

Two Presidents, and

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By Franklin R. Gannon

WASHINGTON—Abraham Lincoln, once told a Chicago audience that press was almost unanimously against him, and in political circles—even in his own party—many thought the country could not survive unless he was removed from office. Accusations of scandal and sinister motives against him and his Administration were commonplace.

For his part, Mr. Lincoln stood firm for the right as he saw the right, and as a result the whole nation remembers and celebrates its sixteenth President's 165th birthday today.

Even the casual reader wary of undue comparisons will be struck by some of the pertinent and poignant political similarities between Mr. Lincoln's Presidency and President Nixon's current troubles. The real similarity and affinity between the two men, however, and the one that explains them best, is on the more important level of ideas: Both men have based their conception of the Presidency upon the belief that the whole

point of America is to find out if the Founders were right, whether free men are in fact able to govern themselves. To that end, both Presidents have shared a determination to preserve the traditions and institutions of self-government, whatever the political or personal cost.

Both Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Nixon entered office facing accretions of power and precedent that put these principles of self-government at risk, and thus found themselves in the difficult position of reminding their countrymen that the high price of personal freedom is the constant need to earn it; that a democratic government can create the atmosphere for individual choice but cannot guarantee that those choices will ever be easy, or will always be wise. Both, too, were faced with preserving these principles amid conditions of civil war, because in their way the ravages of the spiritual civil war America experienced in the nineteen-sixties were as wrenching as the bloody battlefield agonies of the eighteen-sixties. Nor will the spiritual and psychological reconstruction of the nineteen-seventies be any less difficult

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than the material and physical reconstruction of the eighteen-seventies.

In his First Inaugural Address, Mr. Lincoln talked about having faith in "the ultimate justice of the people." And after the war had begun he told his private Secretary John Hay: "I consider the central idea pervading this struggle is the necessity that is upon us of proving that popular government is not an absurdity. . . . If we fail it will go far to prove the incapability of the people to govern themselves. . . ."

There is a direct line of sentiment and philosophy between statements like these and speeches like those he made in Philadelphia in 1861, and President Nixon's 1971 State of the Union message, his Second Inaugural Address and his numerous other domestic addresses.

It is this basic shared belief in popular government that also explains the ostensible paradox of Whiggish warnings against centralized government, combined with unprecedented assertions of Presidential power, which have confused so many observers of both Presidents and led to charges

of executive imperialism against both.

Refusal to compromise his principles about the nature and structure of the Government he heads and the office he holds, and his determination to preserve the traditional boundaries between the different branches, have deprived President Nixon of the kind of short-term political flexibility that many have urged to get over the current crisis. But as Mr. Lincoln said in his last public address, "Important principles may be and must be inflexible."

By his resolute conduct so far, Mr. Nixon has already earned the words that Mr. Lincoln's law partner wrote of him:

"Mr. Lincoln was not appreciated in this city, nor was he at all times the most popular man among us. The cause of the unpopularity, or rather the want of popularity here, arose out of two grounds: First, he did his own thinking, and second, he had the courage of his convictions and he boldly and fearlessly expressed them."

Franklin R. Gannon is a staff assistant to the President.