Lincoln Lore

April, 1978 | Bulletin of the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum. Mark E. Neely, Jr., Editor. Published each month by the Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801. | Number 1682

PUTTING LINCOLN BACK TOGETHER AGAIN

In the first generation of scholarship on Lincoln, his life fell apart in his biographers' hands, and a century of diligent effort failed to put it back together again. The early writers, men like Ward Hill Lamon and William Henry Herndon who had known Lincoln personally, were puzzled by the career of an obscure prairie politician who suddenly became America's greatest President. His life seemed to fall into two parts, an early and rather uninspiring period of local partisan warfare followed by a late and most inspiring period of statesmanship. The only way to tie the two together was to say that Lincoln grew. Generally, they found a Lincoln diamond emerging late in life from a frontier dunghill. Only the vague idea of growth stood between Lincoln students and a hopelessly fractured subject.

Later scholarship tended to accelerate the trend toward stressing Lincoln's capacity for growth as the key to his career. This is especially true of the last decade, when liberal historians felt it necessary to explain away Lincoln's views on race as expressed early in his life by pointing at his amazing capacity for growth in office. Stress on growth became, ironically, a rigid orthodoxy among writers interpreting the life of the Sixteenth President.

G. S. Boritt's *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream,* published this month by Memphis State University

From the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 1. President Lincoln appears oblivious to the economic workings of his administration, as the government grinds out greenbacks for greedy war contractors. The cartoonist could not have misinterpreted his subject more. G.S. Boritt's *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream* shows that Lincoln took a keen interest in economic questions all his life.

Press, puts Lincoln back together again more successfully than any previous effort. By any criterion of judgment, it is a superb book, as full of insights for the reader already steeped in Lincoln literature as for the reader who chooses it as his first serious book on the Sixteenth President. If it does not win the Pulitzer Prize for biography, then the selection committee will have a great deal of explaining to do. Through patient scholarship and wise avoidance of voguish or trendy interpretations, Professor Boritt's work grew from a careful monograph (a dissertation written at Boston University a decade ago) into a well-considered but broad interpretation of Lincoln's life and mind. It is a book which can be ignored by no one seeking any kind of firm knowledge of Abraham Lincoln.

Boritt solves the problem that has plagued Lincoln scholars for a century simply by saying that Lincoln did not grow. Oh, to be sure, he learned a lot as he went along, but the diamond was there from earliest maturity, and it required little burnishing to give it character and brilliance. Why did biographers fail to recognize the quality of the Lincoln diamond as revealed in his early career? Because, says Boritt, Lincoln's brilliance shone early mainly in the realm of political economy, and that is not the arena in which heroes are made. Throughout his mature life, Lincoln had essentially an economic vision. And the word vision (or dream, to use Boritt's phrase) is appropriate in every respect. It was truly a dream or myth, sufficiently rooted in American realities to make it practical but also sufficiently prophetic to inspire the effort that made much of it come true. Much moreso than anyone has ever realized before, the dream contradicted Thomas Jefferson's dream, the other heroic vision which has affected Americans with everything from distrust of cities to a love of large backyards as symbols of a yeoman's independence.

As brilliantly independent as Boritt's work is, I feel quite certain that it would have been impossible had Marvin Meyers not written *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1957). Meyers corrected a grave error in our interpretations of the Age of Jackson, which was also the formative age of Abraham Lincoln. Before his book, American historians saw in the Democratic party of Andrew Jackson the wave of the future, the harbinger of modern American society with its progressive economic ideas and its interest in the common man. Meyers saw in Jackson's party a very different undercurrent of longing for an older, Jeffersonian, pastoral America. The true harbingers of "progress," if by that term is meant the urban, industrial society of finance capitalism and social mobility, were the Whigs.

Boritt argues convincingly that Lincoln's was a Whig mind (in Meyer's sense). Indeed, it is his contention that Lincoln was always a Whig. After the demise of that unfortunate party, Lincoln became a Whig in Republican clothing — not in the sense that he proscribed Democrats who joined the Republican party, but in the sense that he always thought as a Whig would think.

Boritt would be the last to say that Lincoln was a slavish adherent of the Whig party line. In fact, it considerably pains him to find so many writers (among them, I fear, this reviewer on occasion) who have interpreted Lincoln's Whig years as years of narrow or unthinking party allegiance. To interpret Lincoln in such a way is to fall back into the old dichotomy that has always fragmented the life of Abraham Lincoln; it forces repetition of the tired and weak idea that a politician of limited vision was reborn in the slavery controversy as an idealistic leader and statesman. Boritt argues that Lincoln's mind was a Whig mind, but it was also a principled mind. He did not embrace the platform of Henry Clay because it was the route to political advancement; he embraced it because it was what underdeveloped Illinois needed. No common man had a chance to rise in life if the economic system was so primitive that there was no opportunity to make a better living. Canals, turnpikes, and railroads were valued as avenues to social rather than geographical mobility.

Although Lincoln's mind tended more often than not to arrive at a vision of Illinois's economic needs that was congruent with Whig party doctrines, this was not always so. As early as 1835, Lincoln broke with his Whig mentor John Todd Stuart over the issue of supporting a state bank when the Bank of the United States was impossible to salvage. If many were to rise in Illinois, Lincoln knew, banks of some kind were a necessity. Lincoln, Boritt shrewdly points out, almost never agreed with "*any* of the noneconomic principles of his party." He knew the value of political organization (which most Whigs did not), and he never shared the Whigs' disdain for Catholic and foreign-born Americans. He stood only for that part of the Whig platform that he believed in; Lincoln's was an independent and principled mind.

Lincoln's principled actions stood out among his peers. For example, the Panic of 1837 made Illinois's grandiose internal improvements system economically unfeasible and, later, politically unpopular. Bipartisan enthusiasm had erected the system, and it was abandoned in bipartisan terror. Democrat Stephen Douglas, an early supporter, and Lincoln's Whig allies John J. Hardin and Edward D. Baker criticized the system when it was doomed. Lincoln persisted in its defense to the bitter end and may have paid for it with a reduced reputation within his own party. If anything, Lincoln was too idealistic rather than too political in his early career.

Thus we see one element which allows Boritt to tie this fragmented life together: he is willing to look at the Whig years on their own terms and not with a sneering disdain. Surely it is not hard to believe that the rise of the common man would have been facilitated more by canals, railroads, banks, and industry than by the hardscrabble rural economic conditions Lincoln had seen in his formative years in Indiana. There was statesmanship in the Whig program.

The second element in making Lincoln whole again is Boritt's realization that Lincoln clung to the vision all his political life. The Republican party, of course, was, as David Davis termed it, a "confederated" party, a loose and uneasy amalgam of former Whigs and former Democrats. It exacted from its former-Whig standard-bearer, Lincoln, a practical suppression of those economic issues so symbolic of Whiggery and so galling to former Democrats. Yet Lincoln did not

From the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 2. William Henry Harrison strikes a Napoleonic pose in this woodcut from a campaign biography published by Jesper Harding in Philadelphia in 1840. The Whigs at last had found a general to match Jackson.

From the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 3. In America, Napoleonic generals would not do; therefore, Harrison became a Cincinnatus, returning to the plow as soon as the battle was over. His attire seems a bit formal for field work.

abandon his principles for his new party. As it turned out, he could have his cake and eat it too, for the Republican Congress during his Presidency, no longer stalled by a hostile Executive, enacted many of the old Whig programs without Lincoln's having to lift a finger. Wars always require a nationalizing economic program.

The circumstances of Lincoln's change from Whig to Republican allegiance, of course, are not exhausted by explaining the convenient coincidences of Lincoln's private views, national necessity, and a shift in party power in Washington, D.C. A continuing thread of principle stitched that great life together. In the 1850s, Lincoln, who tended to be a one-issue man all his life, perceived slavery's expansion as the greatest threat to the American dream of social mobility, and he moved to meet it. Note that this was not simply a matter of seeing the Slave Power's Congressmen as threats to tariff legislation. It was a far profounder fear that the political assumptions necessary to justify a thriving slave system necessarily degraded the common man's "right to rise," the heart of Lincoln's dream. Besides, the specific Whig policies — the Bank, the tariff, internal improvements — which Lincoln thought necessary to create economic opportunity were politically dead, long since abandoned by Whigs less principled than Lincoln. It was a time for fighting battles over the most fundamental assumptions.

This hasty and impressionistic summary of the central theme of *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream* fails to suggest the intricate web of meticulous scholarship which proves the point. The only way to render that in the short space available is to offer a sampling of some of the detailed insights that mark every chapter of the book.

Lincoln's nationalism, for example, has been repeatedly praised and endlessly invoked as an explanation of his policies, but it has been little analyzed, especially in his early career. Boritt makes a giant step forward when he notes carefully the role of the history of the internal improvements system in Illinois in structuring Lincoln's nationalism. Localism doomed the system from the start by exacting from its promoters some direct and tangible benefit, a railroad terminus or a cash subsidy, for every locality. The result was an overexpanded scheme which had to be built everywhere at once. When it failed in the 1840s, the failure "helped make Lincoln a lifelong opponent of the localism and sectionalism that had proved so destructive in Illinois." He would see secession in the light of this experience, telling Congress when it convened on July 4, 1861: "This relative matter of National power, and state rights, as a principle, is no other than the principle of *generality*, and *locality*." Over-generous sops to local Southern interests could make the national edifice topple.

Other examples abound. In the realm of constitutional thought, for example, some Whigs, despite the fact that their party took its name from the great English party that championed constitutional limits to monarchical tyranny, took a notoriously cavalier attitude toward constitutions. This was one aspect of noneconomic Whiggery which Lincoln shared with the giants of his party. He loathed constitutional wrangles and justified the Bank of the United States as something "necessary and proper" under the vaguely elastic general welfare clause. Here he parted ways from that temporary Whig but permanent constitutionalist, John C. Calhoun, "who based his support for the Bank on its monetary function and on the constitutional right of Congress to regulate the currency." Later, there was reason aplenty, despite Lincoln's carefully soothing assertions of having no designs on slavery where it already existed, for Southerners to be scared to death by Lincoln. If the general welfare clause could justify a bank, it might justify an attack on slavery. "We think slavery impairs, and endangers the general welfare," said Republican Lincoln, and he was still Whiggish enough in his thinking to make that statement ominous.

Lincoln clung to a principled Whiggery far longer than most Whigs. By 1840, the Whigs had caught on to the great Democratic strategy for winning elections: ideas do not win; popular generals suffice very nicely. The party rushed to embrace William Henry Harrison, "General Mum," who stood for nothing. Most Whigs stood staunchly beside him on the same platform. Whig Lincoln "decided to stake a full year's

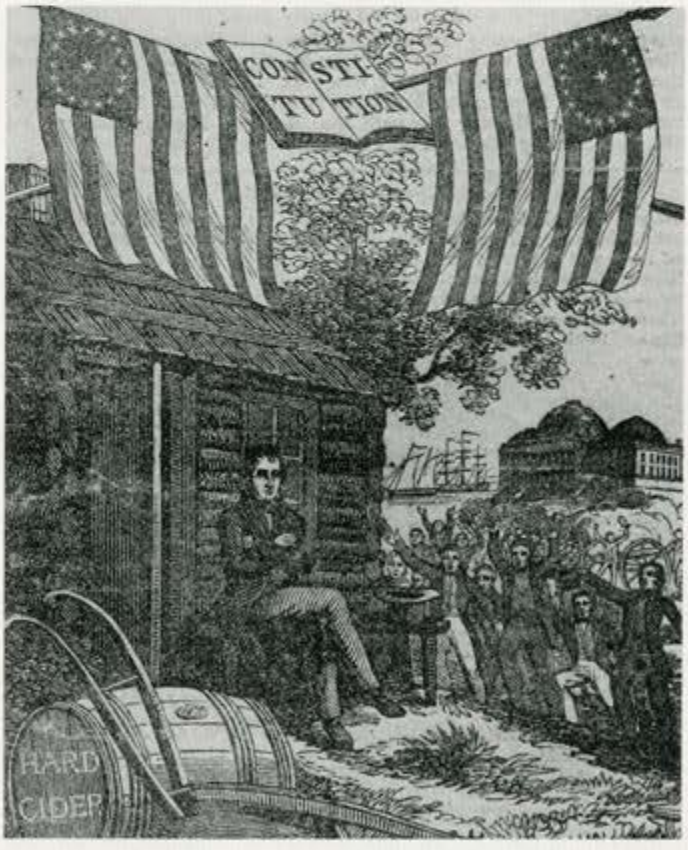

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FIGURE 4. In this campaign woodcut the people clamor for a reticent Harrison, willing to sit simply by his log cabin with his cider barrel. The wealthy Harrison lived in a mansion.

campaigning on the question of national banking." He was deeply committed to a partisan issue, banking, but it was for the sake of the issue and not partisanship; the other Whigs were not saying a mumbling word about banking in 1840. Moreover, the corny nostalgia of the Harrison Log Cabin campaign left this refugee from a real log cabin cold; he had not fought "with trees and logs and grubs" until he was an adult in order to return to a log cabin.

On Lincoln's famous relationship with Henry Clay, we learn again that Lincoln liked the Kentucky Senator for his principles. From Henry Clay, Lincoln learned not only the American System but also a particularly non-silk-stocking version of Whiggery. Lincoln remained a friend of labor throughout his life. More rarely than most Republicans did Lincoln tend to gloss over class differences in the North by juxtaposing an ideal, monolithic "free labor system" against slavery in the South. Lincoln was somewhat different from Clay (and other old Whigs as well) in the candor of his appeal to, let us be blunt, avarice. The old Whigs had said that tariffs and internal improvements were means to the end of military might and real national independence. Lincoln said they were necessary to allow the common man to improve his station in life. He did not share Clay's orientation to the East and had trouble with Whig land policies. And when Clay began to relax his grip on Whig principles for the sake of his Presidential ambitions in the 1840s, Lincoln appears to have drifted away from Clay.

When Lincoln abandoned Clay for Zachary Taylor in 1848, he gave a speech against Taylor's opponent, Lewis Cass, which was hilarious, but it was also, in all honesty, a low piece of stump speaking. Boritt's interpretation of the place of this speech in Lincoln's works is astute: " . . . what is most noteworthy about this, in so many ways uncharacteristic speech (the weakest in substance up to this point in the surviving Lincoln corpus), [is] that many later scholars took it as a display of the quintessential Lincoln before the slavery controversy." As he points out, it is one of the best-known of the early speeches because it contributes to the myth of Lincoln's having been a narrow partisan politician before the slavery controversy.

Lincoln's propensity for thinking in terms of progressive economics lay behind his rejection of the idea that there was a natural geographical limit to slave expansion. He had always believed that man could make the desert bloom, just as America had already proven to England that her seeming economic desert could bloom with industry and a thriving economy.

Lincoln's Whig mind had startling effects on his Presidential policies. He tended to think that avarice could help bring the Union back together. He therefore held out the possibility of assuming the Confederate debt and of compensating slave owners for emancipation long after other Republicans had abandoned such ideas. In fact, Lincoln's famed "plan of reconstruction," to the degree that he had one, was frankly and boldly economic. This penchant for economic schemes led Lincoln to a high tolerance for trading in Southern cotton during the war. The President felt almost to the end that gains in such trade undermined the political loyalties of cotton-rich Confederates.

Boritt accumulates a remarkable amount of evidence that indicates that Lincoln had an economic rather than a political understanding of democracy. "As I would not be a *slave*, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy," said Lincoln. For any political understanding of the idea, such a definition was absurd. The United States was the most democratic country on earth and one of the last bastions of slavery; Western Europe had no slavery and, for the most part, no democracy either.

As with all interpretations which bring unity where previously there was fragmentation and disarray, there are some aspects of the argument which strain credulity. For example, it comes as something of a shock to find the principled Lincoln going for Taylor in '48. In part, this is a failing of the author to supply a decent context of party history, so that the reader realizes the desperation with which Whigs longed for victory after so many lean years at the polls. In part, though, it is a function of having overdrawn the principled nature of Lincoln's previous career. This becomes a more serious problem when Boritt argues that Lincoln learned from this campaign and adopted as his own the Whig idea that the President should be weak. Much of what Boritt says about Lincoln the President hinges on Lincoln's holding the Whig view of the Executive's role, and it is not plausible to think that Lincoln picked this idea up in a no-issue campaign in which Whigs baldly claimed that Taylor's lack of platform was a function of his view that the President simply carried out the will of Congress, be that what it may. In other words, we are presented a principled man picking up a noneconomic principle from a party from which he usually takes only economic principles at a time when the party had, in a naked lust for office, chucked its principles and cloaked its abandonment of platform behind the principle adopted.

Perhaps it is only the startling newness of Boritt's interpretation, but I cannot help cringing at the flat statement that Lincoln "saw economic rights as more fundamental than political ones." Boritt uses this interpretation to explain President Lincoln's willingness "to make temporary sacrifices of certain *political* liberties — the right of *habeas corpus* for example." To ignore *all* the political content of Lincoln's political thought cannot but do violence to a proper understanding of the war years. It was no economic understanding of democracy which led Lincoln to hold the election of 1864, as scheduled, *and* to say: " . . . if the rebellion could force us to forego, or postpone a national election, it might fairly claim to have already conquered and ruined us." Here, as in several other places in the section on the Presidency, Professor Boritt goes overboard in his enthusiasm for this fresh interpretation.

But who can blame him? Weighed in the balance against his great accomplishment in this book, the faults are very slight indeed. In part, of course, this is due to a good mind at work. In part, it is a function of patience and diligence. Boritt has looked at things in collections ranging from the Massachusetts Historical Society to the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, California. He has read manuscripts, newspapers, and secondary sources both seminal and obscure. And he has distilled it all into an elegantly written and tightly organized book — the best written on Lincoln in many, many years.

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FIGURE 5. In Zachary Taylor the Whigs found another popular general who made a platform of having no platform. He would not impose his will on the nation; he would simply carry out the will of Congress.