

# Obama, Sandburg and Lincoln

By Walter G. Moss

Obama and Lincoln, okay; but "Obama, Sandburg, and Lincoln"? Lincoln scholar, poet, and folk singer Carl Sandburg (1878-1967) is seldom mentioned anymore, but that's unfortunate. A half century ago he was, in the words of his friend Illinois governor Adlai Stevenson, "the one living man whose work and whose life epitomize the American dream." During the Great Depression and World War II, he did much to keep American hopes alive. It is that same "audacity of hope" that President Obama is now trying to restore.

In 1999 a scholar wrote that Sandburg's *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and The War Years* is, for better or worse, the best-selling, most widely read, and most influential book about Lincoln .... Probably more Americans have learned their Lincoln from Sandburg than from any other source." The book itself was a condensed version of six Sandburg volumes, and in 1940 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for History. In 1959, he had the unique honor of addressing Congress on the 150th anniversary of Lincoln's birth. Among professional historians, however, Sandburg's Lincoln writings have often been criticized for taking artistic liberties with history.

Regardless of such criticism, this once famous man who also twice won or shared a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and appeared on the cover of popular magazines deserves to be remembered for sustaining the American spirit. And in many surprising ways, this son of poor but hard-working Swedish immigrants foreshadowed our first African-American president.

Born and raised in Galesburg, Illinois, Sandburg attended Lombard College (even played basketball on its team). He worked at many jobs, married a strong, independent-minded, honors graduate from the University of Chicago (Lillian Steichen), and had three daughters. A strong believer in workers' rights, he was briefly an organizer for Wisconsin's Social-Democratic Party and later a private secretary to Milwaukee's socialist mayor. By 1919 he was working for the *Chicago Daily News*, where he remained until 1932. In mid-1919, he wrote articles based on interviews he conducted in black neighborhoods on racial tensions that culminated in violence at the end of July – these pieces were reproduced in his book *The Chicago Race Riots, July 1919*. Sandburg's sympathies for exploited blacks lasted his whole life. Thurgood Marshall, the first African-American Supreme Court Justice, was one of his friends, and in 1966 Roy Wilkins, head of the NAACP, made him a lifetime member and declared him "a major prophet of Civil Rights," saluting him for his "life-long struggle to extend the frontiers of social justice."

In his many writings and books, which also included children's stories, collected folksongs, a massive novel, and WWII newspaper columns, Sandburg continually expressed hope and optimism, as he did touring the country singing folksongs. He campaigned in presidential campaigns for FDR, Adlai Stevenson, and John Kennedy, for whom he also wrote a Forward to his book of speeches, *To Turn the Tide*. FDR even encouraged him to run for Congress.

In Sandburg's belief in the American people, in his hope for a united America, in his support of strong but pragmatic presidential leadership, in his frequent summoning of Lincoln's example, in his optimism amidst gloom, he often sounded as Obama does today. In his epic poem "The People, Yes" (1936), he wrote: "These are heroes then – among the plain people-Heroes did you say? And why not? They give all they've got and ask no questions and take what comes and what more do you want?"

And on one America: "So men in this land, where once were only Indians, are now men of many colors white, black, yellow, red. Yet all one people."

In a WWII article, "What would Lincoln do now?" he stressed Lincoln's pragmatism – "I have simply tried to do what seemed best each day" – and indicated that if he were still living he "would often be doing the expedient [rather than ideological] thing."

In 1961, he called President Kennedy's attention to the following passage in his long novel *Remembrance Rock* (1948): "Long before this time of ours America saw the faces of her men and women torn and shaken in turmoil, chaos and storm. In each major crisis you could have seen despair written on the faces of the foremost strugglers. Yet there always arose enough of reserves of strength, balances of sanity, portions of wisdom, to carry the nation through to a fresh start with an ever renewing vitality."

At a Sandburg remembrance at the Lincoln Memorial, President Johnson said of him: "What will live on forever though is his faith – his faith in the individual human beings whom we impersonally call 'Americans.' He knew that always in America 'the strong men keep coming on.'" Forty-two years later, two days before his inauguration as president, Barack Obama also participated at a Lincoln Memorial event, the upbeat "We Are One" concert. And the spirit of Carl Sandburg seemed reborn.

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