

An Interview with David Hirsch and Dan Van Haften, Part 1

Q. The discovery that Abraham Lincoln had a code or template for his speeches, and that you broke that code, is really quite extraordinary. How did this all come about?

David: I have long believed there was a connection between mathematics and language. During junior high school (middle school) study halls I used to play with word equations and try to make the connection algebraically. This led to dead ends, and for lack of a better description, this “project” I envisioned remained dormant.

Q. What changed?

David: In 2007, Dan and I traveled to Springfield, Illinois, where I needed to research an article for the *American Bar Association Journal* . . .

Q. Just so readers are clear, you are an attorney.

David: Yes, I am. And Dan retired in 2007 from Alcatel/Lucent. The purpose of my research was to determine how Abraham Lincoln might have functioned practicing law in today’s technological setting. I concluded in a short two-page article that Lincoln would have done just fine in today’s legal environment—I won’t bore you with all the details—but more significantly the trip hooked me on Lincoln.

Q. How so?

David: I found everything about him fascinating, but one memory of our trip really stands out. After touring the first Lincoln & Herndon law office, I turned to Dan—whom I have known since the first grade—and casually remarked, “You know, practice in Lincoln’s time was not that different from small-town Midwestern legal practice when I started in the early 1970’s.”

Dan: At that point, I suggested we visit the small train station where Lincoln embarked to Washington as President-elect. It was locked, but what proved more important to us was not what was inside but the plaque outside with Lincoln’s Springfield farewell address. David read it and said, “What a remarkable, beautiful speech.”

Q. This prompted you to write about Lincoln?

David: We decided to co-author a book describing the American legal system and Lincoln’s role therein, using *Lawyering Like Lincoln* as a working title. At first we planned to exclude Lincoln’s presidential years and his speeches, but that changed quickly . . .

Q. How so?

Dan: (laughing). I told David the first thing I wanted to do was read the complete Lincoln-Douglas debates and the Cooper Union speech. David thought this was a peculiar way to begin our project. I ended up with seven legal-sized pages of handwritten notes on the debates and presented them to David, who immediately spotted a reference to Euclid in one of my paragraphs. Seeing the name of a man known worldwide as the “Father of Geometry” shocked David who, for lack of a better description, went “bananas.”

David: I was immediately back in junior high school study hall thinking about word equations and math. And I began to wonder, “Was the key to Lincoln’s extraordinarily effective speeches mathematically based?” Dan immediately set out to discover everything he could in Lincoln literature regarding Euclid and Lincoln.

Q. Given the volume of Lincoln literature, that is one tall order for a research assignment and neither of you were, at that time at least, Lincoln scholars.

David: Right on both points, but I think the fact that we were not Lincoln scholars proved to be an advantage. We rolled up our sleeves without any preconceptions and simply let the evidence take us wherever it led.

Q. And did you find additional references to Euclid?

Dan: I found countless references to Euclid and they all said about the same thing: Lincoln read Euclid, he mastered Euclid, and he took *Euclid’s Elements* with him while riding the judicial circuit. The only real substantive clue that there was more here than meets the eye was a rather loose statement that Lincoln read Euclid to find out how to “demonstrate.”

Q. And the obvious question is, “demonstrate what?”

Dan: Exactly. So I did what Lincoln did. I read *Euclid’s Elements* in an effort to find out what it means to “demonstrate,” and David told me that when I figured out what that meant, to find something Lincoln wrote or spoke that confirms it.

David: Quite some time passed and then Dan called and said, “I’ve got it.” I asked him, “Do you have an example to prove it?” He answered, “Yes. The Cooper Union speech.”

Q. That’s how this unfolded?

Dan: One discovery led to another: the legal system itself, the Thomas Jefferson connection, and a lot more.

***** End of Part 1