Lincoln doubted he could achieve Washington’s greatness — then he did

By Joseph W. McDonnell, Special to the BDN
Posted Feb. 14, 2016, at 10:29 a.m.
Presidents Day remains officially George Washington’s birthday, but by moving the holiday to the third Monday in February between Washington’s and Lincoln’s birthdays, it has become in most states a celebration of our two greatest presidents. There is no one who would be happier with this joint celebration than Abraham Lincoln.

Born on Feb. 12, 1809, 10 years after Washington’s death, Lincoln came of age in the shadow of the great men who risked their lives to break from England and found a self-governing country. Lincoln and his generation wondered how they could possibly aspire to the greatness of their revolutionary forefathers, who had directed their considerable talents and ambitions toward establishing an experiment in democracy.

Washington and the other fathers of the country served as touchstones for Lincoln’s aspirations and policies. Lincoln proclaimed his positions on public policies as consistent with the vision of the founders.

The 29-year-old Lincoln, while serving in the Illinois Legislature, delivered a speech in 1838 condemning mob violence as undermining democratic rule, weakening public confidence in government to provide protection and opening the door for demagogues to seize power. He warned that talented and ambitious men of his generation might take advantage of the growing lawlessness and the fading memory of the revolution to undermine the work of the Founding Fathers. Lincoln urged strict adherence to the law and sober reason to uphold the ideals of the founders and to combat the subversion of a free society.

Four years later in his final year in the Illinois Legislature, Lincoln delivered a speech to the Springfield Washington Temperance Society on the 110th anniversary of Washington’s birth in which he expressed adulation for the country’s first president by proclaiming Washington the mightiest name on Earth, in both the cause of civil liberties and moral reformation. Lincoln acknowledged that a eulogy might be expected on his birthday, but he dismissed as futile any attempt to add to Washington’s greatness — “to add brightness to the sun, or glory to the name of Washington, is alike impossible.”

When Stephen Douglas, Lincoln’s political opponent, advocated the spread of slavery into the territories as reflective of the views of the Founding Fathers, Lincoln refuted this claim in his 1860 Cooper Union address by reviewing the record of Washington and the other 38 signers of the U.S. Constitution with respect to federal control of slavery in the territories.

The record revealed that 23 of the 39 signers of the Constitution had actually voted on the spread of slavery into the territories and 21 of the 23 had voted against its extension. Lincoln summarized the founders’ position as consistent with his own. They marked slavery “as an evil not to be extended, but to be tolerated and protected” in the southern
states with the confidence that it would be contained and ultimately eradicated. Lincoln credited the Cooper Union address with securing for him the Republican nomination for president that year.

While the young Lincoln had expressed exaggerated praise for Washington and concern that his generation would not have an opportunity to match the feats of the country’s founding generation, the mature Lincoln was more restrained.

Just prior to his inauguration in 1861, Lincoln delivered a short farewell address to the people of Springfield, Illinois, in which he drew a comparison to Washington. “I now leave, not knowing when or whether ever I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington.” President-elect Lincoln saw the challenge of keeping a divided country together as even harder than breaking from England and starting a new country.

Finally, in his brief remarks dedicating the cemetery at Gettysburg in 1863, Lincoln ascribed to the Civil War the task of fulfilling the noble experiment in democracy begun by the country’s founders. Lincoln summoned the citizenry to the cause of freedom and equality — to complete the unfinished work of those who founded the country. By so doing, Lincoln became the new Washington and gave his generation the opportunity to achieve the greatness of the founders.

The Presidents Day holiday presents us with an opportunity to recall the Founding Fathers’ sacrifices in creating a democratic country, to respond to Lincoln’s command at Gettysburg by dedicating ourselves to the cause of freedom and equality, and to heed the warning of the young Lincoln to be wary of talented and ambitious men who aim to take advantage of our fading memory of the revolutionary experiment in democratic governance.

*Joseph W. McDonnell, Ph.D., is a professor of Public Policy and Management at the University of Southern Maine’s Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service.*