

# Life, Liberty, and Lincoln

RAJ MATHUR

**R**ain pours down on the young woman, mingling with her stream of tears. Hundreds of feet away, the most powerful office in the world is being transferred, as it has been forty-two times before, to a new man: George W. Bush—a hopeful revival for some, utter ruination in the minds of others. For Sarah Vowell, it is ruination, and she sobs “tears of rage” as the oath of office is given (“Patriot” 169). There are thousands of protesters on the Washington Mall, but through blurry eyes and hazy weather, Vowell’s gaze falls upon a pro-Bush family, praying hand-in-hand with their heads down as the chaplains give the invocation. The dichotomy between the family and the hate sign of a nearby protestor strikes her as the national anthem begins to play (“Nerd” 93). Many protestors refuse to sing—an affirmation of their steadfast belief that the Death of Democracy is occurring before their very eyes. And yet, however much she may agree with their politics or abhor President Bush, Sarah Vowell puts her hands over her heart and sings (“Patriot” 169).

Singing loudly is much of what Sarah Vowell does in her terse yet compelling essays—she presents her political convictions as incontrovertible. “The modern mocha is a bittersweet concoction of imperialism, genocide, invention, and consumerism served with whipped cream on top,” she quips in “God Will Give You Blood to Drink in a Souvenir Shot Glass” (42). When a veterans’ group leaves American flags on Vowell’s lawn to celebrate Independence Day, she screams, “The whole point of that goddamn flag is that people don’t stick flags in my yard without asking me!” (“Patriot” 159). Addressing people who make grandiose analogies between themselves and historical figures of great import, she suggests that “perhaps people who compare themselves to Rosa Parks are simply arrogant, pampered nincompoops with delusions of grandeur who couldn’t tell the difference between a paper cut and a decapitation” (“Rosa Parks” 123). Vowell, attentive to

hypocrisy in others, appears so resolute in her own ideology that she tends to dismiss those who believe otherwise.

Yet she is quick to remind us that her strong convictions do not always engender resolution. After singing the anthem, Vowell's gaze falls upon President George W. Bush embracing his father, former President George H.W. Bush, and begins to "cry harder" ("Nerd" 96). She seethes in frustration, dismayed "that Bush doesn't . . . come clean" about the fact that he lost the popular vote ("Nerd" 98). This is how her narrative of the 2001 Inauguration ends—not with her proudly singing the national anthem, or waxing poetic about the endless possibilities of American democracy, or even discussing how the Democrats are favored in the 2002 midterm elections—but in trepidation, leaving us uneasy and disconcerted about the future.

Just days after the 2001 Inauguration, Philip Hamburger, a young East Coast liberal like Vowell, wrote an essay for *The New Yorker* entitled "Visiting the Declaration." He too admits to feeling disturbed and forlorn about the prospect of a Bush presidency. Seeking solace, Hamburger goes to the site of George Washington's first inauguration, Federal Hall in downtown Manhattan. He is struck by the "poetic . . . freedom of [the] design" of the balcony on which Washington took the oath of office (33). He then visits a curator, Mimi Bowling, guardian of an original copy of the Declaration of Independence. She recounts some of the document's history, including its secret transfer out of D.C. for safety during the Second World War. Its most recent trip to Paris for display at the Bibliothèque Nationale almost ended in disaster: Bowling and the Declaration got stuck in traffic and "[she] was sure [they] would miss the plane," but luckily they "boarded . . . just as the door slammed shut and the plane took off" (33). This is the resonant and heroic image Hamburger leaves us with. The Declaration, and the ideal of American democracy it symbolizes, has always endured—through far more trying times than this—and the Bush presidency cannot possibly halt America's inexorable march towards a more perfect union. This assuring impression of continuity stands in stark contrast to Vowell's lament, which makes no overt attempt to leave us inspired or hopeful. Whereas Hamburger's tone begins pessimistically and then slowly but surely winds towards hopefulness, Vowell's remains despondent to the end. Where Hamburger lays out a semblance of a path forward, Vowell's outrage remains unmitigated, and she seems to feel no obligation to conclude with hopefulness. Indeed, Vowell imparts a distinctive sense of insecurity about the future.

Vowell's predilection for leaving us uneasy is certainly not confined to her narrative of the Inauguration. Many of her pithy essays leave us without

a sense of closure. This structure is not arbitrary. It is more of an inclination—Vowell is inherently predisposed to leave us troubled. In “Democracy and Things Like That,” Vowell reveals how the media took out of context a quotation from a venerated speech by Al Gore about gun violence and smeared him with it. She concludes not with a path forward or a reproach of the America media, but rather with a description of how a young student who heard the speech is now more skeptical of the media. Vowell’s essay “The Strenuous Life” details a trip she and her sister took to a national park in North Dakota and ends with an unsettling description of how she feels “complacent” in her urban lifestyle, but without an impassioned plea to save our vast natural reserves or even some sort of epiphany (195). She consistently breaks the orthodox perception of how a cultural critic *should* end his or her essays—with a resounding call to action, or with at least a gesture towards something, *anything*, tangible we can hold on to. Vowell instead leaves us grasping at straws, uneasy and floundering.

In the cracks of Vowell’s steadfast political beliefs lies a resonant and revelatory unease of her own: a deep-rooted sense of radical insecurity—a perpetual hyper-awareness of how arbitrary and transient the human condition is, and how powerless we are against disruptive events and death. In “The First Thanksgiving,” Vowell describes the scene at the first Thanksgiving dinner her family has ever let her host. When her mother allows her to make the dressing, it hits Vowell that this means that she “is definitely, finally, totally going to die” (“Thanksgiving” 13). Vowell often uses this sort of whimsical humor and a lighthearted tone to defuse tense subjects and make the intolerable more palatable. Indeed, profundity generally underlies her drollness, and Vowell continues to come to terms with, and make meaning out of, this radical insecurity across much of her book. In her title essay, “The Partly Cloudy Patriot,” she is struck by the fact that she is “overpaid to sit at a computer, eat Chinese takeout, and think things up in [her] pajamas,” whereas her grandmother just fifty years ago “was picking cotton with bleeding fingers” (“Patriot” 163). It seems so arbitrary and, on a deeper level, fleeting—that at any moment, something could change or it could all be taken away. In the same essay, she mentions that, as a child of the Cold War, she still feels the “constant threat of random, sudden death” that comes from hiding under school desks (160). Radical insecurity seems to lurk perpetually in the corner of Vowell’s consciousness, and it informs her essays.

Humans have crafted myriad responses to this existential dread, chief among them religion. But Vowell is an atheist, consistently critical of traditional religions—especially the “so-called god” of her parents

(“Thanksgiving” 9). But the fact that she rejects conventional religions does not mean she is without *faith*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines faith as a “strong belief in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual conviction rather than proof” (“Faith”). Vowell answers her radical insecurity by turning the normative notion of faith on its head—instead of believing in a religion, she places her faith in an idea: *America*. This secular conception of faith is predicated upon understanding America not as a nation state or a collection of fifty smaller sovereign ties, but as a novel experiment unique in the history of man that, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, is “conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” (qtd. in Vowell 2). And yet, in the 2000 New Hampshire primary, evangelical Christian and Republican presidential candidate Gary Bauer dismissed Vowell as one “who doesn’t believe in God, doesn’t believe in [the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution] because of [the presence of the] phrase ‘endowed by their creator’” (“Congressman” 85). In response, Vowell writes, “I told him that, on the contrary, those documents for me have superseded God, that they are my Bible” (85). For Vowell, the principles of equality, liberty, and freedom transcend politics and resonate on a spiritual plane.

Her religion, like many, necessitates certain rituals and duties. Vowell believes a never-ending questioning of the government and societal norms to be one of the fundamental tenets of her faith. In “The Partly Cloudy Patriot,” she scrutinizes the disturbing pressure she feels after September 11th to agree with every governmental policy, irrespective of how antithetical to American values she may find it. For her, the “ideal picture of citizenship [is] always . . . an argument,” not a passive acceptance of the historical and political mythos of America (“Patriot” 169). Challenging this mythos—the idea of a perfect, infallible United States—is a recurrent preoccupation of Vowell’s, and she understands it not as disloyalty but as fundamental to American patriotism. At first glance, Vowell’s challenging of *America* seems to be directly opposed to her religious faith *in America*. However, as its definition reminds us, faith necessitates the suspension of disbelief. Vowell’s faith in the abstract notion of America, a nation, in the words of her admired Lincoln, “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,” requires her to struggle with, rationalize, and ultimately not get discouraged by the darker chapters of our history: slavery, needless wars, and racism chief among them (qtd. in Vowell, “What He Said” 2). Indeed, this is what motivates her—by recognizing and studying the dichotomy between American ideals and American history, Vowell ostensibly identifies her purpose: to reconcile this disparity and improve the nation she so deeply loves. Vowell is able to overcome her

unease about the insecurity of her way of life by positioning herself within a secular narrative of America—she believes she can be immortalized through advancing the cause of a more perfect union.

But Sarah Vowell's faith is unmistakably jarred by the election of George W. Bush in 2000. This perceived crisis is a watershed moment for her. In her essays, she imparts the distinctive sense that she considers herself somehow separate from the vast majority of Americans. She writes that global warming is not a politically potent issue because "the public is not interested in wisdom and the public is not wise"; rather, "the public is actually reactive" ("Nerd" 102). Vowell does not identify with the *public*. "As a kid," she writes, "I never knew what to say to anyone" (91). In many ways, this insecurity of being fundamentally detached from the public is why Vowell identified with Al Gore. The man who would be so bold as to ask in his book, "'What happened to the climate in [the] Yucatán [in] 950?' . . . [tugged] at [Vowell's] nerdy soul" (100). But it was more than just nerdy camaraderie. Sarah Vowell saw *herself* in Gore. Her tears on Inauguration Day formed partly because she was angered that Bush won by a constitutional quirk, yes, but mostly because she felt that when America—the pillar of her faith—rejected Al Gore, it also rejected *her*.

Whereas other Americans may turn to religion in these moments of existential crisis, Vowell's faith provides no comfort. Normative religious faiths are all-encompassing—they answer questions about sin, death, friendship, sex, and love. Yet Sarah Vowell's faith does none of that. The Sixth Amendment guaranteeing a speedy trial is no consolation when you feel detached and rejected by the nation that for you has "superseded God" ("Congressman" 85). Even if she can overcome her radical insecurity, other fundamental questions remain. This uneasiness underlies many of Vowell's essays, even those with overtly political or historical subjects. From the 2001 Inauguration to her visit to the Salem Witch Museum, where she feels compelled to phone her psychiatrist to ask why she feels drawn to these "gruesome places," Vowell is deeply troubled by aspects of experience that her faith cannot explain ("Souvenir" 39). Indeed, it is this uneasiness that lingers with us in many of Vowell's essays.

When one returns to the documents of her faith, it becomes evident that the resonant unease Vowell imparts to us is neither accidental nor the ultimate purpose of her writing; rather, it is a means to an end. Whereas the Bible is an all-encompassing religious text, the Constitution is deliberately open-ended. The Founding Fathers never meant to resolve every dispute, but instead consciously created a living and breathing document. They wrote the

Bill of Rights not as the final set of guidelines for American jurisprudence, but as its cornerstone—something to be built upon. Indeed, these documents limit themselves, and their omissions are very much deliberate. In contrast, most opinion essayists and cultural critics write with the explicit aim of elucidation, of forced inspiration. But Sarah Vowell breaks this normative understanding, and, due to the uneasiness she feels with her own faith, omits the resonant hopefulness that is so pervasive among other writers. Yet if she omits overt espousal of hope, she must have a deliberate rationale for writing—something else that motivates her essays.

Of all figures in American history, Abraham Lincoln inspires Vowell the most. “The teachers taught us to like Washington and to respect Jefferson. But Lincoln—him they taught us to love,” she writes (“What He Said” 8). Vowell indeed appears to love Lincoln. She is especially struck by him not as a president or a politician, but as a writer. In “What He Said There,” she humanizes him; breaking down the mythos around the “American Jesus,” she feels “closer” to him (7). Vowell’s fascination with Lincoln manifests itself most clearly with the recurrent motif of the Emancipation Proclamation, a document she believes to be the “perfect American artifact” (“Nerd” 168). Lincoln signed the Proclamation years before the Union had any authority to free the slaves in the Confederacy and before its “words [could] come true” (168). Its effect was unclear—no one knew whether it would prolong the war, what would happen to the slaves in the Union, or how the Confederates would react. Indeed, the Proclamation left its readers with a distinctive and resonant unease.

Moreover, its author was also uncertain about the document. Lincoln knew no better than anyone else what the Proclamation’s future held. Vowell leaves us with the same insecurity that Lincoln imparted to his contemporaries with the Emancipation Proclamation. She is unsure about the answers her belief system leaves open-ended—an uneasiness that permeates many of her experiences, and that she freely imparts to us. Still, she does not feel obliged to contrive optimism or artificial hope to assuage our shared insecurity. Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation perpetuated America’s inexorable march even though—and perhaps precisely because—it neglects to offer the definitive final word, in faith that the document’s inheritors will carry out its purpose. Sarah Vowell has faith that she, like Lincoln, can use the written word to fortify America’s march toward a more perfect union, without saying precisely how to get there—and that is optimism enough for her.

---

## WORKS CITED

- “Faith.” *Oxford Dictionaries*. Oxford UP, Apr. 2010. Web. 7 Dec. 2012.
- Hamburger, Philip. “Visiting the Declaration.” *The New Yorker*. 5 Feb. 2001: 32-33. Web. 7 Dec. 2012.
- Vowell, Sarah. *The Partly Cloudy Patriot*. New York: Simon, 2002. Print.
- “California as an Island.” 67-77.
- “Dear Dead Congressman.” 79-85.
- “Democracy and Things Like That.” 47-60.
- “God Will Give You Blood to Drink in a Souvenir Shot Glass.” 31-42.
- “Rosa Parks, *C’est Moi*.” 119-24.
- “The First Thanksgiving.” 9-15.
- “The Nerd Voice.” 87-117.
- “The Partly Cloudy Patriot.” 155-72.
- “The Strenuous Life.” 181-96.
- “What He Said There.” 1-8.

20 - MERCER STREET