been more apparent than on October 17, when he received this warning from a Kansas man: "As I have every reason to Expect that you will be our next President—I want to warn you of one thing—that you be Exceeding [sic] Careful what you Eat or Drink as you may be Poisoned by your Enemys as was President Harrison and President Taylor" [sic]. That

same day, a Quincy, Illinois, man sent Lincoln "a Mississippi River Salmon," with the hope that "the fish . . . caught this morning will grace the table of the next President of the United States."<sup>12</sup> There is no record that Lincoln responded to either letter, but it is amusing to wonder how he reacted to the receipt of the food concurrently with the receipt of the warning.

After Lincoln's election three weeks later, the steady stream of gifts grew into a flood. "A pile of letters greeted him daily," wrote Villard, and many packages bore gifts. Books, for example, arrived frequently. "Authors and speculative booksellers freely send their congratulations," Villard explained, "accompanied by complimentary volumes." Many of the other gifts were homespun—others merely "odd."<sup>13</sup>

In December one New York "stranger" sent two specially made hats.<sup>14</sup> "A veritable *eagle quill*" arrived from Pennsylvania, plucked from a bird shot in 1844 in the hope that the pen fashioned from it would be used by Henry Clay to write his inaugural address. For sixteen years its owner had waited for a candidate of equal stature to

<sup>10</sup> Helen Nicolay, *Lincoln's Secretary: A Biography of John G. Nicolay* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1949), pp. 37, 38; *New York Daily Tribune*, Nov. 14, 1860, p. 6, col. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Digby V. Bell to Lincoln, June 4, 1860, Lincoln Papers; Lincoln to Bell, June 5, 1860, *Collected Works*, IV, 71.

<sup>12</sup> R. S. Bassett to Lincoln, Oct. 17, 1860, and Samuel Artus to Lincoln, Oct. 17, 1860, both in Lincoln Papers.

<sup>13</sup> Villard and Villard, pp. 27, 28, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Louisa Livingston Siemon to Lincoln, Dec. 10, 1860, Lincoln Papers.

<sup>15</sup> E. P. Oliphant to Lincoln, Dec., 186[0], Lincoln Papers.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas D. Jones, *Memories of Lincoln* (New York: Press of the Pioneers, 1934), p. 8; S. M. Orr to Lincoln, Jan. 7, 1861, Lincoln Papers.

<sup>17</sup> Victor Searcher, *Lincoln's Journey to Greatness* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Co., 1960), p. 152.



*Sculptor Thomas D. Jones as he looked around the time he "helped" Abraham Lincoln receive the unusual gift of a pig's tail whistle*

win the Presidency. And thus he wrote to Lincoln:

I . . . have the honor of presenting it to you in your character of President elect, to be used for the purpose it was originally designed.

What a pleasing, and majestic thought! The inaugural address . . . written with a pen made from a quill taken from the proud and soaring emblem of our liberties.

If it be devoted in whole or in part, to the purpose indicated, would not the fact, and the incident be sufficiently potent to "Save the the [sic] Union."<sup>15</sup>

The new year of 1861 brought more valuable gifts, including several canes. One redwood, gold and quartz-handled example was judged "highly artistic and in very good taste" by the visiting sculptor, Thomas Dow Jones.<sup>16</sup> Mrs. Lincoln

received a sewing machine; some Cleveland millworkers sent Lincoln a model T-rail; and Chicago City Clerk Abraham Kohn sent a watercolor he had painted, complete with Hebrew inscriptions.<sup>17</sup>

Yet another allusion to Lincoln's "beau ideal," Henry Clay, was offered with the arrival in February of a decades-old medal from a limited strike run of 150. One had been "reserved, at the time," explained the presenter, "with the intention . . . of presenting it to the citizen of the school of Henry Clay, who should first be elected to the Presidency. . . . I rejoice that that event has, at last, occurred." Lincoln replied with "heartfelt thanks for your goodness in sending me this valuable present," expressing the "extreme gratification

I feel in possessing so beautiful a memento of him whom, during my whole political life, I have loved and revered as a teacher and leader."<sup>18</sup>

More clothing arrived as well. A Boston wholesaler sent what Lincoln acknowledged as "a very substantial and handsome overcoat," an "elegant and valuable New Year's Gift." A Westerner sent "an Union grey shawl, made of California wool . . . together with a pair of family blankets" as samples of "Pacific State weaving." Thanking the donor for the "favour," Lincoln noted the "forward state of California manufactures which those articles exhibit."<sup>19</sup> Shortly before leaving for Washington, as he stared into a mirror admiring a new topper sent by a Brooklyn hatter, Lincoln reportedly remarked to Mary Lincoln: "Well, wife, there is one thing likely to come out of this scrape, any how. We are going to have some *new clothes!*" As he had predicted, three days before his fifty-second birthday, Titsworth & Brothers, Chicago clothiers, donated an expensive suit for Lincoln to wear at his inauguration.<sup>20</sup>

That same day he received a more peculiar gift, one that arrived in a package so "suspicious" looking that Thomas D. Jones, for whom Lincoln was then sitting for a sculpture, worried at first that it might contain "an infernal machine or torpedo." Jones placed it "at the back of the clay model" of Lincoln's head, "using it as an earthwork, so, in case it exploded, it would not harm either of us." It turned out to be a whistle fashioned from a pig's tail, which Tad Lincoln was soon using "to make the house vocal, if not musical . . . blowing blasts that would have astonished Roderick Dhu." Both the suit and whistle inspired Villard to file this report on February 9:

A large number of presents have been received by Mr. Lincoln within the last few days. The more noteworthy among them are a complete

suit . . . to be worn by his excellency on the 4th of March. . . . The inauguration clothes, after being on exhibition for two days, will be tried on this evening—a most momentous event to be sure. . . . The oddest of all gifts to the President-elect came to hand, however, in the course of yesterday morning. It was no more or less than a whistle, made out of a pig's tail. There is no "sell" in this. Your correspondent has seen the tangible refutation of the time-honored saying, "no whistle can be made out of a pig's tail" with his own eyes. The donor of the novel instrument is a prominent Ohio politician. . . . Mr. Lincoln enjoyed the joke hugely. After practicing upon this masterpiece of human ingenuity for nearly an hour, this morning, he jocosely remarked, that he had never suspected, up to this time, that "there was music in such a thing as that."<sup>21</sup>

Even as Lincoln prepared to leave for Washington the following day, he was asked to accept one more gift—specially designed for the inaugural journey. A Burlington, Iowa, man proposed making a mail shirt for Lincoln to wear for protection. He even offered to plate it "with gold, so that perspiration shall not affect it." The instructions continued: "It could be covered with silk and worn over an ordinary undershirt. . . . I am told that Napoleon III is constantly protected in this way." Lincoln declined the offer, and left Springfield armorless. But he was not long without other sorts of gifts. En route to Washington he was given baskets of fruit and flowers. And in New York he was given silk top hats from both Knox and

<sup>18</sup>Daniel Ullmann to Lincoln, Jan. 25, 1861, Lincoln Papers; Lincoln to Ullmann, Feb. 1, 1861, *Collected Works*, IV, 183–84.

<sup>19</sup>Lincoln to Isaac Fenno, Jan. 22, 1861, *Collected Works*, IV, 179 (overcoat); Donald McClellan to Lincoln, Jan. 31, 1861, Lincoln Papers, and Lincoln to McClellan, March 20, 1861, *Collected Works*, IV, 296 (shawl); Louis A. Warren, "Gifts for the President," *Lincoln Lore*, Dec. 14, 1936.

<sup>20</sup>Francis Bicknell Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1866), p. 113; Villard and Villard, p. 69.

<sup>21</sup>Jones, p. 8; Villard and Villard, pp. 69–70.



Plaster bust of Lincoln by Thomas D. Jones, made from life in Springfield, Illinois, in 1861. During a sitting, an unusual package arrived and Jones, fearing it contained an explosive, untied it while bracing it against the original clay model for this bust. The sculpture survived; the package contained the pig's tail whistle, and not a bomb.



Leary, rival hatters. Asked to compare them, Lincoln diplomatically told the *New York World* that they “mutually surpassed each other.”<sup>22</sup>

At last, on March 4, Lincoln moved into the White House. But the flood of gifts only increased. A carriage came from

some New York friends, and a pair of carriage horses was reportedly sent to Mrs. Lincoln. Presumably, they were hitched together.<sup>23</sup> A more modest donor, disclaiming personal ambition but hearing that Lincoln was “constantly besieged with applications for office,” thought “that something nice & palatable in the way of good Butter might do you good, & help to preserve your strength to perform your arduous duties.” Along with the tub of butter came this advice: “Keep a good strong pickle in this butter & in a cool place then it will keep sweet till July.”<sup>24</sup> There is no record of whether the butter stayed fresh through the summer, but during the same hot months, Secretary of State William H. Seward gave the Lincolns a quite different gift: kittens. The pets were intended for the Lincoln children, but the President

<sup>22</sup> A. W. Flanders, quoted in Nicolay, pp. 59–60; Earl Schenck Meirs, ed., *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809–1865*, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission, 1960), III, 17, 18 (flowers and hats); Searcher, p. 152 (flowers and fruits).

<sup>23</sup> *Day by Day*, III, 23 (carriage); *Collected Works . . . Supplement*, p. 73n (carriage horses). According to Basler, a mare that Lincoln wanted sold in June, 1861, may have been one of the pair of carriage horses originally given to Mary Lincoln.

<sup>24</sup> John B. Bradt to Lincoln, March 25, 1861, Lincoln Papers.

reportedly liked to have them “climb all over him” and grew “quite fond of them” himself.<sup>25</sup>

John Hancock’s niece sent Lincoln “an interesting relic of the past, an autograph of my uncle, having the endorsement of your ancestor, Abraham Lincoln, written nearly a century ago: humbly trusting it may prove an happy augury of our countrys future history.” Lincoln returned his “cordial thanks” for both the relic and “the flattering sentiment with which it was accompanied.”<sup>26</sup> There were gifts to warm the spirit and spirits to warm the President. A “poor humble Mechanic” from Ohio forwarded “one pair of Slippers worked by my Little Daughter as a present for you from her.” A Cincinnati man recommended the “quick and wholesome nourishment” of “Pure wine” made from grapes he had planted himself. He sent a case.<sup>27</sup>

Some gifts were meant to preserve honor. When a Brooklyn man read that no American flag flew over the White House, he asked for “the privilege, the honor, the glory” of presenting one. The “ladies of Washington” made a similar offer a few days later. No reply to either has been found.<sup>28</sup> Nor did the President respond to an offer of toll-free carriage rides on the Seventh Street Turnpike, or the gift of “Dr. E. Cooper’s Universal Magnetic Balm,” good for “*Paralysis, Cramps, Colics, Burns Bruises Wounds Fevers, Cholera Morbus, Camp Disease, &c. &c. &c.*,” despite advice that Lincoln “trust it as you would a true friend,—administer it to your own family and friends (especially to Gen. Scott).” But he did respond to the gift of “a pair of socks so fine, and soft, and warm” that they “could hardly have been manufactured in any other way than the old Kentucky fashion.”<sup>29</sup>

Foreign dignitaries usually sent far more exotic presents, some so valuable that Lincoln decided he could not accept them.

When the King of Siam, for example, presented “a sword of costly materials and exquisite workmanship” along with two huge elephant tusks, Lincoln replied: “Our laws forbid the President from receiving these rich presents as personal treasures. They are therefore accepted . . . as tokens of your good will and friendship for the American people.” Lincoln asked Congress to decide upon a suitable repository, and it chose the “collection of curiosities” at the Interior Department. Yet another gift offer from the King of Siam—a herd of elephants to breed in America—was refused outright, with Lincoln explaining dryly: “Our political jurisdiction . . . does not reach a latitude so low as to favor the multiplication of the elephant.”<sup>30</sup>

Gifts from domestic sources were not only less cumbersome, they were proper to accept. White rabbits arrived for Tad, and in the ultimate expression of faith that Lincoln had attained the stature of his political

<sup>25</sup>Diary of Frances Seward, entry of Aug. 31, 1861, quoted in *Day by Day*, III, 63.

<sup>26</sup>Mary Hancock Colyer to Lincoln, March 22, 1861[1], Lincoln Papers; Lincoln to Colyer, April 2, 1861, *Collected Works*, IV, 319.

<sup>27</sup>S. Shreckengast to Lincoln, April 2, 1861 (slippers), and Joseph Kinsey to Lincoln, April 9, 1861 (wine), both in Lincoln Papers.

<sup>28</sup>Robert G. Thursby to Lincoln, May 9, 1861, and Eugene Freat to Lincoln, May 18, 1861, both *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup>J. C. Lewis to Lincoln, June 4, 1861 (tolls), and P. Miller, Jr., to Lincoln, June 27, 1861 (medicine), both *ibid.*; Lincoln to Susannah Weathers, Dec. 4, 1861 (socks), *Collected Works*, V, 57.

<sup>30</sup>Lincoln to King of Siam, Feb. 3, 1862, *Collected Works*, V, 125–26; Lincoln to Senate and House of Representatives, Feb. 26, 1862, *ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>31</sup>Lincoln to Michael Crock, April 2, 1862, *ibid.*, p. 177 (rabbits); Lincoln to John M. Clay, Aug. 4, 1862, *ibid.*, pp. 363–64 (Clay relic). The younger Clay hoped, he wrote to Lincoln, that his father’s “noblest sentiment ‘that he would rather be right than be President’ . . . may ever be yours” (Clay to Lincoln, Aug. 4, 1862, Lincoln Papers).

<sup>32</sup>Hawthorne, “Chiefly About War-Matters,” *Atlantic Monthly*, July, 1862, p. 47, quoted in Wilson, p. 466; Lincoln Speech to a Massachusetts Delegation, March 13, 1862, *Collected Works*, V, 158.

hero, Henry Clay, Clay's own snuffbox was presented by Clay's son.<sup>31</sup> Earlier, when a Massachusetts delegation presented Lincoln with an "elegant whip," the ivory handle of which bore a cameo medallion of the President, he replied, according to author Nathaniel Hawthorne, who witnessed the scene, with "an address . . . shorter than the whip, but equally well made."

I might . . . follow your idea that it is . . . evidently expected that a good deal of whipping is to be done. But, as we meet here socially, let us not think only of whipping rebels, or of those who seem to think only of whipping negroes, but of those pleasant days which it is to be hoped are in store for us, when, seated behind a good pair of horses, we can crack our whips and drive through a peaceful, happy and prosperous land.<sup>32</sup>

"There were of course a great many curious books sent to him," artist Francis Bicknell Carpenter recalled, "and it seemed to be one of the special delights of his life to open these books at such an hour, that his boy [Tad] could stand beside him, and they could talk as he turned over the pages." Some books, however, proved troublesome. Actor James H. Hackett sent his *Notes and Comments upon Certain Plays and Actors of Shakespeare*. Lincoln had seen Hackett perform Falstaff in *Henry IV* at Ford's Theatre, but when he acknowl-

edged the gift he admitted, "I have seen very little of the drama." Hackett published the letter for his "personal friends" only, but the press got hold of it and quoted it to illustrate Lincoln's ignorance. Hackett later apologized. Canes were sent in abundance as well, typically hewn from some hallowed wood. Lincoln received one cane made from the hull of a destroyed Confederate ship, *Merrimac*, and another from a sunken Revolutionary War ship, *Alliance*. Yet another, with a head carved in the shape of an eagle, was made from wood gathered in the vicinity of the 1863 Battle of Lookout Mountain. Journeying to Philadelphia in June, 1864, to attend the Great Central Sanitary Fair, Lincoln was given a staff made from the wood of the arch under which George Washington had passed at Trenton, New Jersey, en route to his inauguration.<sup>33</sup>

Were all these gifts made with no ulterior motive in mind? It is impossible to say—although Lincoln might have sniffed out one potentially compromising situation in 1863 when Christopher M. Spencer gave him a new Spencer Rifle, along with a demonstration of the proper way to assemble it. A large War Department order could make a munitions man wealthy overnight, and there was no shortage of new military gadgetry sent to the White House. Clerk William Stoddard reported that his own office eventually "looked like a gunshop."<sup>34</sup> Similarly, when an Indian agent, fighting a theft charge, petitioned Lincoln to intervene for him, enclosing quilled moccasins as a gift, Lincoln took off his boots and tried them on with a smile. But he did not intervene in the case. Later, when California railroad men presented Lincoln with an exquisite, thirteen-inch-long spun gold watch chain, it was quite possible the delegation was thinking not so much about how elegant the adornment would look on the presidential waistcoat but how lucrative would be government

<sup>31</sup>Carpenter, p. 93 (books); Lincoln to Hackett, Aug. 17, 1863, *Collected Works*, VI, 392–93, 558–59; William O. Snider, quotation from *ibid.*, VII, 457n (*Merrimac* cane); Lincoln to John Birely, May 12, 1864, *ibid.*, p. 337 (*Alliance* cane); Weldon Petz, *In the Presence of Abraham Lincoln* (Harrogate, Tenn.: Lincoln Memorial University Press, 1973), p. 73 (eagle-head cane); Lincoln speech at Philadelphia Sanitary Fair, June 16, 1864, *Collected Works*, VII, 396n–97n (Washington arch relic). George C. Miller sent "a Cane in some Measure Emblematical of What I hope Our Nation will be . . . Composed of as Maney Sections and Pieces as there Ware States, and of a verry Beautifull Curled White Oak Not of the kind that Could be Split into Railes" (Miller to Lincoln, Dec. 30, 1864, Lincoln Papers, and Lincoln to Miller, Jan. 18, 1865, *Collected Works*, VIII, 222).

<sup>34</sup>*Day by Day*, III, 202 (Spencer Rifle); Stoddard quotation from Wilson, p. 231.

support for the building of roadbeds out West. Lincoln apparently did not much care. He posed for his most famous photographs wearing the ornament.<sup>35</sup> An ideal companion piece—a gold watch—arrived in late 1863, forwarded by a Chicago jeweler in behalf of the local Sanitary Commission. Lincoln expressed thanks for the “humanity and generosity” of which he had “unexpectedly become the beneficiary.” It seemed the jeweler had promised the watch to the largest contributor to the Ladies North Western Fair. Lincoln had donated a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation. It sold for \$3,000, winning him the prize.<sup>36</sup> Lincoln seemed pleased also by

a rather hideous elkhorn chair presented by a frontiersman, Seth Kinman.<sup>37</sup> He admired an afghan made by two New York

<sup>35</sup>Jay Monaghan, *Diplomat in Carpet Slippers: Abraham Lincoln Deals with Foreign Affairs* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1945), p. 242 (moccasins); Carl Sandburg, *Lincoln Collector: The Story of Oliver R. Barrett's Great Private Collection* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950), pp. 15, 207, and *Lincolnia Collected by the Late Oliver R. Barrett*, auction catalogue (New York: Parke-Bernet Galleries, 1952), pp. 182–83 (watch chain). The chain sold at the Barrett auction for \$1,300.

<sup>36</sup>Lincoln to James H. Hoes, Dec. 17, 1863, *Collected Works*, VII, 75.

<sup>37</sup>*Day by Day*, III, 297–98. Kinman presented the chair on Nov. 26, 1863.

Civil War artist Alfred Waud sketched the scene below at the White House shortly after Lincoln's return from Gettysburg in late November, 1863, as frontiersman Seth Kinman gave Lincoln the elkhorn chair roughly outlined in the center. This is the only known pictorial record of Lincoln actually receiving a gift. It is possible that the rifle he holds was also presented by Kinman, though no documentary record has been found to support this speculation.





*Sculptor John Rogers, seen here around 1876, produced an impressive number of widely-reproduced, best-selling statuary groups during his long career, becoming to three-dimensional art what Currier & Ives were to two-dimensional art: unrivalled popular favorites who understood sentimentality and knew how to represent and market it. Pictured here posing with one of his best-known groups, Wounded to the Rear/One More Shot, Rogers in 1864 sent Lincoln a gift of one of his most timely works.*

girls (“I am glad you remember me for the country’s sake”), and the Vermont cheese forwarded by an admirer from Danby (“superior and delicious”). He liked the book of funny lectures he received from a

comic “mountebank,” and the “very excellent . . . very comfortable” socks knitted by an eighty-seven-year-old Massachusetts woman. Lincoln thought these “evidence, of the patriotic devotion which, at your advanced age, you bear to our great and just cause.”<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup>Lincoln to Clara and Julia Brown, March 21, 1864, *Collected Works*, VII, 258 (afghan); Lincoln to Solomon Foot, Jan. 18, 1862, *Collected Works . . . Supplement*, pp. 120–21 (cheese); Lincoln to Stephen C. Massett, Dec. 4, 1863, *Collected Works*, VII, 34, and Carpenter, pp. 160–61 (book; the author was known as “Jeems Pipes of Pipesville,” and he had performed for Lincoln at the White House); Lincoln to Mrs. Abner Bartlett, May 5, 1864, *Collected Works*, VII, 331 (socks).

<sup>39</sup>Lincoln to the Shakers, Aug. 8, 1864, *Collected Works*, VII, 485–86 (chair); Lincoln to L. J. Leberman, July 15, 1864, *ibid.*, p. 442 (clothes from Rock-hill & Wilson, New York clothiers); Lincoln to Anne Williamson, July 29, 1864, *ibid.*, p. 471 (Scotch plaid); Lincoln to Alfred B. Justice, Sept., 1864, and Oct. 17, 1864, *ibid.*, p. 529, and VIII, 51 (knife); Lincoln to Frederick A. Farley, April 1, 1864, *ibid.*, VIII, 278 (bedspread); *Day by Day*, III, 290 (gold box, presented Oct. 20, 1864).

A “very comfortable” chair came from the Shakers; a fine “suit of garments” was made to Lincoln’s order and displayed for a while at a Sanitary Fair; a “useful” Scotch plaid; a “handsome and ingenious pocket knife” (acknowledged not once but twice); a red, white, and blue silk bedspread emblazoned with stars and stripes and the American eagle; an exquisite gold box decorated with his own likeness and filled with quartz crystal—all of these were received and acknowledged in 1864.<sup>39</sup>

More art came to hand as well. Sculptor John Rogers sent his statuary group, *Wounded Scout—A Friend in the Swamp*, which Lincoln thought “very pretty and

WOUNDED SCOUT—A FRIEND  
IN THE SWAMP

by John Rogers



suggestive." The President found "pretty and acceptable" a gift of photographic views of Central Park in New York City, which its senders, E. & H. T. Anthony & Co., hoped would "afford you a relaxation from the turmoil and cares of office." Photographer Alexander Gardner sent along the results of an 1863 sitting, which Lincoln thought "generally very successful," adding: "The imperial photograph, in which the head leans upon the hand, I regard as the best that I have yet seen." Lincoln seemed less taken with a photographic copy of an allegorical sketch by Charles E. H. Richardson called *The Antei-*

*tam* [sic] *Gem*. As a contemporary described the scene: "Twilight is seen scattering the murky clouds which enveloped and struck terror to the people in the days of Fort Sumter." The Union was shown "Crushing out Secession, unloosening its folds from around the Fasces of the Republic." The *carte-de-visite* copy had been sent in the hope that Lincoln would want the original after the conclusion of its display at a Philadelphia fair. Instead, Lincoln suggested tactfully that it be "sold for the benefit of the Fair." Despite his apparent aversion to such representational works, the President did sit still once for the presentation of an

allegorical tribute to Emancipation "in a massive carved frame." Lincoln "kindly accorded the desired opportunity to make the presentation, which occupied but a few minutes," remembered artist Francis Carpenter, who witnessed the scene. After it was over, Lincoln confided to Carpenter precisely how he felt about the gift. "It is what I call *ingenious nonsense*," he declared.<sup>40</sup>

According to Carpenter, of all the gifts Lincoln ever received, none gave him "more sincere pleasure" than the presentation by the "colored people of Baltimore" of an especially handsome pulpit-size Bible, bound in violet velvet with solid gold corner bands. "Upon the left-hand corner," Carpenter observed, "was a design representing the President in a cotton-field knocking the shackles off the wrists of a slave, who held one hand aloft as if invoking blessings upon the head of his benefactor." The Bible was inscribed to Lincoln as "a token of respect and gratitude" to the "friend of Universal Freedom." Rev. S. W. Chase, in making the presentation, declared: "In future, when our sons shall ask what mean these tokens, they will be told of your mighty acts, and rise up and call you blessed." Lincoln replied: "I return you my sincere thanks

for this very elegant copy of the great book of God . . . the best gift which God has ever given man."<sup>41</sup>

Another touching ceremony took place the next year, when a Philadelphia delegation gave Lincoln "a truly beautiful and superb vase of skeleton leaves, gathered from the battle-fields of Gettysburg." Lincoln told the group that "so much has been said about Gettysburg, and so well said, that for me to attempt to say more may, perhaps, only serve to weaken the force of that which has already been said." Interestingly, he was referring not to his own words spoken November 19, 1863, but to those of principal orator Edward Everett, who had died just nine days before the vase presentation.<sup>42</sup>

Lincoln was deeply moved as well when Caroline Johnson, a former slave who had become a nurse in a Philadelphia hospital, arrived at the White House to express her "reverence and affection" for Lincoln by presenting him with a beautifully made collection of wax fruits and an ornamented stem table-stand. Together with her minister, she arrived in Lincoln's office, unpacked the materials, and set up the stand and fruits in the center of the room as the President and First Lady looked on. Then she was invited to say a few words, and as she later recalled:

I looked down to the floor, and felt that I had not a word to say, but after a moment or two, the fire began to burn, . . . and it burned and burned till it went all over me. I think it was the Spirit, and I looked up to him and said: "Mr. President, I believe God has hewn you out of a rock, for this great and mighty purpose. Many have been led away by bribes of gold, of silver, of presents; but you have stood firm, because God was with you, and if you are faithful to the end, he will be with you." With his eyes full of tears, he walked round and examined the present, pronounced it beautiful, thanked me kindly, but said: "You must not give me the praise—It belongs to God."<sup>43</sup>

By the last few months of his life, the novelty of presidential gifts seemed finally

<sup>40</sup>Lincoln to Rogers, June 13, 1864, *Collected Works*, VII, 389 (statuary group); Lincoln to Edward and Henry T. Anthony, Jan. 13, 1864, *ibid.*, p. 123 (Central Park scenes); Lincoln to Gardner, Aug. 18, 1863, and *Collected Works . . . Supplement*, p. 199 (photographs); Lincoln to Richardson, May 21, 1864, *ibid.*, p. 244 ("Anteitam Gem"); Carpenter, pp. 157–58 (Emancipation tribute). Lincoln also received engravings of McClellan; see Lincoln to Henry A. Brown, March 13, 1862, *Collected Works*, V, 157, in which he declares one "very beautifully executed . . . the likeness . . . perfect."

<sup>41</sup>Carpenter, pp. 197–99.

<sup>42</sup>Reply to Philadelphia Delegation, Jan. 24, 1865, *Collected Works*, VIII, 236.

<sup>43</sup>Carpenter, pp. 199–201.

to wear off for Lincoln. When in late 1864 the organizers of a charity fair asked him to contribute the mammoth ox, "General Grant," recently sent by a Boston donor, Lincoln seemed totally unaware that he had been given the beast. "If it be really [mine] . . . I present it," he wrote incredulously. It was auctioned off for \$3,200. A new pattern had been established. Gifts were still arriving, but Lincoln was no longer taking notice. There is no record of any acknowledgments, for example, for the many Thanksgiving gifts received in November, 1864.<sup>44</sup>

Then, only two months before the assassination, Lincoln had to be reminded by abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison that he had also failed to acknowledge the gift a full year before of a "spirited" painting depicting blacks awaiting the precise moment of their emancipation. "As the money was raised," Garrison wrote testily, "by ladies who desire that the donors may be officially apprised of its legitimate application, I write in their behalf." Noting that visitors had "seen the picture again and again at the White House," Garrison pressed Lincoln to avoid further "embarrassment" by taking note that "the painting . . . was duly received." A weary Lincoln apologized for his "seeming neglect," explaining weakly that he had intended "to

make my personal acknowledgment . . . and waiting for some leisure hour, I have committed the discourtesy of not replying at all. I hope you will believe that my thanks though late, are most cordial." The letter was written by secretary John Hay; Lincoln merely signed it.<sup>45</sup>

The very last recorded gift presented to Lincoln came from a delegation of fifteen visitors only hours before the President left for his fateful visit to Ford's Theatre. Anticlimactically, the presentation ceremony—such as it was—took place in a hallway. A spokesman made a brief impromptu speech, and Lincoln was handed a picture of himself in a silver frame. There is no record of his reply.<sup>46</sup> But by then, Lincoln had been given a far more precious gift: the surrender of Lee's army at Appomattox. Before he had very much time to savor it, however, he was dead.

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<sup>44</sup>Lincoln to Alexander H. Rice, Nov. 8, 1864, *Collected Works*, VIII, 96–97 (the ox, "General Grant"); for Thanksgiving gifts, see *Day by Day*, III, 298.

<sup>45</sup>Garrison to Lincoln, Jan. 21, 1865, Lincoln Papers; Lincoln to Garrison, Feb. 7, 1865, *Collected Works*, VIII, 265–66.

<sup>46</sup>William H. Crook with Margarita Spalding Gerry, "Lincoln's Last Day: New Facts Now Told For the First Time," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, Sept., 1907, p. 523.