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Abstract
“I have found no one to speak of Lincoln as a man of either capacity or patriotism,” smirked Confederate general Lafayette McLaws, as the Army of Northern Virginia prepared to march into Pennsylvania on June 28, 1863. His was not, unhappily, an opinion limited to Abraham Lincoln’s enemies-in-arms. Henry Clay Whitney admitted that, at best, Lincoln “had the appearance of a rough intelligent farmer.” Elihu Washburne agreed: meeting Lincoln on the railroad platform in Washington, D.C., on February 23, 1861, Washburne could not help thinking that Lincoln “looked more like a well-to-do farmer from one of the back towns of Jo Davies’s county than the President of the United States.” His own soldiers had some difficulty taking seriously a man who presented such “an odd figure on a horse, and the odder for wearing a stovepipe hat that increased his height and angularity.” The more educated the observer, the lower the opinion seemed to be. A Pennsylvania College student who listened to Lincoln deliver
Gettysburg Address was, forty years later, still put off by the way Lincoln appeared on the platform, “with his arms hanging at his side at full length and holding a slip of paper with both hands on which was written his three minute address, which had been prepared, according to report then current, on his way from Washington.” Newspaper editors foamed angrily over Lincoln’s election, asking, “Who will write this ignorant man’s state papers?” And the intolerably well-educated George Bancroft burst out, in a letter to his wife, “We suffer for want of an organising mind at government. We have a president without brains.”

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