

MORE INSIGHTS

Mike Bell



Mike Bell as Abraham Lincoln.
(Photo provided by author.)

In the thirty odd years that I have been doing historical interpretations, I have always tried to bring the best to each presentation. On two recent occasions I had an opportunity to portray Abraham Lincoln via Zoom. The program showcased my brother-in-law, Robert Bartlett, Ph.D., and me,



Dr. Robert Bartlett as Frederick Douglass.
(Photo provided by author.)

engaged in a fictional discussion between Frederick Douglass and President Lincoln. Our first presentation was last fall for a class I was teaching at the University of Maine at Augusta Senior College.

Although portraying Lincoln had its own set of burdens, it went well. The most recent presentation was similar, but part of a fundraiser for some legal education programs in Minneapolis.

The audiences for these two events were very different. One was academic, while the other focused on some of the social and justice issues now at play in our nation. When Bob and I were done with the second program, I expected the usual thanks for a job well done—it was not to be. The next two presenters, both African-American men who had served time in prison, had a different view of Lincoln. Part of that was our fault for not providing enough context ahead of time. But it was also clear that they had a different insight coming into the event, based on their life experiences. I am not sure that anything I could say about Lincoln's slowly evolving movement on issues of race could have turned the tide, and that is okay.

For groups such as ours to stay relevant, we are going to need to reshape how we view and present the history of the Civil War. Simple demographics along age and racial lines demand this. We can still talk about battles and the strategy of the blue and the gray, but we will need more insights.

We will need to find new stories to tell and likely new and innovative ways to share them. To many of us Lincoln was the great leader of his time, to others he was just another stumbling block along a continuum of our nation's complicated past. We need to listen, ask uncomfortable questions, and be prepared for answers we might not like. Isn't that what the study of history challenges us to do?