

## Regional

# Hansen probes little-known aspects of Lincoln

No other historical figure has had more books written about him than Abraham Lincoln. According to WorldCat, the world's compendium of academic libraries, more than 27,000 books have been written about the nation's 16th president. And still there is much about Lincoln's life that people don't know or simply don't understand. Someone who is helping to clarify those aspects is Stephen Hansen, professor emeritus of history at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Hansen was born in Kankakee, Ill., and received his bachelor's degree from MacMurray College in Jacksonville, Ill., and his master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Illinois at Chicago. For Hansen, it is not necessarily that people are discovering new evidence about Lincoln, but that they are interpreting the evidence in new ways.

"There is some work that looks at how the images of Lincoln have changed over time and how that meets our particular needs," said Hansen, explaining how everyday people and politicians use Lincoln for their own purposes. "There is a great story about how (President) Reagan would quote Lincoln, like, 'You cannot help the poor by destroying the rich, you cannot make the weak strong by weakening the strong.' The fact is that Lincoln never said those things, but everybody wants to have Lincoln on their side." Most people, Hansen said, do not really know how Lincoln was because he has developed into a myth like no other American president. "Lincoln captures what we want us to be," he added. "It may not be what we really are, but it is our values."

Because of the greater-than-life myth that has been created about Lincoln, few people today realize just what a skillful politician he was, said Hansen.

"He was an incredibly skilled and

## Aldemaro Romero College Talk

canny politician and I think that is what accounts for the fact that he comes from obscurity to national prominence in a very quick way," Hansen said. "He matures into greatness during his presidency. Those skills made it possible for him to have the opportunities to learn how to become a statesman. He helped create the Republican Party in Illinois and put together a voter coalition of disparate groups that would not normally work together. He was able to articulate a position to unite those voters into a majority coalition and he was skillful enough to keep all the bombastic and strong personalities together from destroying each other. His skillfulness was evident in how he captured the Republican nomination in 1860 and then how he managed putting together the cabinet and how he handled the secession crisis."

The "Great Emancipator," as Lincoln has come to be called, was criticized in his time – and even now – for weakening civil liberties.

"Not even Richard Nixon has been vilified as much as Lincoln for stumping all over civil liberties, but what's interesting is that after the Civil War is over, all the power amassed in Washington, D.C. dissipates incredibly quickly and the civil liberties are restored after the times of crisis," said Hansen.

Another historical event that has been much studied and written about is the assassination. And given the propensity of Americans for conspiracy theories, there is not a shortage of them when it comes to this very well studied episode in American history. "A more obscure one," Hansen said, "is that the Catholic

Church had Lincoln assassinated because of his stands and his more distant position regarding religion." An even lesser known incident was when Lincoln's corpse was almost stolen.

"There were counterfeiters looking to make a fast buck and they decided that they would steal Lincoln's body and then hold it for ransom," Hansen explained. "They were only able to get the top off of the sarcophagus and pull part of the casket out. But because there was an informant, they were not able to get the body and were captured. When they re-buried Lincoln, they poured all this concrete but they drilled a hole in the casket and made his only surviving son, Robert Todd, look inside and make sure the body was still there."

When he talks about these issues with general audiences and his students at SIUE, Hansen said that he observes very interesting reactions among the listeners. Many of them even change their notions on American history as taught to them in high school.

"I certainly would like to believe that light bulbs go off in my students' heads," Hansen said. "We have had some interesting and lively discussions in my class on Lincoln. We have a National Endowment for the Humanities summer teachers' workshop on Lincoln. There we bring in two groups of 50 teachers from all across the nation. That is really lively and exciting because we try to untangle Lincoln's feelings about race as opposed to slavery, union and power. He can carry for us a lot of the complexities and ambiguities of American democracy."

*Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at [College\\_Arts\\_Sciences@siue.edu](mailto:College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu).*



Photo by Shan Lu

Dr. Stephen Hansen during one of his classes.