

# Marx and Lincoln: Comrades in the Making?

Since Abraham Lincoln is a towering figure in American history, Democrats and Republicans alike seek to cast the man in their own image to support their respective agendas.

Both sides might want to be careful with such a move. In reality, Lincoln was far more radical than those on the Left or Right would be comfortable with.

This becomes clear when examining the actual letters and speeches made during Lincoln's time in office. In fact, there is some evidence that Abraham Lincoln was ideologically closer to what would soon be known as communism.

Addressing the country in his [1861 Annual Message](#), Lincoln took time to declare his stance on the relationship between capital and labor:

*Labor is prior to and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital and deserves much the higher consideration.*

Given this statement, it's not surprising that the eventual founder of communism, Karl Marx, was watching Lincoln's election and the subsequent Civil War with great interest across the pond in London. Earlier in his life, Marx had considered moving to the United States after the failed German Revolution in 1848. He was incensed at the sympathy the British Government had for the Confederates and supported the Union wholeheartedly. Marx, in his capacity as a delegate for the International Workingman Association in the United Kingdom, [penned an address](#) to congratulate Lincoln on his reelection in 1864 and concluded with the following:

*The workingmen of Europe feel sure that, as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Antislavery War will do for the working classes. They consider it an earnest of the epoch to come that it fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead his country through the matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of a social world.*

Abraham Lincoln almost certainly read this address, but it fell to his Ambassador to the United Kingdom to write the response. Interestingly, this was Charles Francis Adams, the grandson of President John Adams and son of President John Quincy Adams. In his response, he clearly showcased both his and President Lincoln's sympathy to Marx's ideas, while giving a nod to the international struggle of the working class against national aspirations:

*Nations do not exist for themselves alone, but to promote the welfare and happiness of mankind by benevolent intercourse and example. It is in this relation that the United States regard their cause in the present conflict with slavery, maintaining insurgence as the cause of human nature, and they derive new encouragements to persevere from the testimony of the workingmen of Europe that the national attitude is favored with their enlightened approval and earnest sympathies.*

Karl Marx himself clearly saw the American Civil War as part of a larger fight against capitalism, and to a certain extent, Abraham Lincoln agreed enough to encourage a sympathetic response. Furthermore, Marx and Lincoln could frame the American Civil War as a broader international fight between the working class against international capitalism.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, American business interests took over both parties and successfully put the genie of revolution back in the bottle. In Europe, however, it took a

world war for a socialist revolution to bear fruit.

Looking back, it seems odd that the avatar of international communism and the exalted founder of the now pro-capitalist Republican Party were ideological bedfellows. But it is an interesting lesson that times change, and with it, our perception of history. It is important to look outside one's own ideological lens to truly understand history and develop an open mind.

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