

# Editorial Notebook: A great president's humble belongings

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In "With Malice Toward None," the Lincoln exhibit currently at the California Museum, a glass case on display contains the contents of the 16th president's pockets the night he was assassinated – a \$5 Confederate bill, a pocket knife, a watch fob, a button, a glass case and two pairs of spectacles. One pair has a broken hinge that the president had crudely repaired himself using a piece of twine. I loved that last detail. It speaks volumes about the humbleness of this greatest of all American presidents, the one who saved the union and abolished slavery.

A few blocks from the museum, California's leaders struggle with the state's fiscal crisis. I think it might be helpful to their deliberations if they all took time out to peer into that glass case, to look at the playbill from Ford's Theatre mounted above it, the one stained with Lincoln's blood.

It puts today's seemingly insurmountable troubles into healthy perspective. The crisis Lincoln faced makes the one confronting California now seem puny by comparison.

Yet, in the midst of his crisis, as the exhibit's curators remind us, Lincoln managed to push through federal authorization for the transcontinental railroad. He signed the Homestead Act and the law that created land-grant colleges. All this he did while serving as commander in chief during the Civil War, a slaughter unmatched in this country before or since and a challenge to the very survival of the nation.

Of course, there's more to the exhibit than the contents of the great man's pockets. There are letters he wrote and received; photographs; campaign buttons, a scrapbook of favorable newspaper articles he assembled himself; political cartoons that viciously mocked him; speeches written in his own hand; a lithograph of the Gettysburg Address, its first page on Executive Mansion stationery, the second on cheap notepaper, one corner torn off; the Emancipation Proclamation, part of it written out and part typed; and the small Bible, covered in red cloth, on which he took the oath of office, the same Bible that Barack Obama used when he took the oath 148 years later.

And finally, there are the life masks – one made just before he was elected president, looking youthful; the second, made five years later, two months before his assassination, on which the strain of the presidency remains indelibly stamped: the sunken eyes, the hollow cheeks, the sadness.

"With Malice Toward None" divides Lincoln's life into three parts: the first, his birth into poverty in Kentucky, his courtships and career as a lawyer; then his early, sporadic political life, including his nomination and run for the presidency; and last, his heroic but painful presidency through the bloody Civil War and assassination.

Because of Lincoln, the nation and Independence Day endure. The Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Exhibit sent shivers up my spine. It's something every American should see. It will be on display at the California Museum through Aug. 22.