

## **Abraham Lincoln's great laws of truth, integrity: A long career ruled by honesty**

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<http://www.greatamericanhistory.net/honesty.htm>

**Mary Todd Lincoln once wrote to a friend that "Mr. Lincoln . . . is almost monomaniac on the subject of honesty."**

**The future president was first called "Honest Abe" when he was working as a young store clerk in New Salem, Ill. According to one story, whenever he realized he had shortchanged a customer by a few pennies, he would close the shop and deliver the correct change-regardless of how far he had to walk.**

**People recognized his integrity and were soon asking him to act as judge or mediator in various contests, fights, and arguments. According to Robert Rutledge of New Salem, "Lincoln's judgment was final in all that region of country. People relied implicitly upon his honesty, integrity, and impartiality."**

**As a member of the Illinois legislature and later in his law practice, he took advantage of his reputation for honesty and fairness to help broaden his constituency. His good name helped win him four consecutive terms in the legislature.**

**Lincoln soon moved to Springfield, Ill, and began his law practice, a profession at which he admitted there was a "popular belief that lawyers are necessarily dishonest." His advice to potential lawyers was: "Resolve to be honest at all events; and if in your judgment you cannot be an honest lawyer, resolve to be honest without being a lawyer. Choose some other occupation, rather than one in the choosing of which you do, in advance, consent to be a knave."**

**According to Judge David Davis, in whose court Lincoln practiced for many years, "The framework for [Lincoln's] mental and moral being was honesty, and a wrong cause was poorly defended by him." Another judge who had worked with Lincoln agreed, saying "Such was the transparent candor and integrity of his nature that he could not well or strongly argue a side or a cause he thought wrong."**

**Lincoln was ethical not only in his legal dealings with clients, but with his personal relationships.**

**Always comfortable telling jokes and stories around the men of Springfield, he usually was awkward and self-conscious around women. In Lincoln's early political years, he wrote "I want in all cases to do right, and most particularly so in all cases with women." This was a principle to which he remained true all of his life. Today, historians tell us there is not a single credible story of Lincoln's being unfaithful to his wife.**

**The Reverend Albert Hale of Springfield's First Presbyterian Church said, "Abraham Lincoln has been here all the time, consulting and consulted by all classes, all parties, and on all subjects of political interest, with men of every degree of corruption, and yet I have never heard even an enemy accuse him of intentional dishonesty or corruption."**

**An example of an "enemies" respect came in 1858, during Lincoln's Senate race against the powerful incumbent, Stephen A. Douglas. The senator, having competed with Lincoln in the legislature and many Illinois courtrooms, knew his opponent well.**

**Responding to the news that Lincoln was to be his adversary, Douglas said: "I shall have my hands full. He is the strong man of his party-full of wit, facts, dates- and the best stump speaker, with his droll ways and dry jokes, in the West. He is as honest as he is shrewd, and if I beat him my victory will be hardly won."**

**Lincoln lost his Senate bid to Douglas. Two years later, however, he found himself running against the same man for the presidency. When Douglas was told of Lincoln's victory, he unselfishly told his informants: "You have nominated a very able and very honest man."**

**By the time Lincoln was president, statements he had made previously, such as "I have never tried to conceal my opinions, nor tried to deceive anyone in reference to them," and "I am glad of all the support I can get anywhere, if I can get it without practicing any deception to obtain it" had become a source of strength for him as a leader.**

**Everyone, even his bitterest political opponents, knew exactly where they stood with Lincoln. Because he didn't have to waste time convincing his opponents of his sincerity, he was able to devote his energies to solving political issues and winning the war.**

**Lincoln as commander in chief was honest and straightforward with his generals, always telling them directly what he did and did not appreciate about them. An example of his candor is the following excerpt from a letter to Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker in early 1863:**

**"I have placed you at the head of the Army of the Potomac. Of course I have done this upon what appear to me to be sufficient reasons, and yet I think it best for you to know that there are some things in regard to which I am not quite satisfied with you. I believe you to be a brave and a skillful soldier, which of course I like . . . I have heard, in such a way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the army and the government needed a dictator. Of course it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those generals who gain successes can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship."**

**Finally, in search for the reason Lincoln was so adamant about honesty, a quote by one of his closest friends, Leonard Swett, is revealing:**

**"He believed in the great laws of truth, the right discharge of duty, his accountability to God, the ultimate triumph of the right, and the overthrow of wrong."**