

Movie discussion resource

Lincoln

Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.

Genre: Drama

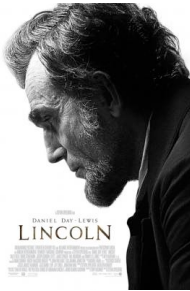
Rating: M (Mature themes, coarse language, and intense scene of war violence)

Length: 153 minutes

Starring: Daniel Day Lewis, Sally Field, Tommy Lee Jones

Director: Stephen Spielberg

Screenplay: Tony Kushner (*Angels in America*), based on Doris Kearns Goodwin's book *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*



Brief synopsis

This is a grand, poignant and very long drama that focuses on Lincoln's tumultuous final 4 months in office in 1865. In a nation divided by war and the strong winds of change, Lincoln pursues a course of action designed to end the war, unite the country and abolish slavery. With the moral courage and fierce determination to succeed, his choices during this critical moment will change the fate of generations to come.

Questions for discussion

Some general questions might provide enough framework for you to discuss the movie:

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the movie?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own experience or with the experience of others in a similar situation?
- ❖ Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?

'Here there be dragons' (adapted, <http://www.pluggedin.com/movies/intheaters/lincoln.aspx>)

'Here there be dragons' - so wrote the old cartographers on their maps, sketching fantastical beasts with fins and fangs. They were fearsome and horrible, able to swallow ships and devour cities. Mr. Lincoln had his fill of dragons.

One is named **War**. The Civil War broke out the month after Lincoln's inauguration as President. War is a gluttonous beast that fed on the country for four sickening years. Hundreds of thousands have died at its feet, lost in its bloody maw. America's forests and fields are covered in corpses. The streets are alive with the cry of mothers and children, mourning the beloved dead. Another is called **Slavery**, a demon that's torn at the country since its inception and before—mocking its hypocrisy, decrying the duplicity of its declaration that "All men are created equal" when so many live in chains. Now, finally, in 1865, Lincoln feels the time is right to slay a monster or two. The rebellious South is exhausted and ready to plead for peace. Slavery may, with a little luck, be wiped out through an act of Congress—the 13th Amendment. But there's a catch: End the war, and the Confederate South will insist on preserving slavery. Free the slaves, and the South will have no incentive to make peace. "It's either the Amendment or this Confederate peace," William Seward, Lincoln's secretary of state, tells him. "You cannot have both." *Lincoln* is the story of monsters, the man who slew them, and the price he paid to do so. What did you find inspiring about the 'dragon slayer'?

Leadership

In her book on which the screenplay is based, Doris Kearns Goodwin depicted Lincoln as a smart and wise agent of change whose leadership abilities enabled him to convince key players from the complete spectrum of both parties to support his agenda. His

vision and tenacity enabled him to both confront the injustice, but also to stand firm in the face of fear and prejudice that permeates political debate. He demonstrated a tremendous capacity for patience as well as strength of will. There were other key leaders including Secretary of State William Seward (David Strathairn), the President's right hand man, and Thaddeus Stevens (Tommy Lee Jones), a radical Republican who was strongly opposed to slavery. What qualities and skills are required for the kind of leadership that generates change, and where do you see such skills demonstrated in contemporary culture, and within the church?

Family ties

The film shows the burden of Lincoln's family problems. All politicians have to juggle competing challenges and commitments in the workplace and family. Discuss what you imagine might be the personal cost for leaders in public office.

Quirks and foibles

Not all politicians tolerated Lincoln's propensity to tell stories and anecdotes: one member of the cabinet storms out of the room muttering how he cannot abide another story. The public and media scrutinize politicians mercilessly, looking for any signs of 'weakness', quirks and foibles. What place is there to be 'real' in politics rather than politicians who project an image carefully manufactured by the 'spin doctors'?

Politics and faith

Lincoln's speeches, actions and priorities were evidence of his faith in God, though he never wore faith on his sleeve. America during the Civil War was a deeply religious country. Politicians, then as now, tried to enlist God to their side. Can you give other examples in the movie, and in contemporary politics, where faith informs politics, and is used to influence politics? What role is appropriate for faith in politics?

Devious politics (adapted, <http://www.pluggedin.com/movies/intheaters/lincoln.aspx>)

Lincoln is politically savvy and shrewd and uses dirty tricks to push the 13th Amendment through Congress. He knows that the Emancipation Proclamation (enacted 2 years previously in 1863) required some serious contortions to legally justify it. The Amendment would clear up any potential illegality, but to get it passed Lincoln arranges for some dubious "lobbyists" to help get the required votes. While they are forbidden from using money to outright bribe anyone, they can offer jobs in exchange for "yes" votes. Lincoln tells one congressman that he'll have him booted out of Congress unless he votes "yes." He continually sidesteps rumors that he's entertaining peace offers from the Confederacy - but in fact he is. The opposition demands the President respond to rumors that there's a Confederate delegation in town; he says there is no delegation in Washington, D.C., "as far as I know." It's true, but only semantically so: He stalled the delegation outside town. When one principled adjunct refuses to deliver that message to Congress, Lincoln gently takes the missive out of his hands and gives it to a less scrupulous messenger.

When he is chastised for his seeming lack of a moral compass and his willingness to compromise, Lincoln tells a story. He relates how as a backwoodsman, he learned it was sometimes necessary to deviate from true north in order to evade a swamp or gorge. If you continue straight on toward your goal, regardless of obstacles, that might terminate your trip forever, Lincoln asks, "What's the use of knowing true north?"

Lincoln was an idealist as well as a pragmatist. Is idealism necessarily compromised by pragmatism? Is dirty politics a 'necessary evil' to achieve an outcome for the greater good?