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# Lincoln LORE

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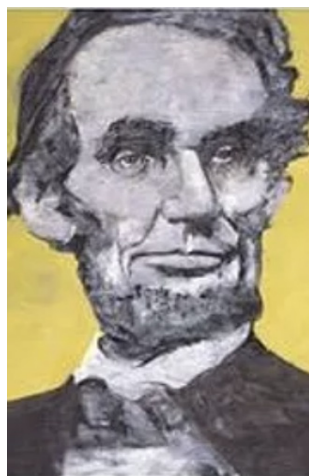
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November 15-18, 2020  
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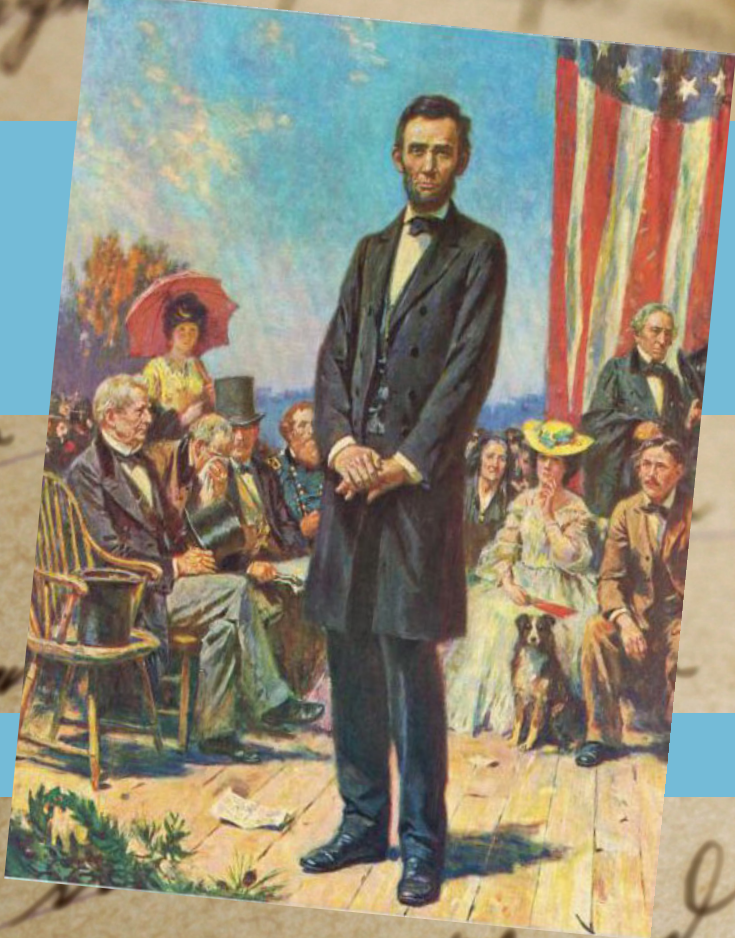


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# Lincoln, the Founders, and the Rights of Human Nature

Lucas E. Morel

*President Lincoln at Dedication of National Cemetery at Gettysburg by Jean Leon Jerome 71.2009.081.2145*



If they had bumper stickers for carriages back in Lincoln's day, his would say:

"I ❤️ the American Founding."

It's true that one can see the influences of the Bible, Shakespeare, and later political examples like John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster, and Henry Clay in Lincoln's speeches. But there was no greater influence on Abraham Lincoln's statesmanship than the leading men, and especially the seminal ideas, that shaped America's revolution and early constitutional formation.

I drew this lecture from a book I've written—"Lincoln and the American Founding," to be published next July—which is a scholarly introduction to the impact of the American founding on Lincoln's political thought and practice. The leading political principles I highlight in the book derive from the argument presented in the opening two paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence. As Lincoln said *en route* to his first inauguration as president, "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence." Several years before his election and the ensuing civil war, Lincoln summarized his

approach to the increasing conflict between the free and slaveholding American states: "Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it. . . . If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have so saved it, as to make, and to keep it, forever worthy of the saving."

Book summary: Let me give a quick outline of my book, and then I'll walk through the basic argument of the book, which shows how Lincoln drew from the American founding to help him navigate the disputes and controversies that threatened to divide the American union. The book has 5 chapters.

**Chapter 1** explains the influence of George Washington, the indispensable Founder. But for Lincoln, more important than a founding man was a founding document, the Declaration of Independence.

So I devote **Chapter 2** to the influence of the Declaration, and to some extent, its chief draftsman, Thomas Jefferson.

**Chapter 3** explains the influence of the U.S. Constitution on Lincoln's thinking and practice as a citizen and politician. It was the most important

*means* that the Founders established to secure the *ends* spelled out in the Declaration of Independence.

In **Chapter 4**, I turn to what Lincoln learned from the Founders' compromise with slavery, the institution that contradicted the Founding experiment in self-government.

Lastly, **Chapter 5** explains Lincoln's understanding of original intent as a political practice. In short, *why* should subsequent generations of Americans follow the Founders? This chapter examines how Lincoln understood his own respect for the American founding in light of progress, experience, and the responsibility of each generation to govern themselves under the Constitution.

My book takes us on a journey: From Founding Father (George Washington), to Founding Purpose (described in the Declaration of Independence), to Founding Means (the Constitution), to Founding Compromise (slavery butting heads with federalism), to Founding Significance (or, why Lincoln thinks the original intention of the Founders matters).

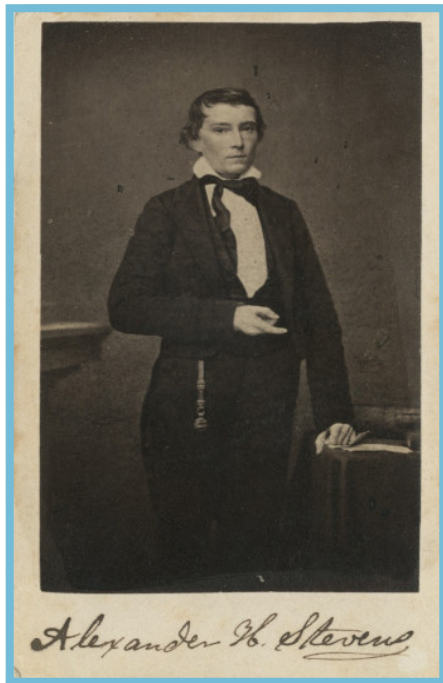
Lincoln believed that during his fractious times, looking back to the Founding could provide guidance

on how to perpetuate American self-government. He did this most famously in his Gettysburg Address. That speech begins at the *nation's* beginning:

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." If you do the math, you find that he takes his audience back *not* to the Constitution, but to the . . . Declaration of Independence.

Not to the body but to the soul of the nation. If America stood for anything, it was liberty and equality. Lincoln goes on to explain that the Civil War was a test of America's purpose: as he put it, "whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure."

In the midst of a fight for the very survival of the United States—a civil war—, Lincoln thought the nation would benefit from looking to its past. Americans needed a reminder of why preserving their Union was so important. So Lincoln sought to clarify what was at stake. With Americans shooting not at an external foe but at each other, it's safe to say there was some confusion about the meaning of America. They were no longer united in their understanding of why the nation existed—what were its highest aims and purposes. So Lincoln wanted Americans to recommit themselves, to dedicate themselves, to the task that remained: to honor the dead who fought at Gettysburg on behalf of the Union, by joining and supporting that fight. It was a fight to defend a certain political way of life, what Lincoln called "government of the people, by the people, for the people."



Alexander Stevens OC-0985

Recall that Lincoln delivered his short speech in the Year of Jubilee, the year of emancipation. Union soldiers and sailors were now charged by the president to protect the freedom of over 3 million, newly emancipated black people. What Lincoln called "a new birth of freedom" was tied directly to the old, original birth of freedom, our first emancipation proclamation, the Declaration of Independence. Its principle that "all men are created equal" described all human beings.

So at Gettysburg, Lincoln did not announce a new principle of freedom, but affirmed an old one—what he argued was its original one. He never sought to discover new rights for a new age; or for that matter, he never spoke of a "living constitution," one where a visionary few would discern what would benefit the many. Instead Lincoln spoke of "the unfinished work" to which the living could dedicate themselves. In this way, they could honor the men who fought at Gettysburg—those "who gave their lives that that nation might live."

This was no Civil War epiphany of Lincoln's. In February 1861, en route to his first inauguration as president, he stopped in Trenton, New Jersey, and told the state senate: "I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the *original* idea for which that struggle was made." I suspect many today would think that this is rather controversial. After all, weren't the founders—at least some of them, even the most famous of them—slave owners? Why would Lincoln want to lean on that generation, long dead and gone, for political guidance in his day and age?

Our temptation today is to think

that everything new is by definition improved, better than what's old, what we used to call "the tried and true." But in Lincoln's time, there were some Americans arguing for something new, an improvement over the American founders. Consider Alexander Stephens of Georgia, a former Whig colleague of Lincoln's during Lincoln's sole term in Congress. As the Vice President of the Confederate States of America, Stephens argued that their Constitution was a better one than the old one Lincoln was trying to preserve. It was better not simply because it protected slavery by mentioning it explicitly, where the original constitution did so implicitly. There were plenty of people, plenty of regimes throughout human history, that practiced slavery. Alexander Stephens argued that the Confederacy was the first to base its slave society on white supremacy.

Unlike the American founders, who Stephens acknowledges believed that "the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically," the Confederate government was "founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition." He added, "This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth." The American founders, in his mind, saw slavery as "an evil they knew not well how to deal with, but . . . somehow or other in the order of Providence, the institution would be evanescent and pass away." Stephens argued that the anti-slavery principles of the Founding "were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races." He called this "an error" and "a sandy foundation," unlike the new and improved constitution he helped write for the Southern Confederacy.

Nevertheless, in the decade leading up to the Civil War, Lincoln's main political target was not slave-owning *southerners*, but complacent white *northerners*, like his Illinois rival Senator Stephen A. Douglas. Lincoln criticized Douglas's "popular sovereignty" policy because of its neutrality—its moral indifference—on the slave question, and its insistence

that whites at the local level—whether in the states or federal territories—reserved the right to decide the question without interference from Congress. In other words, the future of slavery or freedom in the United States, under this policy of local



Stephen Douglas OC-0546

“popular sovereignty,” would not be determined, ironically enough, by the vast majority of American citizens, but by a very small majority of settlers who went to live in the western territories.

This indicated to Lincoln, that the most urgent threat to the expansion of freedom in the United States, was the temptation of white northerners to become indifferent to the plight of blacks in the federal territories. What made Douglas’s “don’t care” policy about slavery in the territories, so insidious, was that for slavery to become national, it did not require a full-throated defense of the peculiar institution. Rather, simply promote indifference or tolerance on the part of free-state whites, towards the enslavement of blacks in the territories. Eventually those slave territories would become additional slave states of the American union.

This is why “looking back” was no exercise in nostalgia or some abstract consideration by Lincoln. It couldn’t have been more relevant to the developing crisis the nation faced in the 1850s. Lincoln’s trip down

memory lane was a contested one. Stephen Douglas, the most prominent Democrat of the 1850s, claimed he knew better what the Founders thought about the question of slavery, and claimed his policy proposal aligned more closely with the Founders’ hopes for the new republic. In Lincoln’s mind, the future of freedom and the eventual demise of slavery depended on whose interpretation of the Founders was correct and could help unite a divided country.

Lincoln argued that in the beginning, at the founding of the United States, slavery was viewed and treated as a “necessary evil.” But it had become in the South, to quote South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun, “a positive good.” It was also true at the beginning, that where slavery already existed in the states, Congress had no authority over the matter because of the federal nature of the U.S. Constitution. It was considered a “domestic institution,” governed only by state authority. Government powers, since the beginning of the United States, were divided between the state governments and national government. And slavery, as it existed prior to the formation of the United States, remained a state institution, and therefore could not be abolished by Congress, short of a constitutional amendment.

Given the greater population growth in the free states than in the slaveholding states, this meant that the spread of slavery or freedom in America would be decided by the votes of northern whites, who according to Lincoln could use federal authority to ban slavery in the only area they had jurisdiction over internal affairs—the federal territories. Territory owned by *all* the citizens, could be regulated by those same citizens, and that meant Congress. However, tempted by Stephen Douglas’s popular sovereignty, slavery’s fate might be determined not by moral right but by mere self-interest—meaning those who could profit by taking black slaves into the territories. If free-state whites agreed with Douglas that Congress did not have authority to regulate the domestic affairs of the territories, then his “declared indifference” would actually represent, in Lincoln’s

words, “covert *real zeal* for the spread of slavery.” And so Lincoln was at pains to tie the future security of the rights of whites, to the present in-security of the rights of blacks. Those same white Americans would have to decide if what happened to a people that did not look like them—black slaves in the South potentially being taken into federal territory—had anything to do with the kind of country in which they wanted to live. For Lincoln, the necessary connection could be found in the thinking of the American founders.

So why does the founding, the beginning of America, deserve Lincoln’s respect? Discussion of original intent is important not simply because it came first. After all, not all old things are worth holding onto. What if the Founders were wrong? To be sure, an old government should not be rejected simply because it is old. Nevertheless, as we see in Lincoln’s consideration of the American founding, to preserve what is old—even one’s form of government—requires a justification most importantly on its merits. Later generations of American citizens should follow those older intentions because they are worthy of their respect: which is to say, because they are good. If not, then it stands to reason that what is no longer seen as good—no longer true in principle, nor useful in practice—should be replaced by something better.

Lincoln addressed this concern regarding original intentions in his 1860 Cooper Institute speech. It was a speech designed to make him a credible candidate for the Republican nomination for the presidency. He said:

I do not mean to say we are bound to follow implicitly in whatever our fathers did. To do so, would be to discard all the lights of current experience—to reject all progress—all improvement. What I do say is, that if we would supplant the opinions and policy of our fathers in any case, we should do so upon evidence so conclusive, and argument so clear, that even their great authority, fairly considered and weighed, cannot stand . . .

Lincoln allows that differences of opinion over what policy to pursue will emerge not only from a dispute

between the old ways and the new ways, but also between interpretations of the old ways among those who believe the old ways are the best ways.

He goes on to say:

If any man at this day sincerely believes that a proper division of local from federal authority, or any part of the Constitution, forbids the Federal Government to control as to slavery in the federal territories, he is right to say so, and to enforce his position, by all truthful evidence and fair argument which he can. But he has no right to mislead others, who have less access to history, and less leisure to study it, into the false belief that "our fathers, who framed the Government under which we live," were of the same opinion . . .

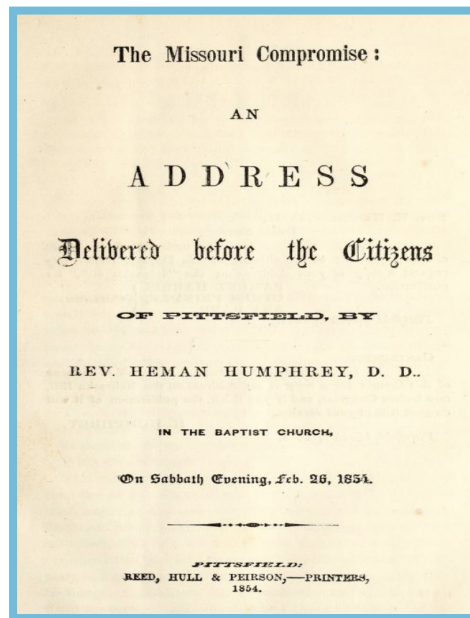
Of course, Lincoln has Stephen Douglas in mind here. Both men greatly respected the founders, but they differed in their interpretation of what the founders intended.

To his credit, Lincoln said out loud, in that pivotal campaign year of 1860, that Americans were free not to follow what is old, even the founders of their country, if experience and argument lead them to think they could improve on their old political beliefs and practices. That said, Lincoln hastened to add that he did not see a better way forward for the country—given the crisis facing them regarding the future of slavery in their republic—than the mode adopted by the founders. He thought Stephen Douglas's respect for the American founding was actually a misinterpretation of their intentions. "Popular sovereignty" was actually a sham because it treated slavery "as something having no moral question in it." And Alexander Stephens's outright rejection of the American founding was deficient in comparison with founders dead and gone. Although Lincoln's generation faced different challenges than those of the founders, he did not suggest that the primary means and ends were to be tossed for the sake of newer interpretations of those means and ends, let alone newer principles or institutions.

The question of innovation and progress, versus original intention, is an important one. Lincoln acknowledges that experience

could lead to progress and improvement. Nevertheless, with regards to slavery, the experience of free white southerners enslaving black people, led some whites to make new arguments on behalf of slavery. Lincoln believed they were wrong—an example of how the new did not improve upon the past.

Contrary to Douglas and Stephens, Lincoln thought the Founders saw the toleration of slavery only as a necessary evil. After the passage of



*The Missouri compromise : an address delivered before the citizens of Pittsfield 71.2009.084.09449*

the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, which opened territories north of the 36° 30' parallel to the possibility of slavery, contrary to the Missouri Compromise of 1820, Lincoln contrasted the Founding era with the degeneration of his own times. He detailed the many ways that the older generation restricted the further entrenchment of slavery in America by stopping it at its source, as well as limiting its spread into federal territories—all in the hopes that slavery was being put "in the course of ultimate extinction."

Lincoln concluded:

The plain unmistakable spirit of that age, towards slavery, was hostility to the PRINCIPLE, and toleration, ONLY BY NECESSITY. But NOW it is to be transformed into a "sacred right." Nebraska brings it forth, places it on the high

road to extension and perpetuity... Little by little, but steadily as man's march to the grave, we have been giving up the OLD for the NEW faith.

Instead of the new faith of Douglas's crude majoritarianism, which rejected the self-evident truth that "all men are created equal," Lincoln preached a return to the old faith, the faith of the founding fathers: "Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust," Lincoln declared.

Let us repurify it. Let us turn and wash it white, in the spirit, if not the blood, of the Revolution. Let us turn slavery from its claims of "moral right," back upon its existing legal rights, and its arguments of "necessity." Let us return it to the position our fathers gave it; and there let it rest in peace.

Catch the pun? Lincoln went on to call Americans to "re-adopt the Declaration of Independence." In so doing, they would "not only have saved the Union," but "so save it, as to make, and to keep it, forever worthy of the saving." That was October of 1854. A country worthy of the saving needed to be a country limiting the spread of slavery, not expanding it. A few months later, Lincoln came within five votes of being appointed to the U.S. Senate by a coalition of anti-Nebraska Democrats and Whigs in the Illinois state legislature. That was a few years before his more famous campaign against Stephen Douglas, and six years before his election as the first Republican president of the United States.

After that election, but before he assumed the presidency, Lincoln received a letter from none other than Alexander Stephens, who would later become the Vice President of the Confederate States of America. Stephens wanted the president-elect to speak to the nation before the inauguration—in his words, "to save our common country." Quoting Proverbs 25, Stephens suggested to Lincoln that, "A word fitly spoken by you now would be like 'apples of gold in pictures of silver.'"

This led Lincoln to jot a note to himself—a reflection on what he called the "philosophical cause" of American prosperity. For someone who had long revered the Constitution, and saw the union of

the American states as essential to the success of the republic, he wrote that “even these, are not the primary cause of our great prosperity.”

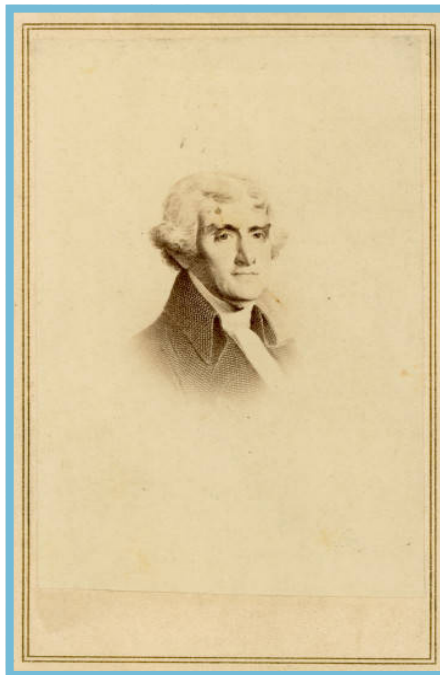
His note continued:

There is something back of these, entwining itself more closely about the human heart. That something, is the principle of “Liberty to all”—the principle that clears the path for all—gives hope to all—and, by consequence, enterprize, and industry to all. . . The assertion of that principle, at that time, was the word, “fitly spoken” which has proved an “apple of gold” to us. The Union, and the Constitution, are the picture of silver, subsequently framed around it. The picture was made, not to conceal, or destroy the apple; but to adorn, and preserve it. The picture was made for the apple—not the apple for the picture. So let us act, that neither picture, or apple shall ever be blurred, or bruised or broken.

As Lincoln saw it, more important than new words from him, were old words—from the founders, from the nation’s founding charter—the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln saw the Declaration’s principle of “Liberty to all” (human equality and individual rights) as the moral center of a Constitution and American union, that could otherwise be misinterpreted—or destroyed—in pursuit of other ends. For Lincoln, the Constitution and union of the states were the means of achieving the political ends defined in the Declaration of Independence.

To state that the Declaration of Independence was the lodestar of Lincoln’s political life would be an understatement. The Declaration was the sine qua non of Lincoln’s political thinking. Without its influence the Gettysburg Address would be unrecognizable; the Emancipation Proclamation and 13th Amendment would lack their moral purpose; and the Civil War would not have been fought as a war to save republican government, and ultimately expand the protection of rights to all Americans.

A year before he was elected president, Lincoln was asked to give a speech in Boston upon the anniversary of Thomas Jefferson’s birth. He couldn’t make the trip, but sent a letter that was essentially an ode to Jefferson’s achievement in drafting the Declaration of Independence. He wrote that “the principles of Jefferson are the definitions and axioms of free society.” For someone who studied Euclid’s geometry while in Congress, Lincoln was referring to the Declaration’s principles as the building blocks of democracy. Unfortunately, even self-evident truths can be “denied, and evaded,” as was the case in 1859. Lincoln said: “This is a world of compensations; and he who would be no slave, must consent to have no slave.” Borrowing from Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he observed that, “Those who deny freedom to others, deserve it not for themselves; and, under a just God, can not long retain it.”



Thomas Jefferson OC-1788

These were astounding words for a Republican, a former Whig, to utter. After all, Jefferson was a states’ rights Democrat, not a National Republican.

And yet, Lincoln declared:

All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a

struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.

Lincoln saw the principles of Jefferson, America’s principles, as universal, timeless, and transcendent. Lincoln looked back to the founding generation and saw ideals of human nature and legitimate government that he believed applied in his day and forever more. He understood that according to Jefferson’s logic, if they applied to anyone, they applied to everyone, at any time, and any place. This was key to Lincoln’s eventual role as the emancipator of black slaves in America—which he derived from the principle of equality to which he thought the nation had long been committed, until it began to lose its way in the mid-1850s.

In a speech at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, another stop on his way to his first inauguration, he had this to say about the universality of the principles of the Declaration: “All the political sentiments I entertain have been drawn . . . from the sentiments which originated, and were given to the world from this hall in which we stand.” He said that he “never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence,” and then he mused out loud about “what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together.” He argued that the Declaration was more than just about separating from England; he said it gave “liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have an equal chance.” Lincoln believed that the Declaration unified the citizens of the diverse thirteen American colonies, and the Constitution that replaced the flawed Articles of Confederation, a league with no direct authority over the citizens of each state, the Constitution helped “form a more perfect union.”

But we all know that in addition to Jefferson, other signers of the Declaration were slaveholders; ditto for the framers of the U.S. Constitution, which after all, made several compromises with slavery. Lincoln was aware of these facts, and aware that slavery stood as the grand contradiction to the very principles of the American Revolution. But he believed that even though the founders did not abolish it right away, this did not mean that they approved of slavery as a morally just practice. How should we understand this?

Lincoln is best known for two political accomplishments: preserving the American union and emancipating slaves. How he approached the abolition of slavery owes much to his interpretation of how the American founders approached the difficulty of slavery in their midst, as they sought to establish not just their independence from Great Britain, but also a way of life based on the principle of human equality.

Lincoln's anti-slavery convictions were the very thing that informed his devotion to the Constitution. Like the founders, he believed that, but for the American union, there would be no freedom—for whites or blacks. This was no innovation on Lincoln's part, but rather the abiding conviction of Americans who knew their colonial and revolutionary history. Individual freedom required political independence from foreign powers; and political independence required domestic unity. To keep the union of American colonies, then states, required that compromises be made regarding slavery. As Lincoln once said, "We had slavery among us, we could not get our Constitution unless we permitted them to remain in slavery, we could not secure the good we did secure if we grasped for more, and having by necessity submitted to that much, it does not destroy the principle that is the charter of our liberties."

Time and again, Lincoln's references to the founders centered on how they tried to establish a government based on human equality, but by that very equality, imposed upon themselves the requirement that slavery be abolished in a manner

consistent with the consent that was the flip side of the equality coin.

As he put it in an 1864 letter:

If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I can not remember when I did not so think, and feel. And yet I have never understood that the Presidency conferred upon me an unrestricted right to act officially upon this judgment and feeling.

This distinction between "official duty" and "personal wish," a distinction he made most famously in his 1862 public letter to Horace Greeley before



*Horace Greeley OC-1835*

Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation, demonstrates most clearly Lincoln's concern that Americans follow the rule of law in their pursuit of justice. That in America, the means of securing liberty needs to be consistent with the end. In emancipating slaves, as president, in a time of war, Lincoln had to turn a humanitarian end into a constitutional means in order to make emancipation a legitimate action of the national government.

The connection between constitutional means and ends is one, I think, we have lost sight of today, and it has shaped how most historians interpret Lincoln's statesmanship.

The reigning interpretation of Lincoln today finds him most relevant to our times because of what consensus historians see as his openness to change. This progressive Lincoln got better as the nation got worse, with a good number of its white citizens grown indifferent toward the spread of black slavery into federal territory, while others fought to defend a way of life where white supremacy was the explicit rule and not the exception.

This version of Lincoln is worthy of our twenty-first-century esteem only if he exhibits virtues that shine brightest when distanced from his country's slaveholding founders. After all, few of the founders freed their own slaves, or strove to rid the new nation of the "peculiar institution." If Lincoln is to be praised, his love of the founders, especially Thomas Jefferson, needs to be minimized if not altogether muted.

Thus what makes the Emancipator so great in the eyes of succeeding generations of Americans must be his capacity for growth, a figure embraced by future generations who, presumably, have progressed and improved upon the past to the extent they followed Lincoln's example, of not being too fixed in one's views and of being open to the light of experience and progress. Lincoln understood simply as a man focused on the future, becomes a man who did not know early on what he believed about America, or what he hoped for the nation.

I disagree with this interpretation. On my reading, Lincoln's greatness is due largely to his recognizing and appreciating what the founders had accomplished despite the pre-existing problem of slavery. Lincoln chose to offer an alternative view of the founding to counter the incorrect view promoted by influential figures such as Chief Justice Roger Taney and Senator Stephen Douglas. Unlike Lincoln, Taney and Douglas thought the Declaration of Independence was true only for white people, and they read it that way to protect the slaveholding founders from charges of hypocrisy. In 1857 Taney wrote that "the men who framed this declaration were great men—high in



literary acquirements, high in their sense of honor, and incapable of asserting principles inconsistent with those on which they were acting."

A year later, Stephen Douglas echoed this sentiment: "If they included negroes in that term ['all men'], they were bound, as conscientious men, that day and that hour, not only to have abolished slavery throughout the land, but to have conferred political rights and privileges on the negro, and elevated him to an equality with the



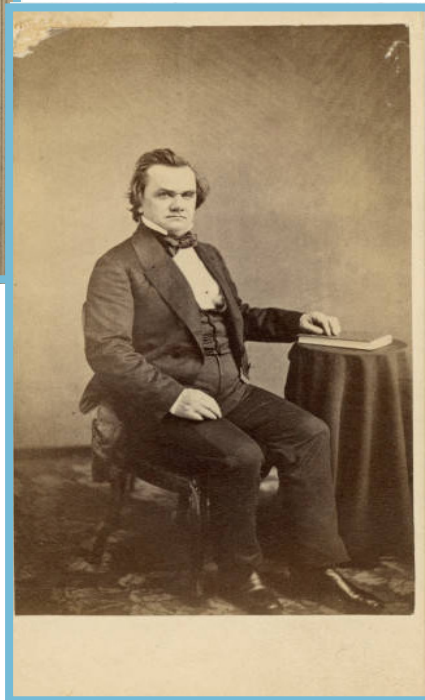
Roger Taney OC-1006

white man." To make profession and practice consistent at the American founding, thereby establishing an integrity worth admiring for subsequent generations, Taney and Douglas interpreted the founders' profession in light of their practice. So if the founders did not free their slaves and abolish the peculiar institution, then they must not have seen Africans as "created equal" to Englishmen or their descendants.

In response to the *Dred Scott* opinion of 1857, Lincoln commented on the equality principle stated in the Declaration of Independence. On his reading, the Founders "did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet, that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact, they had no power to confer such a

boon. They meant simply to declare the *right*, so that the *enforcement* of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit." Lincoln understood the reticence of the founders not as hypocrisy but as prudence: they recognized that circumstances, like British opposition, could impede their attempt "to secure these rights."

Furthermore, Lincoln pointed out that their inaction regarding black slaves in their midst was no different than their inaction toward white citizens on American soil: "They did not at once, or ever afterwards, actually place all white people on an equality with one another. . . . They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which could be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, . . . and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere."



Stephen Douglas LN-1708

To sum up the Founding compromise with slavery: to be free, Americans had to be independent. And to be independent, they had to be united. That political unity—what the Constitution would call "a more perfect union"—required concessions to slaveholding states, which were unable or unwilling, in the near term,

to extricate themselves from their dependence upon slavery, while they established the institutions and habits of self-government. Put simply, the founding generation of Americans did not believe they could both free themselves and their slaves without hazarding the success of both their independence and their new way of governing themselves. Lincoln's respect for the American Founding, which established an independent nation devoted to "secur[ing] the blessings of liberty to ourselves *and our posterity*," recognized both the noble end to which that nation was founded, and the prudent means adopted to achieve that end.

Time and again, as the controversy over slavery threatened to split the nation, Lincoln returned his audience to the words of the Declaration of Independence. There he hoped they would find clarity about the true principles of self-government, and thus common ground for promoting a common future as a truly free people. To keep Lincoln relevant, our task should not be to remake him in our image, but to render an accurate portrait of him in his age. He spoke to his own era with sufficient transcendence not only to enable Americans then to surmount their difficulties, but also to teach subsequent generations how to address the abiding questions that confront a free people.

Lincoln "belongs to the ages" as a teacher of profound lessons regarding the nature of the American regime, and how Americans from generation to generation, could preserve and perpetuate our free system of government. With Lincoln, we find no blind follower of the American founding, but a thoughtful and thought-provoking citizen who became a statesman by reaching back to the founders, and making the case that what they achieved was the best, most prudent, means of securing their safety and happiness.

*Lucas Morel is a professor at Washington and Lee University. This article was presented at Ashland University's Summer MAHG Program.*

# An Interview with Harold Holzer

*regarding his new book*

## THE PRESIDENTS VS. THE PRESS



THE ENDLESS BATTLE BETWEEN THE  
WHITE HOUSE AND THE MEDIA

— from —

THE FOUNDING FATHERS TO FAKE NEWS

## HAROLD HOLZER

WINNER OF THE LINCOLN PRIZE

*The Presidents vs. The Press*

**Sara Gabbard: When in relationship to the timing of writing your marvelous *Lincoln and the Power of the Press* did you decide to write a book which would explore “the Endless Battle between the White House and the Media from the Founding Fathers to Fake News?”**

**Harold Holzer:** The idea first struck me during the 2016 presidential campaign, when President-to-be Trump began railing against so-called “fake news.” My original thought was to do a short book about what happened when the phenomenon of partisan journalism collided with changes in communications technology, including periodic presidential complaints about “false” reporting, which are anything but new. But the more I looked into the story, the more convinced I grew that I should explore the entire history of the crucial relationship between presidents and the press, and what it has meant both in safeguarding liberty and forging our unique system of government.

**SG: Do you see a point in time at which some topics (presidential families, finances, and promiscuous behavior) were once determined to be off-limits to the press but eventually became “Open Game?”**

**HH:** Yes: I would suggest that it was that Lincoln admirer, Theodore Roosevelt, who first reaped the whirlwind on this one. Of course, cute families and questionable behavior were not new at the White House, but TR tried to have it both ways: he paraded his adorable sons around the mansion and then got angry when the press reported on them, as when the boys misbehaved once by chasing the Thanksgiving turkey along the White House lawn, which only made the reporters more determined to cover them. On another occasion, Teddy said he couldn’t control both the country and his daughter Alice, and that only made Alice more irresistible to journalists than before. Not all bets were off. Just a few administrations later, Woodrow Wilson threatened to punch a press photographer in the face for taking a picture of his daughter riding a bicycle. By then, the White House press corps had grown so large and so competitive—and

had its own official headquarters inside the building to boot—that First Families could never again escape the spotlight. Later, the Clinton administration tried to seal the door between the press room and the West Wing—and I mean that literally—but eventually had to re-open it. We’ve come a long way since the days when Mary Lincoln’s outbursts and feuds went largely unreported in the press.

**SG: Is it possible to summarize the effect which reporters of the Progressive Era had on future media coverage of presidents?**

**HH:** Journalists had been crusading for pet causes for generations before the Progressive Era. But Theodore Roosevelt actively cultivated long-form magazine reporters to support his reform initiatives. He befriended, encouraged, and confided in them. But later, he dropped them and publicly condemned them for wallowing in negativity—remember, the term he applied to them, “muckraker,” was not meant as a compliment. After TR (again he represents a turning point), working journalists became celebrities as well as investigators: Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens and the like became famous in their own right, the way editors and publishers had once earned fame, and from there the line to Woodward and Bernstein is clear and unmistakable. Yet it would be wrong to say all journalists and editors have been progressive-minded. Franklin Roosevelt never enjoyed majority editorial support from the nation’s newspapers, even running

for his second, third, and fourth terms. That’s one reason he spent so much time charming working reporters. Imagine: 998 news conferences!

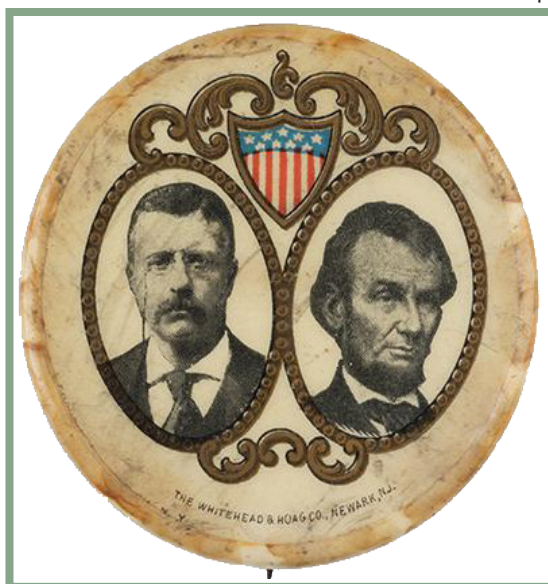
**SG: Did the eventual addition of female reporters make a difference in coverage of presidents?**

**HH:** I think so, though it was not easy to get there. Reading the transcripts of FDR’s press conferences, I was pretty shocked by the way he teased May Craig, a groundbreaking female reporter who lasted through the Kennedy era, and late in her career became well-known as the object of JFK’s amusement during his televised news conferences. Craig and Helen Thomas and Sarah McClendon were tough pioneers who deserve enormous credit for opening the all-male press corps to women. And in the beginning, they indeed brought to the game values that many men lacked, or at least had overlooked—like the toll that bellicose government policies take on families. Now, the great thing about the press corps is that the women are just treated (at least by their colleagues) as equal forces, integrated within the professional community (and often the best in the business).

**SG: Was there a difference in the relationship between president and press during wartime?**

**HH:** The press would point out that there should be no difference; that they should always have full access to the White House and full freedom to report what they think their audience needs to know. But throughout history, presidents have cracked down on the free flow of information during armed conflicts. The Lincoln Administration, as we know, jailed editors without trial if they opposed enlistment. Wilson created a propaganda unit that flooded the country with patriotic news and posters and withheld sensitive information that it judged would provide aid and comfort to “the Hun.” FDR considered creating an official, government news agency during World War II, but relented.

Instead he used his enormous charm and “off the record” pol-



Roosevelt and Lincoln Pin 71.2009.082.0680



Ida Tarbell and Louis Warren at the dedication of the Hoosier Youth statue, *Lincoln Life*, Fort Wayne, IN, Lincoln Museum

icy briefings to keep the lid on sensitive information, created a film propaganda unit that recruited great movie directors like Frank Capra and George Stevens to create memorable documentaries, and reminded the media and public that “loose lips sink ships.” JFK grew so frustrated about press coverage that he considered challenging the fundamental right of the press to any kind of sensitive military information. Yet like most presidents, Kennedy wanted to have it both ways. He demanded that reporters privy to his anti-Castro plans not reveal the Bay of Pigs mission before it occurred, then blamed the press for not warning that the plan was flawed! By the way, it was JFK, my first hero in politics, who gave a speech he wanted to call “The Presidents vs. the Press”—which inspired my title.

**SG: You cover 19 presidents in your book. There are obvious limitations of space in Lincoln Lore. Please comment on the following points for each of the presidents listed:**

**1. Did he deal di-**

**rectly with the press or did he rely on others to handle this task?**

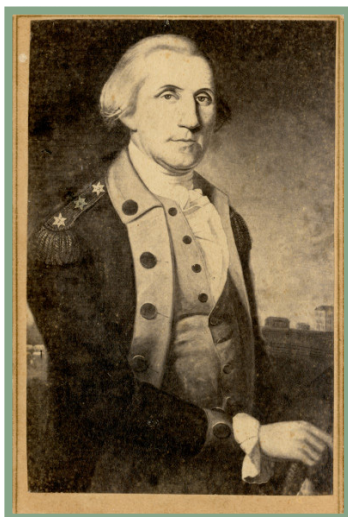
**2. Did he have specific people/publications he tended to favor? Any he disliked and avoided if possible?**

**3. Did he follow news reports closely? Just glance over a summary? Ignore if possible?**

**4. How did each advance or set back the relationship between president and press?**

**George Washington**

Unless you count Alexander Hamilton, founder of the *New York Post*, Washington appears to have spoken directly to a major journalist only once—when he summoned an astonished Philadelphia editor to the executive mansion late in his second term and gave him exclusive rights to publish his Farewell Address. In the Founding Era, editors spoke either for the Administration or the opposition—with government officials feeding them



George Washington LN-1350

what today we would call “talking points.” Washington had his own official “organ,” the *United States Gazette*, whose editor consistently ballyhooed Federalist policies. He did read newspapers—enough to make him furious enough on one occasion to throw an unfriendly paper to the floor and stomp on it in full view of his astonished Cabinet members. Washington in a sense advanced every relationship he established, simply because he was the first president. Where the press was concerned he encouraged friendly reporting and (privately) denounced hostile reporting, and his successors would expect the same loyalty and more often than not be disappointed. I will add here that Washington’s own Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson, not only founded an opposition paper—while he served in Washington’s Cabinet—but got its editor a job as a government translator to help support him!

**Abraham Lincoln**

Lincoln befriended Whig, and later Republican, journalists with the same energy and personal touch with which he developed relationships with politicians—and of course, by the Lincoln era, editors were often politicians, and vice versa. Before his presidency, he could count on a friendly, semi-official paper in Springfield, the *State Journal*, and one in Chicago, the *Tribune* (whose editors doubled as advisors and whose offices he made his unofficial political headquarters). He also faced hostile Democratic papers that attacked him relentlessly. As president, he gave exclusive news to the Washington editors he liked, and maintained a wary relationship with others, like *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley, with whom he never really got along—beginning with their wary relationship as fellow Congressmen—despite their shared opposition to slavery. By 1864, Lincoln disgustingly likened Greeley to an “old shoe” and cut him off completely. Yet at the same time, Lincoln became so close to *Sacramento Bee* correspondent Noah Brooks that he weighed making him chief of staff for his second term. Lincoln devoured newspapers from his earliest days as a reader—and only during his presidency did he find he no longer had time to study them, not even a digest that one of his secretar-

ies for a time assembled. He certainly never ignored the press altogether; after all, his administration shut down nearly 200 anti-war newspapers in an effort to clamp down on resistance to enlistment and conscription. A mixed record. In one way, Lincoln set press freedom back with his censorship policies. But he also thrust it forward by using advanced technologies to communicate rapidly, and by devising the inspired idea of issuing his most important private correspondence to the public through the newspapers: think of the Corning and Conkling letters as examples.

### Theodore Roosevelt

Teddy Roosevelt simply loved dealing directly with the press. It was TR who staged the first informal press opportunities by inviting reporters to chat with him while he was being shaved in the Oval Office. When they printed something he didn't like, or thought had been off the record, he uninhibitedly banished them from his circle: he called this purgatory the Ananias Club. TR read voraciously—a book a day, some have claimed, along with every paper he could get his hands on. He was the first “personality” in the White House since Lincoln, and he came to believe that press coverage should focus on him; that he should be the “lede” of every story, or he was unhappy about the press. He certainly opened up the presidency to closer and more intense scrutiny. Whether that was a good or bad thing, his successors faced the music.

### Franklin D. Roosevelt

FDR met the big White House press corps twice a week for 12 years, so he was extraordinarily accessible, although he also enjoyed slipping away from Washington on occasion without telling the press. He liked reporters but generally disliked editors and publishers—especially the Patterson-Medill family who controlled anti-Administration papers like the Chicago Tribune. He read a batch of newspapers every morning while eating breakfast in bed, and then summoned his press secretary into the room to complain about disappoint-



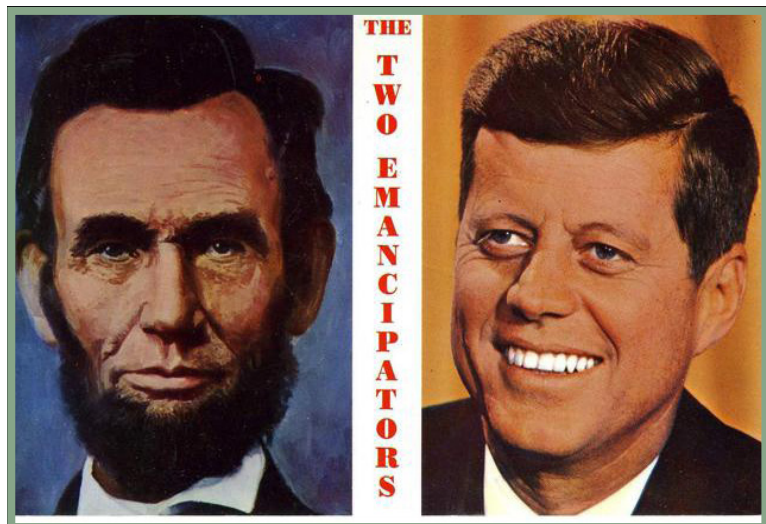
Abraham Lincoln LN-0046

ing coverage. FDR widened access for sure, but also found a way to go around reporters by speaking directly to the people through his “Fireside Chats.” He understood the power of new technologies like radio and newsreels and took full advantage of them. At the same time, he depended on what began as a “gentleman’s agreement” to conceal his disability from the public. Later, his press office aggressively enforced a ban on photographs that showed him on crutches, or struggling in and out of his automobile. As with most presidents of note, the record is mixed.

### John F. Kennedy

Like the greatest presidential communicators, JFK found a new way to speak directly to the people outside of the confines of the press corps: in his case, the televised news conference. It almost didn't matter what the reporters asked or broadcast or wrote about his performances on live TV. The events became so popular that JFK was able to make news instantaneously, almost immune from reinterpretation. He basically favored his old press pals (he had once been a working journalist), and he often gave them exclusives. He read newspapers and magazines hungrily, got angry at some coverage in the Roosevelt mode, but kept pushing his agenda with favored journalists. In the final analysis, I would have to say that JFK set traditional press coverage back by inventing new techniques to make news. In addition, because of the look-the-other-way attitude that still reigned during the Kennedy era, the public never learned about his questionable personal behavior, his fragile health, or the medications he took to keep functioning. For decades afterwards, especially after Nixon, the press demanded, and got, almost everything it asked for; now we seem to have returned to a period in which a president needn't provide full disclosure about personal matters. Should it be so? That's for the press and the president to hash out, and for the public to ultimately decide.

*Harold Holzer, a winner of the Lincoln Prize, is the Jonathan F. Fanton Director of the Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute at Hunter College.*



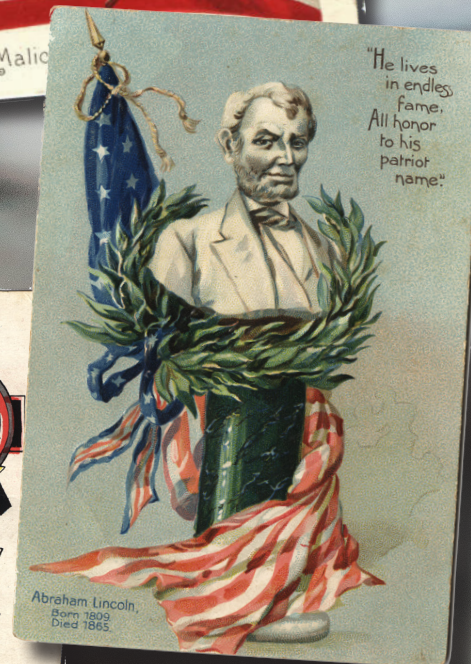
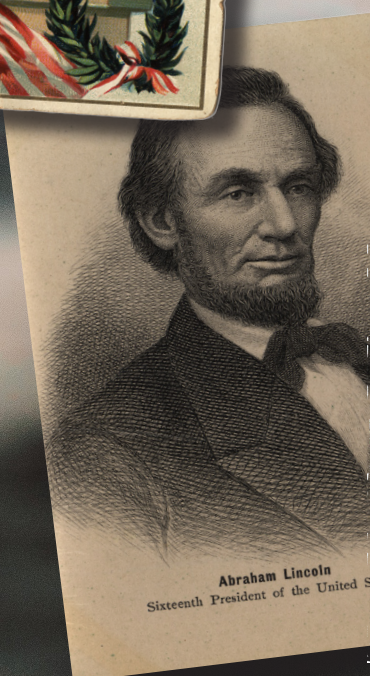
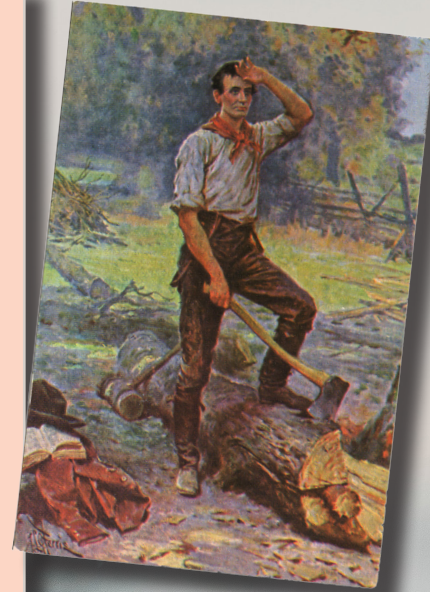
The Two Emancipators 71.2009.083.0842

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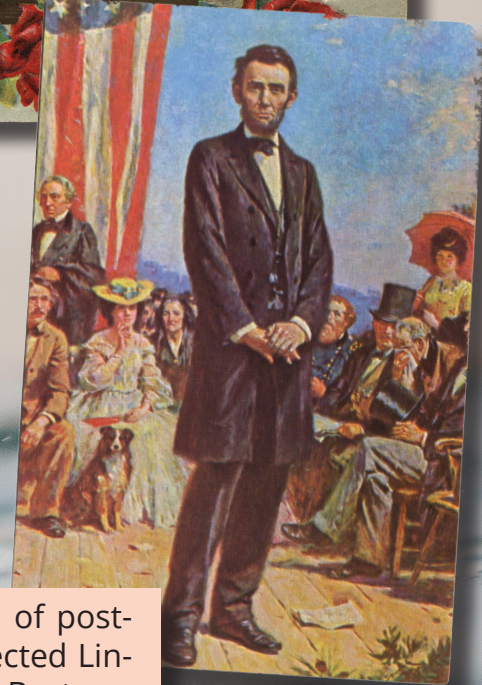
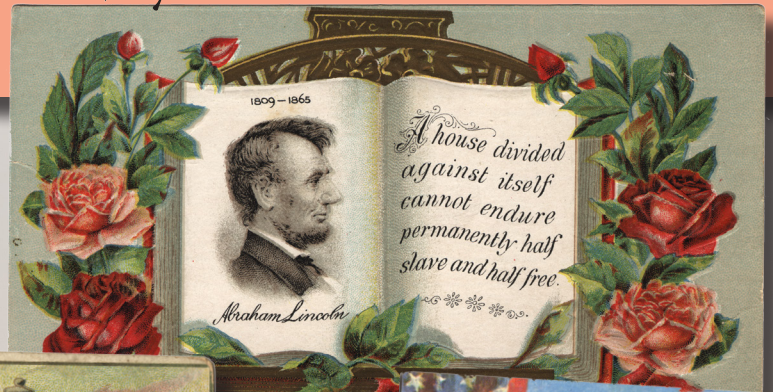
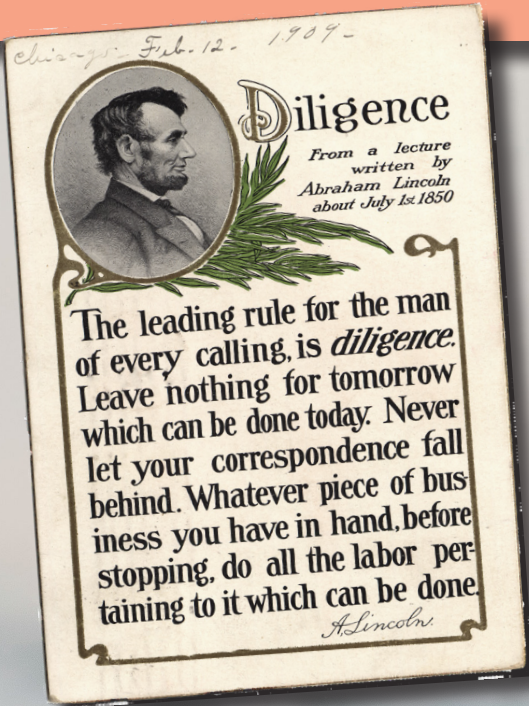
# Lincoln in Postcards

A century after Lincoln's birthday marked a time of remembrance. The centennial celebrations came in a variety of forms, including the production of commemorative postcards. These postcards, which continued being designed and printed well after 1909, illustrate the life of Abraham Lincoln through a variety of monumental moments. These postcards also continued to describe Lincoln by his nicknames including "The Rail Splitter," "The Emancipator," and "The Martyred President."

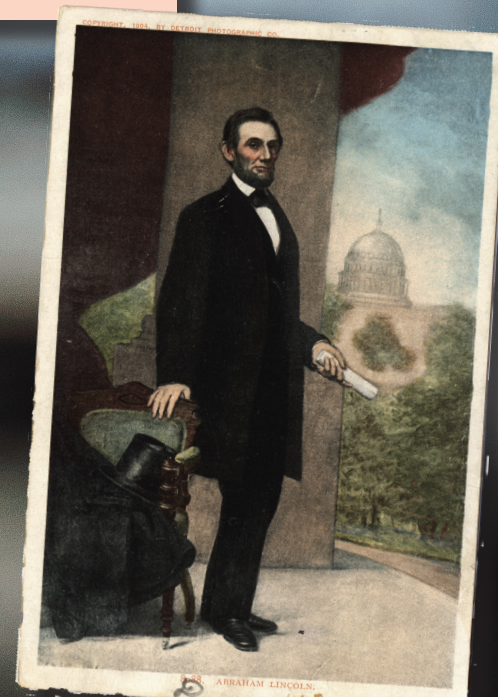
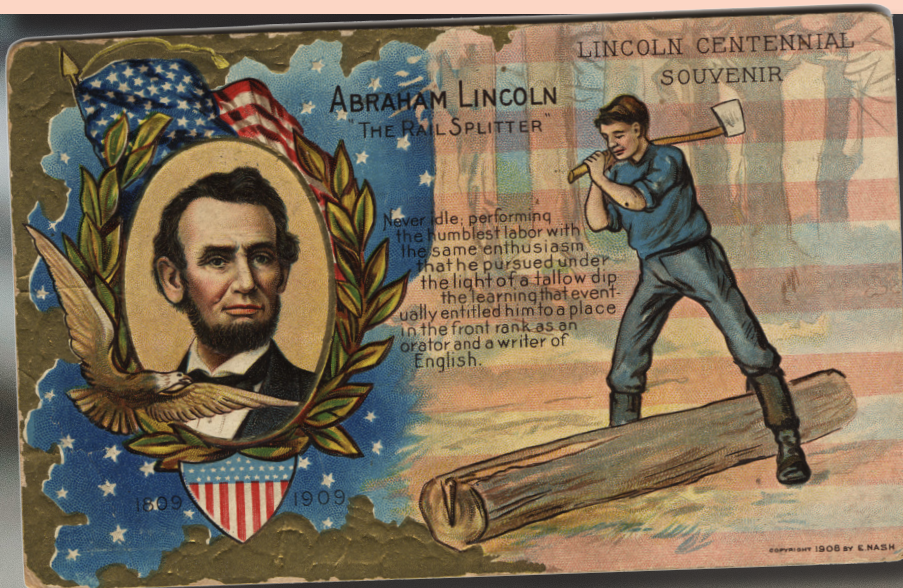
After the centennial celebration printing, the postcard designs began to change stylistically. Quotes started to add more historical relevance. Different snapshots of Lincoln's life were used to imitate current issues. One consistent element is the use of original photographs as a basis for the illustration as well as Lincoln's own signature. Different images and scenes show Lincoln in many facets: the politician, the public speaker, the president, the father, the husband, the railsplitter, and the emancipator.



Emily Rapoza, Senior Lincoln Librarian  
 Megan Heimann, Intern, University of St. Francis



The Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection has a large collection of postcards through the donation of Jean Szalkowski Zurow. Zurow collected Lincoln postcards and related ephemera for more than sixty years in Bastrop, Texas. In total, the collection has 556 Lincoln-related postcards, souvenir booklets, pamphlets, and images. Also included in the donation was an admission ticket to the Lincoln Home National Historic Site in Springfield, IL and a transfer car decal showing Lincoln sites. In August of 2013, the collection found a new home at the Allen County Public Library in the Lincoln Collection.



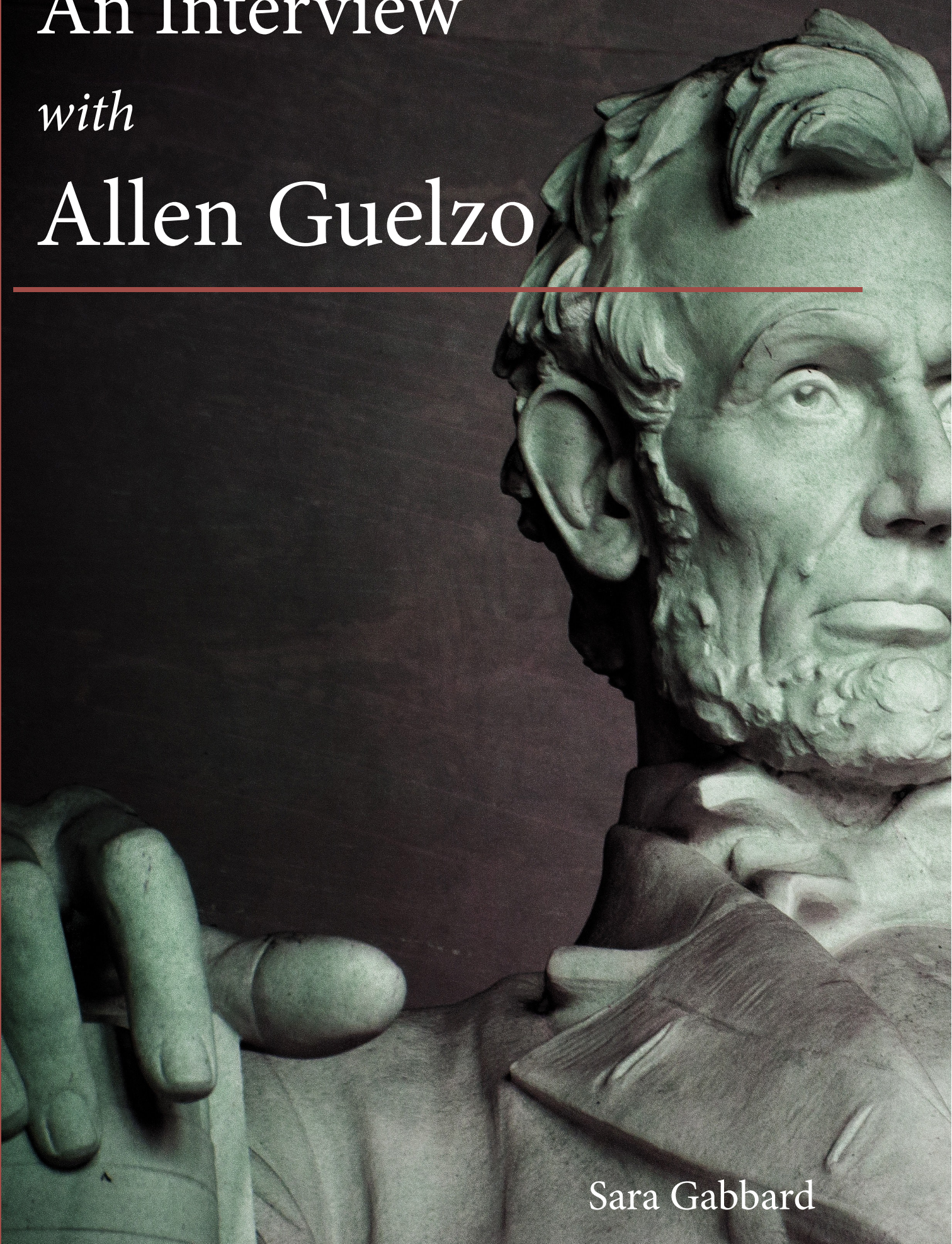
An Interview

*with*

Allen Guelzo

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Sara Gabbard



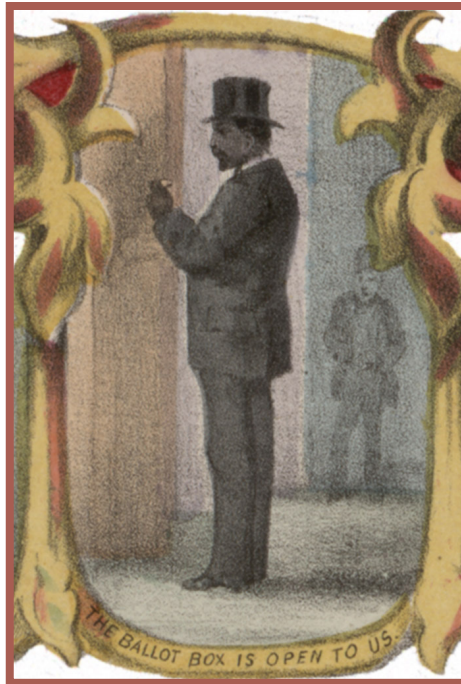


**Sara Gabbard:** When you are “on the road” lecturing about Lincoln and the Civil War, what questions do members of the audience ask most frequently? Do responses from your students reflect the same interests?

**Allen Guelzo:** Far and away, the most-frequently-asked question I encounter from audiences is, “Would things have been different if Lincoln had lived?” What they mean, in most cases, is, would a Lincoln-managed Reconstruction have healed the nation’s wounds more effectively than the one we got, as managed by Johnson and Grant, and spared us a century-and-a-half of racial suffering and turmoil?

The answer is *maybe*. Even that is mostly based on the not-unreasonable assumption that nothing Lincoln would have done could have been worse than what Andrew Johnson did. But in real terms, Lincoln faced some serious problems in Reconstruction that were almost as formidable as the wartime ones. *First*, he needed to move the freedpeople toward civil equality, starting with the vote. After all, the Constitution knows no category of semi-citizen; you’re either a citizen or an alien, and with the end of slavery, it would have been unthinkable to classify the freedpeople (180,000 of whom had fought for the Union) as mere aliens. Furthermore, Lincoln would need their votes, since Reconstruction would bring white Southern Democrats back into the political life of the nation (and likely in alliance with their old Northern Democratic allies). Black voters would create for Lincoln a new political constituency in the South to offset white Democratic power, and their voice would be a necessity if the Republicans’ wartime measures (tariffs, the national banking system, the transcontinental railroad) were not to be overturned.

But that created the *second* problem -- how were the freedpeople to be enfranchised, and who would enforce it? No one in the South was going to take this sitting down; there would have to be some element of military oversight, and that would continue to run up the costs of the war. One of the painful lessons we learned out of the Iraq War (and should have learned after World War One) was



Result of the 15th Amendment 71.2009.081.0558

that you can’t simply walk away after the shooting stops. Lincoln did not want military occupation. He was not a military-minded person, and he was already fearful of the costs of prolonging military expenses at the war’s close. But he would not have had any other choice, given the behavior of the defeated Confederates. As it was, I believe that we broke off military occupation of the South entirely too quickly. We needed to foster, over at least thirty years, the emergence of a new generation of Southern leaders, black and white, who could (as Lincoln said) live themselves out of the old patterns and into the new. But the investment, in time, energy, and money, would have been (to borrow a Lincoln term) “heart-appalling.”

Finally, there is a *third* limitation on what Lincoln could have done: he would have left office in March 1869, which is not a lot of time in which to effect a Reconstruction. Granted, there was no constitutional inhibition at that time on his running for a third term, but there remained a general sense that this sort of thing wasn’t done (as Ulysses Grant learned when he made noises to that effect).

Curiously, this is not a question often asked by students in the classroom. But I suspect this is because they’re often coming to grips for the first time with these events, and haven’t yet acquired the perspective to ask *what if*.

**SG:** Have your students impacted the way that you view the subjects that you are teaching?

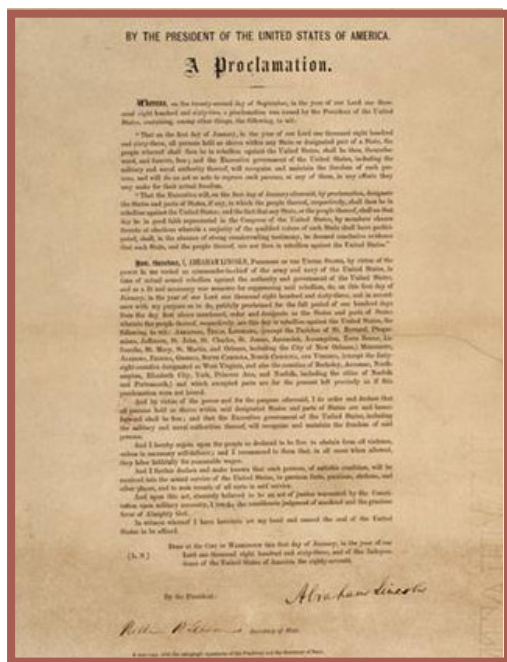
**AG:** I was asked by a Princeton undergraduate recently: why do you always wear a coat and tie to class? Because, I said, I have the most wonderful students in the world, and this is my way of saluting them. And I really have enjoyed some of the most marvelous students, some of whom already are stepping into significant scholarly careers: I think particularly of Brian Matthew Jordan (whose *Marching Home* was a runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize in History), Skye Montgomery, Zachary Fry, John M. Rudy, and Evan Rothera. There are also many who have gone into other pursuits: William Holiman, Isaac N’gang’a, Nick Lulli, Kees Thompson, Ben Foulon, Richard Hildreth. But I cannot say that they have impacted how I teach. I’m afraid I may have intimidated them too much, because they have always been so polite and circumspect. Or maybe, I’ve just been too obtuse to realize how they’ve affected my outlook. I wish I could rule that one out, but I know better.

**SG:** The first of your books that I read was *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*. After 20 years, it is still a favorite.

**AG:** I’m delighted to know that. I’ve been in discussion with Eerdmans about producing an anniversary edition, with some new and updated material. Perhaps it will be worth getting re-acquainted with the book.

**SG:** The subject matter for your books on Lincoln varies greatly. How do you determine the specific topic which you wish to pursue?

**AG:** Mostly, I look to ask the questions that haven’t been answered, or better, even asked. *Redeemer President* was more of a response to an urging from others than an initiative of my own, but once *Redeemer President* was finished, I realized that the Lincoln field held out more unanswered questions than people suppose. Hardly any reviewer fails to begin a review of a Lincoln book without some useless comment about how many Lincoln books there are and so how can another one be a real contribution. That’s



Emancipation Proclamation Leland Boker Edition  
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pure absurdity. The Lincoln field is like a meadow over which many wagons have been driven, but most of them follow the same narrow ruts the others have created, while vast stretches of the meadow roll away to the distance, untouched. I have a list of Lincoln book topics that, I loudly lament, have lain unexamined. In fact, many of them are the same topics James Garfield Randall begged students to take up in his famous 1936 address, "Has the Lincoln Theme Been Exhausted?" and that was almost a century ago.

After *Redeemer President*, I remember sitting at a luncheon in connection with the Abraham Lincoln Institute of the Mid-Atlantic in Washington (now simply the Abraham Lincoln Institute) in the midst of their annual symposium in 2000, and thinking to myself: what should I write next? And it came to me almost in a flash, "There's been no really serious book about the Emancipation Proclamation!" There was only John Hope Franklin's brief *The Emancipation Proclamation*, and that had been written in 1963. So, I pitched heavily into that, and in 2004 produced *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* for Simon and Schuster.

At the end of that project, it occurred to me that the sesquicentennial of the Lincoln-Douglas campaign of 1858 was only four years away. There was, of course, the great Harry Jaffa's

*Crisis of the House Divided* (1959), but that was a political scientist's analysis of the debates; I wanted to take in the whole contest, from June, 1858, until January, 1859. And so that became *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America* (2008). Once done with *Lincoln and Douglas*, the Civil War sesquicentennial was almost upon us, and I turned without a second thought to writing *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion*.

I have just now finished the manuscript of a Robert E. Lee biography, and that, too, was an attempt to answer a question I thought had been ignored: how do you write the biography of a man who commits treason? Besides, having written three large Lincoln books (along with four smaller ones), I thought it might be interesting to look at the only other figure on the Civil War landscape who seemed to be in any way equal to Lincoln in significance, and that was Lee.

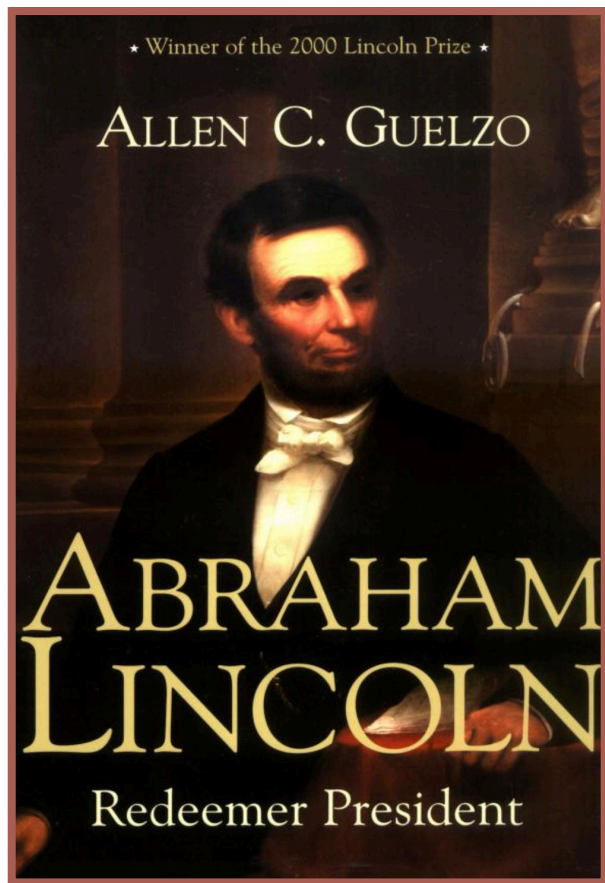
**SG: Which book was the most difficult to research?**

**AG:** *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion* was an immense challenge because so much existed in the way of memoirs, reminiscences, and histories of the battle, some of them written before the last of the battle's dead had been buried. I spent a very long time reading through personal narratives and regimental histories, knowing full well that any one of these I neglected would surely be seized upon by the army of eagle-eyed Gettysburg buffs as some form of fatal omission. What guided me through this vast literature was a determination to see the battle through the eyes of the 19th-century, and cognate 19th-century wars. Hence, even as I was steeping myself in Gettysburg sources, I was reading deeply in 19th-century European military tactics and procedures, and finding a wealth of comparative insights: for instance, the use of column and line, the efficacy of artillery, the purposes of cavalry, the aversion to street-fighting.

Too much American writing on

the Civil War, and on Gettysburg, is embarrassingly parochial. We often forget that our Civil War era was also the era of the Crimean War, the Schleswig-Holstein War, the Indian Mutiny, the Tai-ping Rebellion, the Austro-Prussian War and (at the outside) the Franco-Prussian War. American soldiers lived in those times and imbibed those examples. For instance: why did the Union and Confederate armies never develop heavy cavalry, relying entirely on light cavalry throughout the war? Why was Pickett's Charge not the hopeless, reckless fling that it is so often portrayed as being? The answers are in the overall context of 19th-century warfare.

*Gettysburg: The Last Invasion* was a challenge of depth; the Lee biography has been a challenge of space. Unlike the papers and letters of Lincoln, Grant, Jefferson Davis and Andrew Johnson, there is no easily-available scholarly edition of the letters and papers of Robert E. Lee. Partly, this is because Lee was an indefatigable letter-writer, sometimes writing several multi-page letters a



Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President  
(William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company)



Robert E. Lee LN-0801

day, and probably composing 4,000 of them during his adult life. Creating such an edition would be the work of an entire career. What's worse, these letters are scattered in archives and libraries all across the continent, literally from the J.P. Morgan Library in New York to the H.E. Huntington Library in San Marino, and they all required patient tracking-down, visiting, and copying.

There are several conveniently-large collections at the Virginia Museum of History & Culture in Richmond, at Washington & Lee University, and at the Library of Congress; on the other hand, there are important Lee materials still in private hands, some of which pop-up incontinently on on-line auction sites. Mercifully, I had wonderful assistance at all of these places – John McClure in Richmond, my dear friend Lucas Morel at Washington & Lee, Michelle Krowl at the Library of Congress. But all the same, managing Lee's writing was a mammoth task. I had to create my own index of Lee letters: it runs out to 103 pages of single-spaced entries. That's only a beginning.

Lee is a challenge in another way, because he is a personality very unlike Lincoln. He was not a profound thinker, and not very much of a reader, and he alternated emotionally between a desire for security and a desire for inde-

pendence. He was no enthusiast for either slavery or secession. But like many elite Virginians, he simply averted his eyes from any personal responsibility for slavery, and allowed himself to be sucked into the secession movement under the impression that he could somehow become an agent for mediation, as well as protecting the family's Arlington property. He was wrong about both.

Lee is also a challenge because he was an engineer rather than a lawyer like Lincoln, and that demands a biographer acquire certain mastery of technical finesse in order to be able to understand Lee's career, which was spent mostly in the U.S. Army's Corps of Engineers. (I never thought I would read a textbook on coastal engineering, but for Lee, I did). He served in the Mexican War, and with conspicuous success, but as a staff officer. People are surprised to realize that Lee only commanded troops in action for the first time when he was given charge of the company of Marines that suppressed John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859. After the war, as president of Washington College, Lee remarked that the worst mistake of his life had been "to take a military education." He might have been happier as a civil engineer, but he could not bring himself to abandon the security of

the Army. He was probably at his happiest as president of Washington College in the last five years of his life, when he was remarkably successful and progressive as a curriculum innovator and a fund-raiser.

**SG:** Please tell our readers about your program at Princeton.

**AG:** One of the two hats I wear at Princeton is that of Senior Research Scholar in the Council of the Humanities. The Council is not really a "council," but a department of its own, and is interdisciplinary across the humanities, so that I get to teach a variety of courses under its umbrella. My status as a Senior Research Scholar leaves me a wide variety of choices, and that especially means the freedom to do a lot of writing. My other hat is the Director of the James Madison Program's Initiative on Statesmanship and Politics. The James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions was the brainchild of Robert P. George, the McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton, and has grown over twenty years to embrace both graduate and undergraduate students in fellowships and other programs connected to the American political tradition. The Madison Program is "dedicated to exploring enduring questions of American constitutional law and Western political thought," and especially "to examining the application of basic

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legal and ethical principles to contemporary problems." The Initiative on Statesmanship and Politics is still under construction, and will focus on the investigation of models of statesmanlike leadership in political life, and what qualities distinguish it from other forms of political activity.

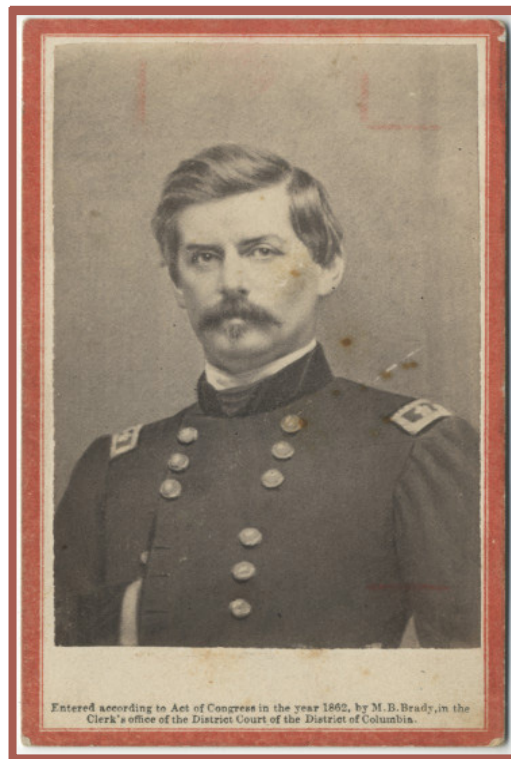
Lincoln, of course, will be a major figure because he gives us clues to the definition of statesmanship through several remarkable qualities: by his cultivation of an understanding of issues and contexts...by visibility to the nation...by his love and reverence for the rules and workings of political life...by mastering his organization...by converting personal liabilities into political assets...by his persistence...and by his resilience. Those qualities are also the particular preserve of *democratic* statesmanship, and they differ in nature from the qualities required by monarchical leadership, which is about honor, style, and the acquisition of power, or bureaucratic leadership, which is about efficiency, competence, and procedure.

**SG: A website refers to you as specializing in "American intellectual history from 1750 to 1865." Why those beginning and ending dates?**

**AG:** That's because I am, at the meat-and-potatoes level, an American intellectual historian. I am, and have always been, fascinated by American ideas, believing that (as the Psalmist said), "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." I actually only backed into doing the American Civil War to the extent I have because of Lincoln, and only backed into Lincoln because of the attraction he offered as a man of ideas.

*Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* is, after all, an intellectual biography of Lincoln, and it's modeled on other species of that genre. As an undergraduate, I fell under the spell of Perry Miller, and especially his great intellectual biography of Jonathan Edwards, so that set me on the course of following the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century as the era of Edwards's greatest prominence. My dissertation at the

University of Pennsylvania, under the eminent intellectual historians Bruce Kuklick and Alan Kors, was on Jonathan Edwards and the problem of free will and determinism in 18th-century America. Once I had the PhD in hand, my first instinct was to write a second book, taking the story of American ideas on that knotty philosophical problem forward from 1858 to the present. This is what brought me alongside Lincoln. I knew that Lincoln had more than a few things to say about fatalism and determinism, and I thought it would be boundlessly clever of me to include Lincoln in a book whose cast of characters was otherwise theologians and philosophers. I end-



George McClellan OC-0811

ed-up writing a paper about Lincoln's "Doctrine of Necessity" which was more successful than I had anticipated, and led to the suggestion I write *Redeemer President*. Once I had my hand in the Lincoln cookie jar, I couldn't get it out. I've never gotten back to writing free-will-and-determinism 2.0.

Not that I have any complaint about that. The group of scholars clustered around the study of Edwards was a

very tight circle; my experience of the Lincoln fraternity was entirely different. People like Michael Burlingame and Doug Wilson welcomed me, a stranger, with open arms in the 1990s. And I have made such wonderful friends among the Lincolmites – Lew Lehrman, Joe Fornieri, Tom Schwartz, Tom Klingenstein, Bill Harris, Jon White, and so many, many more. (Yes, you too, Sara!) I sometimes think the generous spirit of Lincoln insinuates itself into those who study him.

I surprise my students when I tell them that I never took a course on the Civil War on either the undergraduate or graduate level – or on Lincoln, for that matter. But I have always had an interest in Lincoln, going back to my childhood, when I pestered my grandmother to buy me a comic-book biography of Lincoln (it was the *Classics Illustrated* no. 142, and yes, I still have it). I wrote my high-school senior thesis on Lincoln and the election of 1860, and drew the ticket to narrate Aaron Copland's *Lincoln Portrait* with my high-school orchestra under my much-loved music director, Luca Del Negro. (Forty years later, I narrated it again under Del Negro's direction with the Rose Tree Pops Orchestra – what a reunion *that* was). But somehow I never thought of making a serious business out of studying Lincoln. Far from pursuing Lincoln, in my first year in college I was a music composition major – that is, until I discovered that I really didn't have the talent for it! But I have always grabbed for any opportunity to narrate *Lincoln Portrait*, and I always take delight in assuring the conductor that, *no*, I don't need any special cues, I can read the score myself, thank you. In 2009, for the Lincoln Bicentennial, Michael Colburn, then music director of the U.S. Marine Band ("The President's Own"), invited me to serve as narrator, not only for *Lincoln Portrait*, but for the world premiere of Roland Bass's *A New Birth of Freedom* in Washington. I could not imagine a more exciting way of celebrating Lincoln's 200th.

**SG: Please rate Lincoln as a Commander-in-Chief.**

**AG:** I've come to believe that Lincoln was in many ways a better president than he was commander-in-chief. Lincoln had very little experience in military matters and very little taste for them (something which was reinforced by his Whiggish politics, since the Whigs were the enemies of the "military chieftain," Andrew Jackson). As president, he assumed that he could master military affairs the same way he had mastered the law – by reading the standard textbooks, which he proceeded to borrow from the Library of Congress.

As the son of a career Army officer and the father of another, I can testify that this is not the path to military understanding. If anything, he learned all the wrong lessons from the textbooks. He was convinced



Ulysses S. Grant LN-0617

that a single Jacksonian demonstration of military determination would be enough to scare the Confederates into shivering imitations of the nullifiers of 1832; that did not work at Bull Run. When he called George

McClellan east to take command, McClellan spent most of his first year creating a fortification ring to protect the capital, and training an army for invasion – both of which were necessary, and both of which Lincoln mistook for dithering. McClellan then formulated a highly-sophisticated combined-operations strategy for besieging and capturing Richmond, based on the models used by the British and French in the Crimea. Lincoln saw no virtue in this whatsoever, and wondered why McClellan didn't simply smash straight overland at the Confederate army.

The miserable failure of the Peninsula Campaign convinced Lincoln that any further suggestions for combined operations of the McClellan sort were mere excuse-mongering, and he demanded that McClellan's successors – Burnside, Hooker, Meade – conduct his favorite idea of a straight-on, heads-down overland campaign. He demanded the same thing of Grant, even though Grant was skeptical of an overland campaign. Grant nevertheless did what he was told. But by the time he reached Cold Harbor, it was clear that an overland campaign was not working. Happily, Grant had built up enough political capital with Lincoln (something McClellan, a Democrat, never tried to do) that he was given a free hand to change directions, which he did by shifting the entirety of his campaign across the James and Appomattox Rivers and locking Petersburg and Richmond in a siege.

The truth was that armies, by the mid-nineteenth century, had grown to such size, that their logistical demands made impossible their survival anywhere farther than twenty-five miles from a major supply center or railroad. Lee understood that, which is why he often said that if Grant was able to besiege and capture Richmond, it would only be a matter of time before the Confederate army went the same way. It was. Once Richmond fell, Lee's army lasted exactly seven days on the run. Headlong battles of the sort Lincoln had read about in the textbooks were a thing of the Napoleonic past, at least in terms of being the hinge that wars turned upon, and in fact

the so-called "decisive battle" associated with Napoleon may have been obsolete by his time, too. On the other hand, Lincoln trusted Grant, and trusted him enough to let Grant have his own leash. That was what won the war.

**SG: You have won the coveted Lincoln Prize three times. Please comment on the circumstances which surrounded the decision to write each book.**

**AG:** I've already hinted a little bit at these circumstances, and in the case of *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation* and *Lincoln and Douglas*, the initiative came from me, channeled to Simon & Schuster through my agent, Michelle Rubin. *Redeemer President* was different. That book was the offspring of the mid-1990s, when I was still doing the work of an American intellectual historian, and teaching American history courses at Eastern University. I had never planned to write a book about Lincoln, but the impact made by the paper I wrote on "Lincoln and the Doctrine of Necessity" generated a call from Chuck van Hof, then the editor at Wm. B. Eerdmans in Grand Rapids. Eerdmans has a multi-volume series, the Library of Religious Biography, and Chuck suggested I write a book on Lincoln's religion. I said *no*. I was aware that a great deal had been written about Lincoln and religion, much of it very mawkishly done, and I didn't want to sink into that swamp. Van Hof called me a second time; a second time I said *no*. He even signed up a mutual friend, Mark Noll, to make the request; I still said *no*. Finally, Van Hof came back to me one more time, telling me that if I didn't take on the project, he would give it to Professor G------. I knew Professor G-----, and shuddered at the likely result. So, I made a counter-offer: let me write an intellectual biography of Lincoln, speaking to the general intellectual milieu of his time, of which religion would be a part. Van Hof was agreeable, and so *Redeemer President* happened.

I originally wanted the title (which was borrowed from Walt Whitman) to read, *Redeemer President: Abraham Lincoln and the Ideas of Americans*. But Van Hof overruled me, and it

became *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* – largely, I suspect, so that Lincoln’s name would be one of the first two words in the short-title distributors use in their catalogs. Books, after all, are a business, just like Leonardo’s paintings. Eerdmans nevertheless did a lovely production job. The dust jacket featured the Edwin Marchant portrait of Lincoln from the Union League of Philadelphia, and the endpapers show the handwriting of the Second Inaugural. There are no maps or illustrations, and originally, in keeping with the format of the Library of Religious Biography, no footnotes. At the last minute, however, it was decided that some form of notation was necessary, so I had to go back and reconstruct all the notes, in the form of running endnotes for each chapter.

*Gettysburg: The Last Invasion* was one of those books that the hour (meaning, the impending sesquicentennial) seemed to ask for. I finished the manuscript at the end of August, 2012, and it was in production and ready for release the following May, just in time for the anniversary of the battle. I had drawn maps for *Lincoln and Douglas*, but *GTLI* required much, much more in that way, and much more in the way of illustrations. I was fortunate in having the co-operation of the Adams County Historical Society and of William Frassanito for the illustrations. Not surprisingly, I spent a great deal of that summer doing nothing but talking about the battle of Gettysburg.

What did surprise me was the book winning the Lincoln Prize – having won the Prize twice before, I assumed that this would probably discount any likelihood of making what

Brian Jordan called a “three-peat.” But then, one fine February morning, Brian strolled into my office and broke the news. No one could have been more astonished than myself. But the greatest astonishment was yet to come, when *GTLI* won the Guggenheim-Lehrman Military History Prize, the Fletcher Pratt Award and the Richard B. Harwell Award. I attended the Guggenheim-Lehrman award ceremony with no

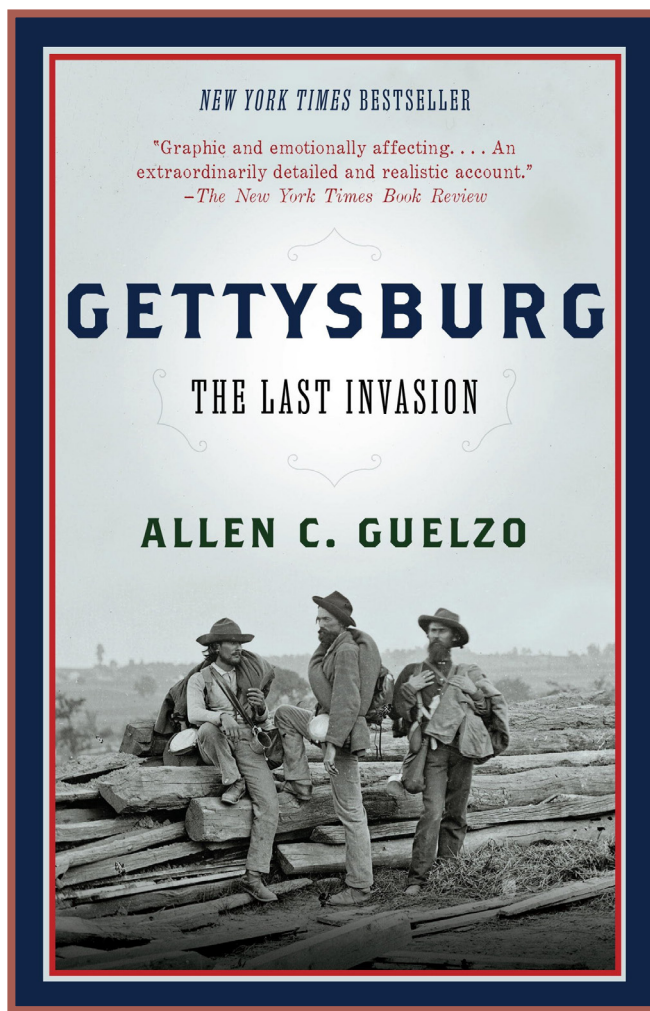
such giants. So, I remember sitting, utterly unprepared, in the front row of the auditorium of the New York Historical Society, as Andrew Roberts stood at the podium and said, “And the winner is, *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion*.” My mouth literally dropped open. I almost blurted out, “No, you don’t mean that.” I was asked to come up to the podium and say something, but I was emotionally dazed, and to this day I have no idea what I actually said.

**SG: What is your next project?**

**AG:** I’ve devoted the last six years to writing a biography of Robert E. Lee, which looks like it will be of about the same physical proportions (as a book) as *GTLI*. I want now to get back to Lincoln, and I have in mind a book which will speak to Lincoln’s ideas about democracy. Curiously, Lincoln used the word *democracy* sparingly. His most extended example is the famous note, “As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy.” Yet, no one in our history has come closer to embodying what we think of as the best

in our democracy. The question is whether democracy, as it worked in Lincoln’s world, still works in ours.

*Allen Guelzo is Director of the Initiative on Politics and Statesmanship in the James Madison Program at Princeton University.*

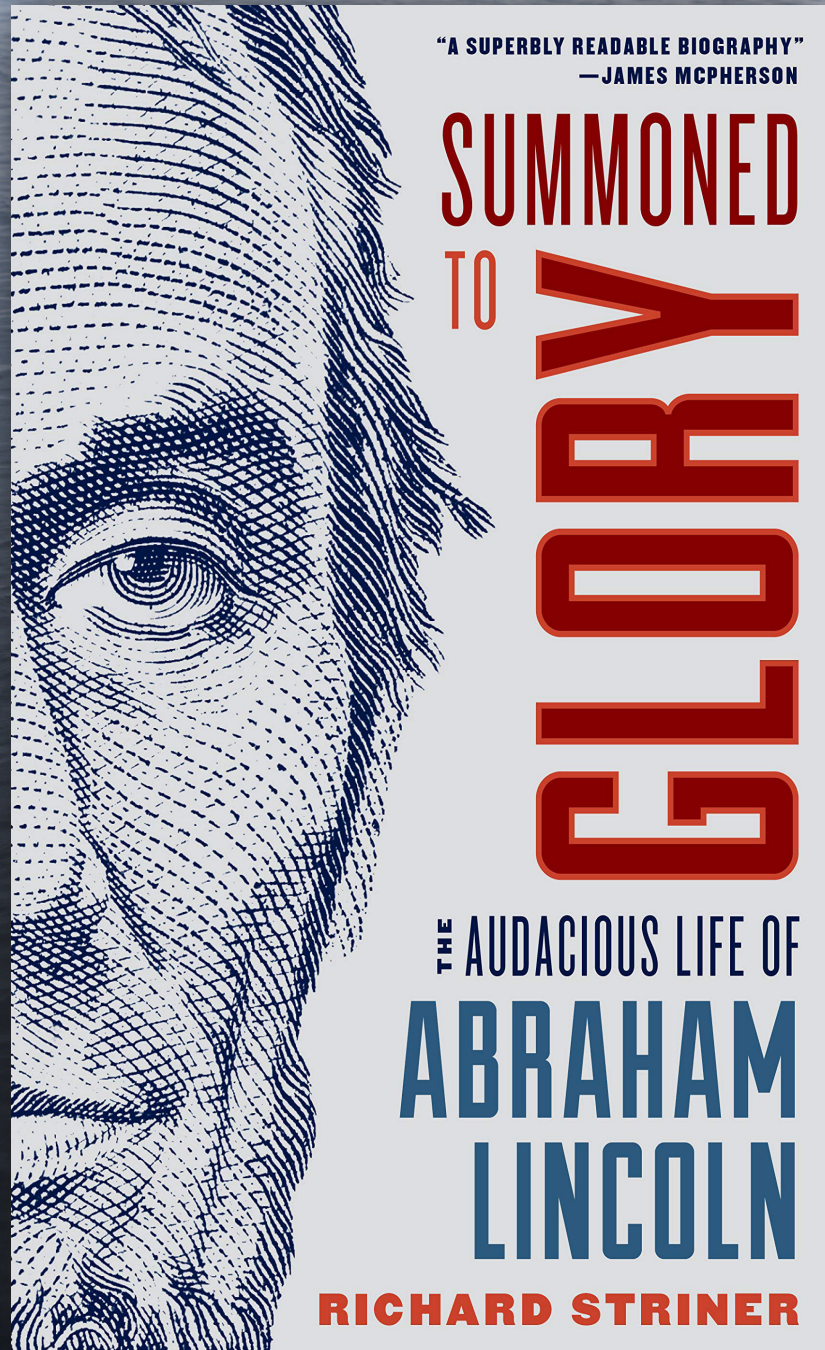


*Gettysburg: The Last Invasion*  
(Vintage Civil War Publishing)

idea of who the winner might be, and found myself in the company of a bevy of military historians whose work I had come to admire profoundly – Richard Overy, Saul David, Hew Strachan. I could not imagine someone who had spent so much time writing about philosophers deserving a place at a table featuring

# An Interview with Richard Striner

Regarding his new book



*Summoned to Glory:  
The Audacious Life of Abraham Lincoln*

Sara Gabbard

**Sara Gabbard: The obvious first question should be about your use of the word *Audacious* in the title. When did you first realize that this word represented the conclusions of your study?**

**Richard Striner:** For years I had been unhappy with the way in which Lincoln was portrayed in popular biographies. Back in 1952, one biographer claimed that Lincoln's mind and body "moved slowly, as is likely to be the way with country people." That's not only a silly generalization regarding the ways of "country people" — did farmers "move slowly" when they danced jigs and reels in a hoe-down? — it's also, to say the least, a one-dimensional characterization of Lincoln. There were many different sides to the man and his moods would shift — as our own moods will shift. In the heat of excitement (according to a great many reminiscences) his powers were dazzling. The evidence overflows with accounts of his witty remarks and swift analysis, his skill in trading barbed exchanges with his foes, his fluent repartee as a humorist, and his astonishing knack for getting straight to the heart of a problem while others were dithering.

In 1995, another Lincoln biographer claimed that Lincoln's life displayed an "essential passivity," a "reluctance to take the initiative and make bold plans." That's completely the reverse of the Lincoln I came to know in my studies. The question as to how this stereotype of a ponderous, slow-moving, and "passive" Lincoln developed is an interesting problem in the study of popular culture.

I challenged the stereotype in 2006 with my book *Father Abraham*. I argued that Lincoln was a brilliant strategist, superb in the orchestration of power and gifted with a matchless ability to perceive both the best-case and worst-case contingencies and use his mental powers with precision to shape the future. Since then, the analysis of Michael Burlingame in his massive two-volume life of Lincoln came to similar conclusions. And yet the tired old stereotype has not diminished in the slightest — or so it seems to me.

My interest in Lincoln the man kept increasing, for the more I reflected on the nature of his overall historical *achievements*, the more I considered the way in which his personal development made them possible. So at last I made the

big decision to join the crowded field of Lincoln biographers. I wanted to write something far more decisive than any other book or essay of mine that had been published to date to change the climate of opinion. But I also did it for a simpler and far more personal reason: to gratify my growing curiosity.

As I shared my intention to produce my own Lincoln biography, the predictable and understandable question was aimed at me: "what on earth could be said about Lincoln at this late date that is in any way new?" So I had to choose a title and a subtitle with the power to convey a preliminary sense of what I had to say. I had to choose some words that would challenge the persistent old stereotype with a dramatic gesture. I had to compose a real *proclamation* of a title that would dish out a frontal assault upon the stale old notions and thereby (hopefully) bring about a radical and necessary shift in public perceptions.

I chose a term that would constitute a dialectical challenge to the notion of "passivity." I called Lincoln "audacious" for very good reason, for I do believe that he acted with audacity to shape the course of history. At times — when he was *playing* for time — the "passivity" that he might seem to display was a *ploy*, a delaying tactic, a maneuver in a grand strategic plan that he kept deeply hidden.

But it needs to be distinctly understood that I am speaking here of Lincoln as he was when he had reached the very summit of his powers. In his early emotional crises, when the man was paralyzed by suicidal grief or in the throes of neurotic self-doubt, his audacity was clearly on the wane, and that is perfectly obvious. It was only through a process of gradual self-discovery and self-strengthening — intersected by the national crises that were convulsing America — that the full magnificence of Lincoln's potentialities got drawn to the surface in a manner that was channeled into *action*. His potentialities were . . . "summoned" — *drawn forth*.

**SG: What did you find in your research that you had not known before?**

**RS:** I learned about a number of things in the course of my research that rounded out my understanding of Lincoln. The most important new insight for me was the profound relationship

between Lincoln's law practice and his brilliance as a presidential strategist. Everything that Lincoln did for a client — and this is of course an essential part of practicing law for any attorney — was grounded in strategy, whether the outcome turned out to be a victory in court or an out-of-court settlement. The accounts of Lincoln's victories — sometimes set forth in newspaper coverage and sometimes in the memoirs of other attorneys — show his sheer virtuosity in out-maneuvering opponents. And the stories show his skill as a performer. Many rivals called him the best trial lawyer in Illinois because of his power to persuade juries. Depending on the nature of the case and the nature of the evidence, Lincoln might use his mastery of logic to convince a jury or else he might weave a kind of spell that was persuasive in ways that made logic irrelevant. He could play upon the jurors' emotions, sometimes through innuendo, sometimes through the charms of gentle humor, sometimes through withering sarcasm, sometimes through righteous indignation. And he was nimble: he would vary his behavior as necessary to lure his opponents into a trap and then catch them by surprise when it was far too late for them to recover.

His career in practicing law turned out to be a proving ground for the skills that he would use later on to defeat his political opponents and by doing so change the trajectory of history on the grand scale. He out-maneuvered them all: the Confederates, the white-supremacist Democrats, the Republican rivals in the cabinet who tried to sabotage him — everyone. Of course there were some very close calls and there were times when he came close to losing, especially in 1864. But he prevailed in the end and his victory was one of the great turning-points in history, not only for America but for the world.

One of the most controversial (and admittedly speculative) themes in my work on Lincoln is my challenge to the conventional vision of the post-war future — Reconstruction — if Lincoln had lived. Almost everything that Lincoln did in the springtime of 1865 reveals — to my satisfaction — that he was building a dynamic partnership with the Radical Republicans that might very well have given America its great civil rights revolution a hundred years earlier.

One can never write a "history" of things that never happened but his-



tory does show the radical contingency of life. Every action and every inaction — every choice that we make — creates a different future, and I call the final chapter of the book “*stolen future*” because the transformational strategy that Lincoln was shaping in the springtime of 1865 is so thrilling to ponder and so mournful to contemplate, thanks to John Wilkes Booth.



John Wilkes Booth OC-0439

I learned a number of things in the course of my research that make me more convinced than ever that Lincoln’s mental gifts — his creativity, his flexibility, his adroitness and boldness as a strategist — would have guided and supported the Radical Republicans as they worked to transform America. I’ll mention one example of a problem Lincoln solved that might well have baffled lesser minds: the constitutional impediments that Republicans faced in the carving of a new state, West Virginia, out of an existing state, Virginia. I haven’t time to go into the details — my book explains them — but Lincoln found a way to solve a thorny problem with breathtaking ease, and as soon as I studied what he did I could see the way his new precedent could have been useful for the Radical Republicans after the war. This was something new that I had not known before.

**SG:** What did you find that made you say: I never thought of it that way?

**RS:** In my previous work on Lincoln, I had focused on the aspects of his life that impressed me the most: his skill as a moral leader who worked in synergistic partnership with the abolitionists — an insider/outsider orchestration that many of the anti-slavery leaders never fully appreciated, though William Lloyd Garrison began to understand it by the end — and also on the vexed question of Lincoln’s racial views, a subject that I took the time to analyze in detail when I wrote my book *Lincoln and Race*. In taking on Lincoln’s life story, I had to give more attention than before to a subject that genuinely interested me: his emotional and intellectual development. Many Lincoln scholars, especially Joshua Wolf Shenk, have already done important work on his emotional life, but I had to think it all through for myself and then arrive at my own conclusions. In the process I thought long and hard about another vexed question of Lincoln controversy: his relationship with Mary Todd Lincoln.

I had paid less attention to the controversies in regard to that subject than I had to the political issues that preoccupied me. But once I began to immerse myself in the surviving evidence — as well as the contemporaneous controversies — I found the issues compelling. And I found that my opinions were shifting as I looked at different sides of the issues, not least of all in response to the comments of people who were reading my manuscript.

Indeed, I continue to find these issues so extremely compelling that I am going to share some rather lengthy reflections on the subject. I put some of this material into the book but I could not include it all. Many of the issues are so highly subjective that to cover them at all would have led to some very long digressions.

There can be no question about the fact that the Lincoln marriage was troubled, but people these days are embroiled in an angry “blame game” about Mary’s personal problems and her personal culpability. It seems plain enough to me that her behavior at its worst could be bad — very bad — but the allegations of gender bias that have flown back and forth in this debate have a measure of validity.

The accounts of Mary scolding Lincoln — scolding him in a very shrill manner — are too numerous to be dismissed.

These encounters were apparently one-sided arguments, since the people who witnessed them said that Lincoln’s behavior was quite inoffensive and mild. We must come to our own conclusions regarding these incidents. And we must also come to our own conclusions regarding Mary Lincoln’s personality.

A number of people who read early drafts of my manuscript cautioned me about being too judgmental in the case of Mary Todd Lincoln. Both Mary and Abraham were troubled by emotional conditions that would justify the use of “mood meds” in our own day and age, and Mary seems to have been struggling with tremendous anxiety that needed an outlet. The more that I considered these views that were offered to me by readers of my manuscript, the more I concluded that they made a great deal of sense. Also, I found significant evidence of affection in the letters that Abraham and Mary exchanged, especially when it came to the shared experience of parenthood.

Still, no one these days (at least as far as I know) is disputing the fact that the Lincolns’ marriage was troubled, for the weight of the evidence is clear. For this reason many students of Lincoln have sought to understand the dynamics of his marriage in relation to his love life in general.

In the past generation, a huge revision of opinion has established beyond any reasonable doubt that the romance between Lincoln and Ann Rutledge was real and that her untimely death plunged him into a near-suicidal depression. The more I pondered his subsequent and ill-advised courtship of Mary Owens, the more I compared it to his on-again/off-again courtship of Mary Todd, and then I came to the conclusion that William Herndon may well have been partially correct when he argued that Lincoln was incapable of loving any other woman with erotic fervor after losing Ann.

I say *partially* correct, because one has to acknowledge here the allegations that Lincoln fell briefly and ardently in love with the beautiful Matilda Edwards in the midst of the Mary Todd courtship, and this led him to feel such a sense of guilt in regard to his dealings with Mary that he plunged again into depression. But if the allegations were true — and it appears that they were — we have no way of



Mary Todd Lincoln LN-1038

knowing how the episode with Matilda ended. Did she fail to reciprocate Lincoln's interest? Was she receptive to courtship? Was she merely being flirtatious? We don't know.

It struck me that Herndon perhaps only scratched the surface of this situation. I think it likely that Lincoln was *afraid* to fall deeply in love again, lest the loss of another woman as wonderful as Ann might drive him straight into suicidal madness from which there might be no recovery. There is no way that I can prove such a thing but it makes a kind of sense as one reads his correspondence with Joshua Speed about the emotional perils of romance.

One other thing about the Lincoln marriage. There are many different kinds of love, and the nuances of relationships can be very complex in regard to the emotional needs that they address. Lincoln's behavior as a husband struck me as being in a number of respects paternal in tone, and if Mary was looking (unconsciously, no doubt) for a father-figure, Lincoln might have been happy to oblige for two reasons: (1) it established the basis for a close emotional bond that might have compensated for the fact that the Lincolns were far from being soul-mates with all of the recurrent tensions that littered their marriage, and (2) it might have served as a different sort of compensation for Lincoln since it gave him a chance to act out the sort of behavior — the behavior of a kind and understanding father — that he had never received from his own father, Thomas Lincoln.

Yes, I often said to myself "I never thought of that" as I considered these issues, especially since I was examining some evidence that I had not had occasion to explore in my previous work and I was also encountering the views of other people whose opinions I respect.

**SG:** Have there been changes in the

**way that historians have looked at Lincoln in the last 70 years?**

**RS:** The way that we look at the past is always shaped by the times in which we live. This is simply the human condition. Most of our mental life is focused on the present as a matter of necessity — no matter how often we think of the past or the future — and our thoughts and emotions simply have to be engaged with the present. It's inevitable that the questions we ask of the past if we think about history will tend to be infused with the preoccupations and presuppositions of the present.

Historians will tend to behave in this way as much as anybody else, and so the schools of thought in the field of Lincoln scholarship have reflected the passions and hopes and fears and controversies of contemporaneity.

The contemporaneous issues that have shaped the way in which historians view Lincoln have changed with the flow of events and with the ever-changing dynamics of the controversies that preoccupy Americans. The most important of these have been the issues of war and peace, the issues of race relations, and the issues of social justice.

Historians' views of Lincoln have been affected by World Wars I and II, by the great civil rights revolution of the 20th century, by the protests against the Vietnam War, by the landmark events and the ever-changing trends in Amer-

ican race relations since the 1960s — landmarks and trends like the Obama and Trump presidencies, the latter in many ways a backlash against the former. I have written some essays myself that compare the Republican Party of Lincoln and the very same party today — if it really is the very same party, and of course it is no such thing.

World War II and the great civil rights revolution were perhaps the most important "game changers," as we say in contemporary slang, in shaping the way that historians view Lincoln. In the 1920s and 1930s, a powerful school of thought among academic historians was "Civil War Revisionism," so-called. The revision in question was a challenge to the dominant school of thought around the turn of the twentieth century, a school of thought that celebrated America's achievement in surviving Civil War and emerging re-unified and stronger. Hence the tributes to Lincoln as the Savior of the Union, tributes that were physically immortalized in the Lincoln Memorial.

The Civil War Revisionists challenged this view because they, like a multitude of people in America and Europe, were appalled by what seemed to them the meaningless slaughter of World War I, and this wave of opinion and feeling was reflected in both the isolationism that ruled American foreign policy and the appeasement of Hitler by the western democracies in general. Nothing could be worse, many people believed,



Martin Luther King Jr. gives his "I have a Dream" speech, National Park Service

than another world war, and so war simply had to be averted at all costs.

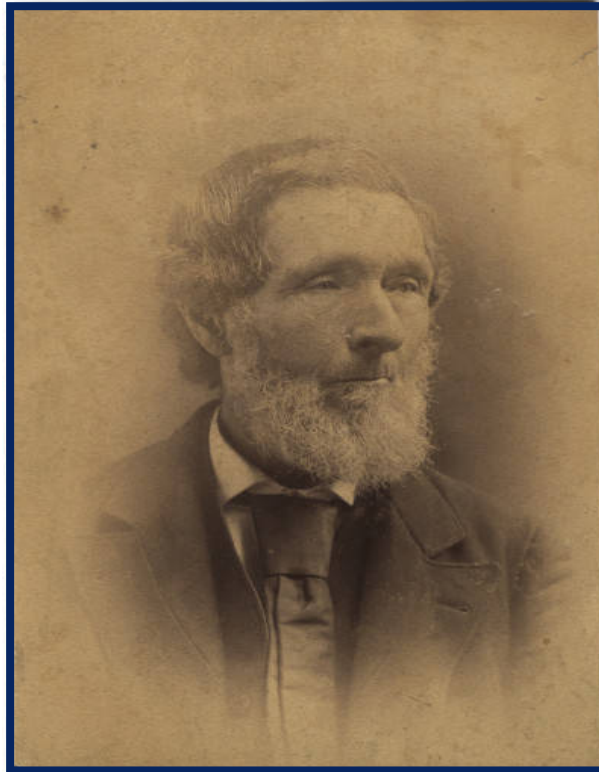
The Civil War Revisionists participated in this climate of opinion, and the backward prism through which they viewed the Civil War was the prism of World War I. Hence the thesis that the Civil War was “unnecessary,” that the slaughter could and should have been avoided through additional compromises of the sort that Henry Clay had orchestrated, that the Civil War should be viewed as the one great failure of American political institutions, and that a “blundering generation” of American political leaders was to blame for all the needless death. The effect of this overall view was to diminish the reputation of Lincoln and exalt the reputation of his foe Stephen Douglas. But as the events that led to World War II were shaping up, the American opponents of Nazism and Fascism looked to Lincoln as the great exemplar of leadership that defends human *freedom* in the face of tyranny.

One example is the work of Harry V. Jaffa, an academician who was not, strictly speaking, a historian but rather a scholar of political philosophy. In 1958, upon the centennial of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, he took on the Civil War Revisionists in scathing terms, and his views — which were largely in tune with the emergent school of “Post-Revisionism” among Civil War historians — were no doubt influenced greatly by America’s achievement in the great coalition that defeated the Axis, as well as by the grassroots protest movement led by people like Martin Luther King, Jr., the movement which, upon the Civil War’s centennial in the 1960s, challenged Americans to revisit the unresolved issues of Lincoln’s America. It was no accident that the dramatic Civil Rights march of 1963 would converge upon the Lincoln Memorial, where King gave his “I Have a Dream” speech.

But the politics of the 1960s changed with Kennedy’s assassination, with the escalation of the Vietnam War, and with the “Black Power” movement that was starting to emerge well before the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. The anti-war movement and the new generation of militant African American leaders — who were starting to challenge the ethos of King well

before his assassination — began to affect the reputation of Lincoln among academic historians, especially among the radical “New Left” historians who became the great opinion leaders in the field by the time of the Nixon era.

For the past forty years or so, historians have been arguing about how much credit Lincoln ought to be given for America’s progress toward racial equality. Historians have disagreed about the question of whether Lincoln was guilty of harboring white supremacist views, whether he was in essence nothing more than a moderate Unionist after all, and whether he should really be given much credit for being the “Great Emancipator.” These questions were raised very prominently in the hugely influential documentary film series on the



William Herndon LN-0718

Civil War by Ken Burns. Lincoln’s reputation was in many ways diminished by the narrative script and by some of the interviews included in that film series.

**SG: Please comment on the value to historians of information provided by William Herndon.**

**RS:** The oral history project that Herndon commenced after Lincoln’s death presents a gold mine for scholars provided that the interviews are sifted

with intelligence. Douglas Wilson and Rodney David performed a great service for scholars when they arranged, edited, and published Herndon’s interview notes in their book *Herndon’s Informants*. They performed another service when they commented shrewdly in the book’s introduction on the controversies that used to surround the credibility of Herndon’s information. By the mid-twentieth century, Lincoln scholars had succumbed to a foolish and pseudo-scientific perfectionism when it came to the use of such evidence; they stressed over and over again how hard it is to trust the human memory and how suspicious almost any reminiscence can be. The result was to cast aside a great deal of useful and interesting material.

Their bias against oral history may be usefully compared to the crude and bossy tenets of “Logical Positivism,” the contemporaneous movement in philosophy demanding that every single statement must demonstrate a single, perfect, and precise denotation, or else be discarded as “meaningless.” Such perfectionism is blind to all the meaning that can only be conveyed through the subtlety of nuance. Herndon was aware of all the perils that the oral history method entailed, and he sought to attain as much cross-corroboration as possible. He said again and again that he was trying to get at the facts. The key to making good use of his interviews is to look for the patterns of cross-corroboration that Herndon himself sought to find. If one reminiscence after another makes substantially the same allegation, it is safe to conclude that the reminiscences are *useful*. But there is no escape from the task of applying our own powers of critical analysis in sizing up the evidence. We have to trust our own judgment, arrive at our conclusions, and admit that in cases where the evidence base is ambiguous we may be mistaken. If we hesitate to do that, there is no way that pseudo-science can help us.

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