



TALES FROM THE WASTELAND

Elegy for Lincoln

It's obvious what's missing from America's education.

By Barry Perryman, Ph.D.

While driving along the headwaters of the Reese River near Arc Dome, Nev., not long ago, I was listening to Jeff Beck (my number-one guitar hero) play Dario Marianelli's "Elegy for Dunkirk." As it often does, my hummingbird-like attention span moved to thinking about elegies and what may be wrong with our country today. Everybody's got an opinion on that one, but it came to my mind that if you really want to know, just watch a couple of episodes of "Judge Judy."

When the Kardashians (whoever they are) get the top headline and more chatter on the six o'clock news than an Iranian nuclear deal, the timing chain has slipped a couple of notches. It all boils down to demand: if the people want more Kardashian than world peace, the news agencies are going to provide them with more Kardashian. As the great

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boxing promoter Don King used to say, "only in America"! Yes, only in America can you be famous for being famous. Don't get me wrong. The Kardashians have evidently made a great life for themselves because the American Dream still lives. That's good and I like it. What concerns me is this false sense of inti-

macy that an audience of millions uses to follow their every move, while simultaneously ignoring the more consequential things that are in play.

The Hebrew prophet Isaiah wrote: "Therefore My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge; and their honorable men are famished, and their multitude is parched with thirst." Although the context is religious, I think this little verse certainly holds true in a secular sense. On a recent trip to Washington, D.C., I was invited to address a roomful of congressional staffers and other natural-resource agency folks about public land management issues out here in the boonies. I had a little free time the day before, so I took a hike up and down the National Mall. I spent some time at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. It was a fantastic experience, and I was most

impressed with the attention to detail of the education effort. Everything was documented, presented and displayed so that those who are totally unfamiliar with Native American history can get a reasonable perspective and education of how we got where we are at this point in time. I think many of my grandfather's people would be impressed.

Later, I walked to the west end of the mall where the Lincoln Memorial stands. I stood and thought about what things must have been like in the country during the years just prior to his Gettysburg Address. It must have seemed like the whole world was on fire. Brother fighting against brother, tribe fighting against tribe, governments fighting against governments, governments fighting against tribes. Uncertainty greeted everyone each morning and bade them goodnight every evening. Everything was up for grabs, society was decaying, and, yes, many politicians were crooked. Abraham Lincoln's visage was projected on this back screen of tumult, division, graft, war, and uncertainty. He was that shining city sitting on a hill. Once upon a time, most of us learned the basic facts about him in grade school, and many of us had to memorize the Gettysburg Address. Things have changed.

Inside the Lincoln Memorial, still in the afterglow of my museum education experience, I was standing at the left wall where the Gettysburg Address is carved. A young man about 35 years old was standing next to his maybe 10-year-old son. The son asked who this guy Lincoln was. The father said, "I don't know for sure, but I think he was maybe a president or something." I moved away a few feet, and heard the same question asked by a similarly aged son to his mother. She answered, "I don't know who he was.... I think he was one of the constitution guys." On the verge of a seizure, I walked to the other side where Lincoln's second inaugural address is carved. This time I heard a husband and wife of about 40 discussing who Lincoln might have been. Neither knew and they were laughing about how they hated history in school, and they finally decided he was "probably a president or something." I then walked to the little-photographed backside of the

Memorial and contemplated what color the sky was in my world.

I am sure they were intelligent, otherwise thoughtful people. They were probably employed by businesses that demanded high standards of achievement for their employees. Nothing about their appearance would indicate that they were incapable of making insightful, well-constructed decisions. But decisions are only as good as the information they are based upon. Low levels or missing information undermines the quality of the decision. Would a lack of knowledge about Lincoln and the circumstances of his presidency affect some of the decisions a voter might make at the ballot box today? I think a modern, Lincoln-omitted perspective may provide a different outcome than one that is inclusive of him and

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ISAIAH, HEBREW PROPHET, 8TH CENTURY B.C.

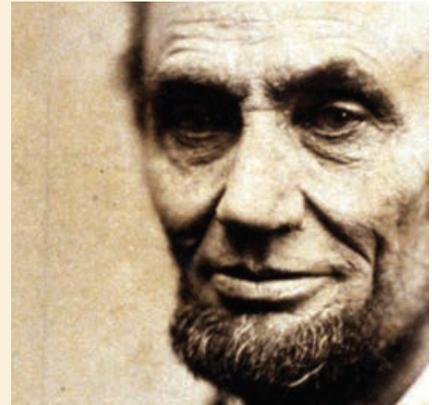
his time. Is it time to sing a dirge and recite a new elegy for Lincoln?

When I returned home, the big story in the local news greeted me: "A new study indicates that only eight percent of Nevada high-school juniors are prepared for college." Now I unequivocally know what kids are missing from their education. It's education. I went to Washington, D.C., thinking the government was broken. From the look of the Capitol Dome, my suspicions were confirmed. But folks, the government is broken because the people are broken. I could level a boatload of platitudes at you now, but my attention span has flown to another flower, thank goodness. College football season is here. And, still a Wyoming boy at heart, I say, "Go Pokes"! ■

Your Wasteland Guide is Barry Perryman, who has a Ph.D. in rangeland ecology. He is an educator, researcher, author, speaker and part-time philosopher specializing in natural resource management issues of the western states. Contact bperryman1296@charter.net.

The Gettysburg Address

President Abraham Lincoln gave one of the greatest and most influential statements of national purpose on Nov. 19, 1863, at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pa. It took place four-and-a-half months after the Union armies defeated those of the Confederacy at the Battle of Gettysburg, and 87 years after the Declaration of Independence was written.



Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, on any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.