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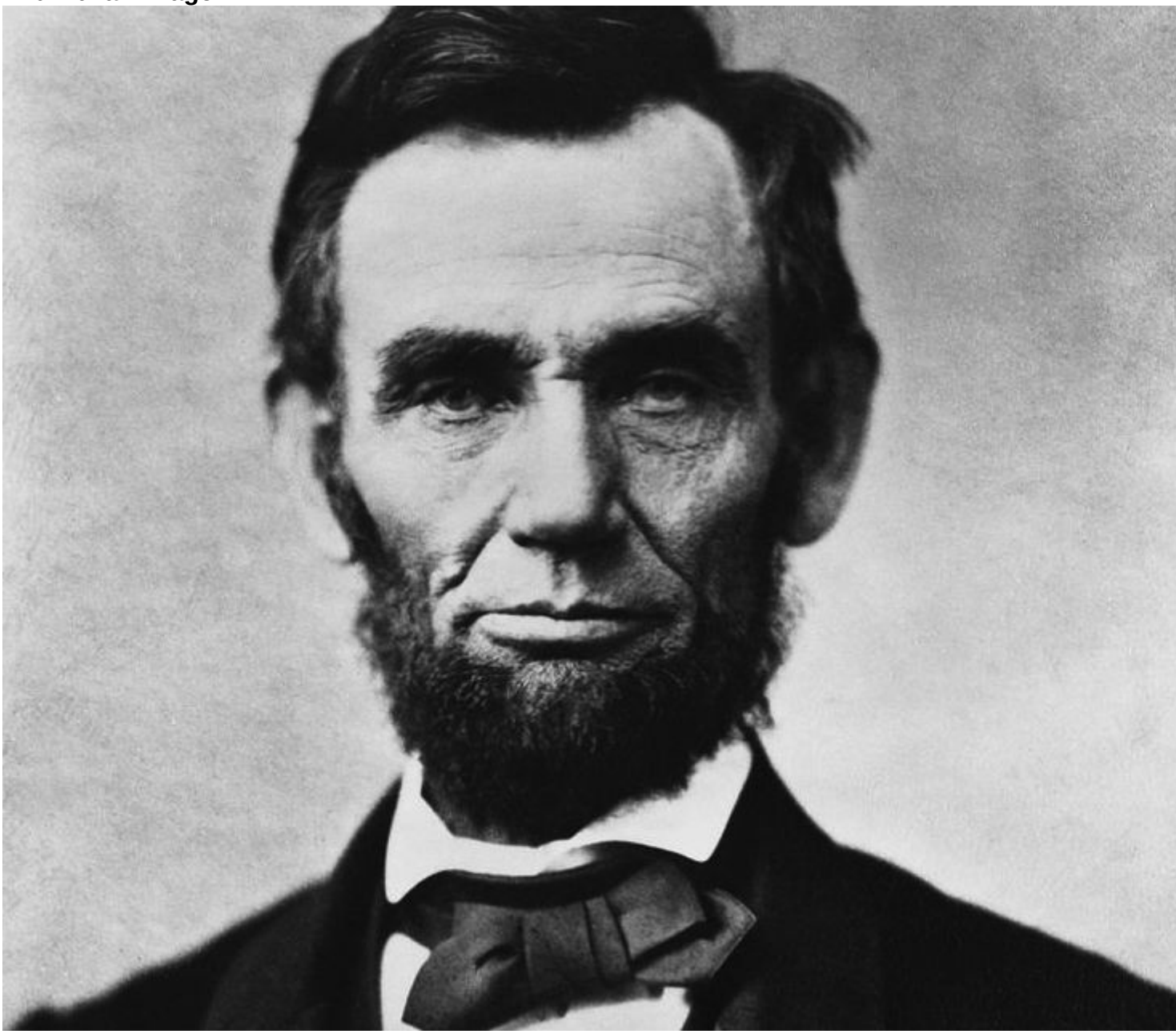

Nov 04, 2016 by Nicholas J. Cull

Lincoln v. Lies [1]

There is an amusing internet meme featuring a bold quotation: ‘Don’t believe everything you read on the internet just because there’s a picture with a quote next to it.’ The quote is accompanied by a portrait of and attribution to Abraham Lincoln. Amusing as it is to make points about our own age by inserting an anachronistic figure from another era, the quote is not as absurd as it might at first appear, rather it is in line with Lincoln’s feelings and policies.

Lincoln was often concerned about distortions in the media of his own day and took numerous steps to head them off. As President, he knew he was not just fighting physical war with the rebellious Southern states; he was fighting a war of ideas in which he had to struggle to secure a moral high ground and maintain the confidence of his own people and world opinion. Most especially, his victory required Europeans to remain at least neutral in the conflict. Such is well known as are some of the steps Lincoln took to advance his cause: personally writing open letters to European newspapers. What is less well known is an even more remarkable step Lincoln's Department of State took: it responded to the outbreak of the Civil War by taking a decisive step to expand on a longstanding tradition of openness – to actually perform some of the democratic values for which their government was fighting, and remind the world that they had the monopoly on the sovereign functions of nation state-hood. The more the U.S. government could do to frame itself as the rightful voice for the entire union – past, present, and future, both home and abroad – the better. With this in mind, the State Department began publishing a grand compendium of key documents relating to its diplomacy and policy in a single hard-bound volume in an edition of many thousands which could be easily read by Congress, the American people and interested parties abroad within months. Previous publications had been piecemeal and harder to access or to track across time. The new volumes were named *Foreign Relations of the United States* (*FRUS*).

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The *FRUS* volume had been a standard source for historians for the past 150 years but they have not themselves been the subject of a sustained historical enquiry until now. The publication of a book-length study: 'Toward "*Thorough, Accurate, and Reliable:" A History of the* Foreign Relations of the United States *Series* by a State Department Historian's Office team of William McAllister, Joshua Botts, Peter Cozzens and Aaron Marrs breaks new ground. Its opening chapters on the antecedents and the Lincoln years show a U.S. goverment striving to live up to its ideas. It is fascinating to see the debates over where to trim the documents to save ambassadors' blushes or protect a delicate bilateral relationship. The debates are astonishingly modern. It is especially touching to see the special volume released at the end of the Civil War to document the reaction to President Lincoln's assassination. The president's ability to project both his image and his cause are clear as is an element of astonishment in foreign audiences that the United States had navigated so dangerous a constitutional corner as the murder of a sitting president without the political roof falling in. The volumes survived the war and the temptation to go back to piecemeal releases and by 1870 the volumes had become an institution – operating alongside emergency and subject specific releases – and an accepted element in U.S. public diplomacy.

The remainder of the book is no less fascinating. The volumes struggle to make their way in the era of reconstruction and the beginnings of American global expansion. There is a salutary brush with political spin in the early 1880s when Secretary of State James Blaine tried to manipulate coverage of a war between Chile and Peru over rights to harvest *guano,* the agricultural resource of accumulated sea-bird dung. By the twentieth century the volumes have slipped from providing contemporaneous coverage to being increasingly historical. The

levels of politicization which come with the Cold War make Blaine's shenanigans seem tame. A foretaste of controversy came in the 1950s with struggles over and after the publication of documents relating to the 1945 Yalta talks. By the 1980s, with publication now lagging decades behind events, the State Department came under immense pressure to falsify the historical record by omission. The two most notorious cases concerned papers relating to the U.S. intervention in Guatemala and in Iran. In the Iran case, the CIA claimed that papers could not be released in deference not only to their own role but to that of their allies in the overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadegh, Great Britain. As the absurdities and obfuscations accumulated, the Historical Branch of the Department of State spiraled into what was termed at the time a 'Civil War' of its own. The battle spilled into the public domain with the resignation of the chairman of the historical advisory committee, Professor Warren Cohen of the University of Maryland. In the end, Congress had to set matters straight with an unequivocal amendment introduced by Senator Claiborne Pell. A 1991 law ended the slide into distortion and set the volumes back on track with the legitimate concerns of security held in balance.

It also reminds us, through its subsequent history, that the impulse to spin, tweak, manipulate and distort for short-term political gain and to overstate the needs of security/secrecy is as much a part of the American way of government as the noble ideals of Lincoln.

This story carries several implications for the U.S. and others. It provides an excellent case study on the openness to which any democracy should aspire. It is fascinating how the democratizing states of the 1990s include the publication of state papers prominently on their 'to do' lists. It deepens our collective knowledge of the origins of U.S. public diplomacy by including a case hitherto not seen as canonical but which displays many of the same issues in better known stories like that of Voice of America radio. It provides insight into the working of a particular administration (Lincoln's) that understood that for communication to work, the speaker must be seen as credible and that governments cannot communicate only in self-selected 'superlatives' (as Edward R. Murrow once termed them). It also reminds us, through its subsequent history, that the impulse to spin, tweak, manipulate and distort for short-term political gain and to overstate the needs of security/secrecy is as much a part of the American way of government as the noble ideals of Lincoln. Plainly, we need an internet meme that says 'don't believe everything you read just because it claims an official U.S. government origin.' It will be fascinating to see how future *FRUS* volumes cope with documenting the 2003 decision to invade Iraq. When that struggle comes, future editors will have a succinct statement of the past values, virtues and struggles of their series to bring into the debate.

The book may be downloaded or accessed free of charge in multiple digital formats at: http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus-history.

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