

# Following the path of Lincoln

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WHEN John Donne declared "No man is an island, entire of itself", he had not met the 44th President of the United States.

Almost without exception, President Barack Obama's former colleagues in the Illinois legislature, Harvard Law School, the University of Chicago and the United States Senate say he was with them but not of them. This man, who can arouse such fervour among his supporters with his oratory, is somehow a disconnected man, an island apart from the world around him, with the exception of his family.

Indeed, his unique biography, born here, brought up there, absent father, is one of rootlessness, of disconnectedness. That is one reason that the old warhorses of the civil rights movement are so unhappy: they created the America that enabled Barack Obama to attend Harvard, teach at the University of Chicago, and eventually capture the presidency. He is disconnected from them, preferring to acknowledge the contribution to racial progress of Martin Luther King before fast-forwarding

to the present. And not only from them, but from the country over which he now presides. This is the man who found expressions of patriotism embarrassing and agreed to wear an American flag lapel pin as a campaign expedient, not as an expression of linkage with the America of John McCain.

Which might explain his recent attempt to connect with America's history. Rather than remain in Washington for his inaugural, Mr Obama chose to travel to Philadelphia, and return via train. Philadelphia, the place where that exceptional group of men we now call the Founding Fathers met to establish these United States of America. "It is here in this city that our American journey began," he announced as he boarded the train to duplicate the 137-mile trip that Abraham Lincoln had taken en route to delivering an inaugural address that included not only Lincoln's hope that "the mystic chords of memory ... when again touched" would call forth "the better angels of our nature", but his assurance to the Southerners who had opposed his election that he had no intention of interfering with their right to own slaves as property, and that any runaway slaves would be returned to them.

It is Lincoln, the man who finally went to war to preserve the Union and abolish slavery, and who many Americans regard as the greatest of all our presidents, to whom Mr

Obama is trying to connect. The pre-inaugural festivities were staged in front of the Lincoln Memorial, from which impressive vantage point Mr Obama proclaimed: "The dream of our Founders will live on." This after having earlier in the day connected to the nation's military history by paying his respects to the fallen at the Arlington National Cemetery and before taking the oath of office yesterday, hand placed solemnly on Lincoln's Bible.

There is no reason to view this as an exercise in cynicism - Mr Obama, his popularity rating in the 80 per cent range, has no reason to pander to voters. Better to view it as an attempt to reveal a side we were not permitted to see during an election campaign in which patriotic connection to America's past was confused with support of President George W Bush's "war on terror", or John McCain's "surge" in Iraq, or general belligerence in international affairs.

The new president is also attempting to link himself to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who confronted the twin scourges of depression and war, the very same problems that Mr Obama confronts now that the in-tray in the Oval Office is his.

Few dispute that Roosevelt was a great war president, although his contribution to new world order that emerged is not so uniformly hailed. Whether his insistence on "unconditional surrender", an insistence that

so upset Winston Churchill and many British and American military leaders, will be part of the Roosevelt legacy that appeals to Mr Obama as he confronts radical Islam is unlikely, and perhaps unattainable.

Roosevelt's effectiveness as a depression-fighter remains controversial. Some argue that it took the Second World War to end the Great Depression, others that Roosevelt's jauntiness, his proclamation that all we have to fear is fear itself, the successive measures he crafted, reassured Americans that government could get people back to work.

Mr Obama is in the latter school. He is appealing to Americans to allow him to follow Roosevelt's path of experimenting with a variety of measures to get the economy moving again, to "move on" to other steps if the first fail. He also cites FDR in support of his stimulus package. FDR's tax-raising to minimise the deficit and force "the rich" to contribute more to the nation's coffers is less mentioned: that's for another day.

For now, this solitary figure, this man who seems less in need of applause and the adoration of the masses than such successful modern-day politicians as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, is leaning on Lincoln to call us to heed the better angels of our nature and extend the American dream to all, and on Roosevelt to rally support for his economic programme.

We could do a lot worse.