



Navigating AI Ethics: Lessons from Abraham Lincoln May Hold the Key

Compliance and Ethics

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"The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country." — Abraham Lincoln, Second Annual Message (1862)

Cheat Sheet

- **Ethics vs. efficiency.** The rapid advances in AI technologies have left a legal-administrative vacuum, with differing and often divergent regulatory approaches. Abraham Lincoln's ethical insights may hold the key to navigating the uncertainty.
- **Legal teams at the helm.** The new ACC AI Center of Excellence for In-house Counsel provides a framework for corporate counsel to support their enterprises in the ethical adoption of AI.
- **Human dignity.** At the center of Lincoln the lawyer's approach was human dignity and the greater good of social welfare. In-house counsel can look to Lincoln for ethical frameworks

when considering the myriad aspects of AI.

- **Timeless lessons.** With the disruptive nature of AI technologies, Lincoln's principles are more relevant than ever in navigating the unknown while staying true to the universal principles of ethical conduct, equality, and morality.

The 16th president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, led America through some of the most trying moments in history — from the Civil War to the slavery debate. These were not just administrative difficulties but a period that would shape America's history and identity. As we face revolutionary changes brought forth by artificial intelligence (AI), Lincoln's unflinching leadership, legal principles, and ethical vision can guide leaders and organizations in answering the big questions presented by this seismic technological shift.

Experts across industries predict that AI could change how we work, how we live, and even what we value. As Lincoln proclaimed [in his address](#), these new challenges require new ways of thinking. Lincoln's balance of the pragmatic with his unwavering commitment to human dignity offers lessons for AI ethical regulation.

The AI dilemma: Ethics vs. efficiency

In 2025, we are facing an array of challenges related to AI use, from the organizational to the national level, with it now visible in every app, website, and system. The ethical questions facing AI include algorithmic bias, loss of privacy, profiling, accountability, and more. And the challenges individuals face — such as being affirmed in all beliefs by AI chatbots or AI's unchecked access to personal data — have snowballed into organizational issues. These include exclusionary AI recruitment practices, copyright and trademark infringement, potential leaks of trade secrets and confidential information, and loss of brand voice and empathy in customer-facing services, to name a few.

While many of these may be unintended consequences of unregulated AI integration, they raise serious concerns regarding ethical limits to technology use. Given the scale of the AI evolution and its acceptance, these issues have transcended the private sphere and are a bold line in governance agendas.

This ambiguity has created a legal-administrative vacuum. As countries struggle to bridge this gap, [differing and often divergent approaches](#) have cropped up. For instance, the US approach is largely non-regulatory, focusing on risk management frameworks and extensive research. In parallel, context-specific legislations have been the foundation of the EU's approach. Meanwhile, the American Bar Association and other similar committees have proposed ethical regulations grounded in constitutional values and principles.

However, AI regulation is not just relevant at the governmental level. As AI creates new norms at the intersection of technology and law, corporate and legal teams must also step up to the challenge. In that vein, attempts to regulate AI and offer informed, ethical systems have also been made by private organizations and foundations. For example, the Association of Corporate Counsel has curated a digital knowledge hub for in-house counsel to understand and harness the power of AI. It offers a

framework for legal teams to analyze AI use, understand risks, and support their enterprises in building informed AI policies. The [ACC AI Center of Excellence for In-house Counsel](#) is focused not just on AI training but also on furthering the conversation on the responsible use of AI in the legal industry.

As we confront the ethical dilemmas posed by artificial intelligence, it seems fitting to seek counsel from one of America's foremost moral compasses: Abraham Lincoln, whose lessons, rooted in character, clarity, and conscience, still offer valuable insights for the modern world.

Lincoln's philosophy: Law, morality, and human dignity

Lincoln wore multiple hats throughout his life: Lincoln the lawyer, Lincoln the egalitarian, Lincoln the politician, Lincoln the president. In all these roles, his devotion toward the rule of law and the Constitution of the Union remained unshaken.

Even as he navigated unprecedented circumstances in the Civil War and the unanswered questions of slavery, he worked within the word of the law. Drawing from his long and successful legal career, he believed the impending questions could and must be solved while upholding constitutional values. So, even as he transformed the sociopolitical landscape of America, he remained devout to the law of the land and leveraged its transformative power.

Given today's anxiety about AI and its use, this respect for the law should be central to how we navigate the technological and philosophical questions that yet remain unanswered. No advance in technology — no matter how efficient — should be allowed to transcend the constitutional values of freedom, equality, and privacy.

These principles must become cornerstones of legislations that seek to regulate AI use for information, decision-making, recruitment, facial recognition, profiling, or scanning of data for access to various services. For in-house counsel advising on AI policies, this means offering holistic guidance and ensuring corporate policies align with global frameworks, including the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the US's Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA), and any other relevant state privacy or data protection acts.

Whether it be in his view of slavery as both a moral failing and a structural injustice or his deep empathy as a lawyer, Lincoln viewed human dignity as primary. Even as a supporter of innovation and technological progress, he always sought to balance it with the human cost and benefit. He believed that protection and incentive of technological advancement must be in balance with the public good. This principle can well guide ethical regulations on AI: In-house counsel should evaluate how much of AI is beneficial to the greater good and social welfare, not just beneficial to the bottom lines of organizations.

Legal teams can learn from [Lincoln the Lawyer](#), who invested time in every case he took, going beyond the black and white word of the law to understand where his moral duty lay. While advising on AI use and policies, legal teams must also evaluate the human cost of using AI in hiring, marketing, or data processing. As Lincoln said, "Just because it is legally right does not mean it is morally right."

This also calls for accountability from organizations that use AI and transparency in their integration process. As humans take primary stance in legal-moral considerations, so must they in responsibility. When moral agency cannot be outsourced, organizations cannot outsource the responsibility for

algorithmic biases or digital discrimination in the name of technology equalizers. Legal teams can play a critical role here in ensuring that using technology for cost-saving does not result in exposing the organization to lawsuits, compliance failures, or brand damage from biased or opaque AI systems.

Naturally, the increased integrations of AI have created anxiety about the loss of jobs, identity, human context, and empathy in strictly tech-oriented decisions. In the face of such social upheaval, Lincoln's leadership sets an example for organizational and national leaders: to lead with rationality, with morality and ethics, and with a people-centric approach to regulation and protection.

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Policy implications and legal frameworks in a Lincolnian approach

The Lincolnian approach to any decision — whether in the courtroom, cabinet, or on the war field — was grounded in diverse, expert perspectives. His famous team of rivals in his cabinet exemplified how individuals who don't concur but bring forth unique specialties provide the perfect system of checks and balances. Even as a lawyer, Lincoln often ceded cases or took help from experts on technical nuances to ensure he was doing justice for his clients.

In overseeing the ethical use of AI, diverse perspectives must be taken into account, from voices in law, policy, governance, corporate leadership, technology, social welfare, environmentalists, and other relevant stakeholders. For legal teams, this means working cross-functionally with departments, including IT, compliance, HR, and executive leadership, mirroring Lincoln's collaborative approach to decision-making.

In regulating AI, questions have been raised about who owns AI-generated material, who bears responsibility for its consequences, and whether AI can be treated as a judicial person. The American Bar Association has raised concerns about conversations around [granting AI legal personhood](#).

Following a Lincolnian approach, the human mind and empathy must always come first. While Lincoln did not have to deal with the issue of AI ethics as a president or lawyer, he was involved in many patent cases of a technical nature. In one of his defenses against a patent of a water wheel, his key argument was that the use of the technology was widespread and essential for the local farmers. With this core focus on common good over technological gatekeeping, it is safe to assume that Lincoln would advise against giving unchecked power to AI.

As moral agency is retained, so must responsibility be borne by those using AI in various operations. Hence, this approach to ethics would be in concurrence with the ABA guidelines for lawyers on the responsible use of AI.

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Timeless lessons, timely considerations

Lincoln has been a role model for leaders in times of uncertainty for decades. Not only was he a revolutionary president, but his sense of justice, honesty, and principles also offer [timeless lessons](#) for in-house counsel today. With the disruptive nature of AI technologies, his principles are more relevant than ever in navigating the unknown while staying true to the universal principles of ethical conduct, equality, and morality.

Just as Lincoln was against outdated norms to handle the moral crises of his time, we must design new frameworks for governing AI — ones that are better suited to meet the challenges posed by autonomous systems, algorithmic bias, and rapid innovation.

Creating equitable and ethical regulations for AI calls for the collaboration of all stakeholders and looking beyond convenience and profit. Lincoln always advocated for governance decisions that prioritized the public good and social welfare. As we build for a future that is progressive yet fair, Lincoln's principles must continue to guide leaders to view tech innovations not just as tools to amass wealth but with the power they hold to transform society as we know it; the direction is ours to decide.

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[Sameer Somal](#)



CEO

Blue Ocean Global Technology

Sameer Somal is the CEO of Blue Ocean Global Technology and Co-Founder of Girl Power Talk. He is a CFA Charterholder, a CFP® professional, and a Chartered Alternative Investment Analyst. Sameer leads client engagements focused on digital transformation, risk management, and technology development. A testifying subject matter expert witness in economic damages, intellectual property, and internet defamation, he authors CLE programs with the Philadelphia Bar Foundation. Sameer proudly serves on the Board of Directors of Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) and Girl Power USA. Committed to building relationships, Sameer is an active member of the

Abraham Lincoln Association (ALA), Academy of Legal Studies in Business (ALSB), American Bar Association (ABA), American Marketing Association (AMA), Business Transition Council, International Trademark Association (INTA), and Society of International Business Fellows (SIBF). A graduate of Georgetown University, he held leadership roles at Bank of America, Morgan Stanley, and Scotiabank. Sameer is also a CFA Institute 2022 Inspirational Leader Award recipient and was named an Iconic Leader by the Women Economic Forum.

[Aashna Duggal](#)



Chief Legal Officer

Girl Power Talk

Aashna Duggal is a lawyer and expert witness specializing in defamation, employment, gender diversity, and damages. She serves as the Chief Legal Officer for Girl Power Talk, where she leads public relations, strategic partnerships, and litigation consulting engagements with a focus on legal matters involving U.S. jurisdictions. A dedicated advocate for women's legal rights and the mentorship of future leaders, Aashna brings a thoughtful, impact-driven approach to her work. She is an active member of the New York State Bar Association (NYSBA), the American Bar Association (ABA), and the Academy of Legal Studies in Business (ALSB).

