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DON E. FEHRENBACHER IN TEXT AND CONTEXT

You will have trouble finding the best Lincoln book of 1987 in your book store. Several new books having to do with the Lincoln theme in American history are readily available, some of them the beneficiaries of ballyhoo in newspapers and popular magazines. These can be found even in airport bookstores and popular book chainstores. But you will probably have to order the best book from your bookseller or purchase it from a shop that makes a specialty of stocking books on Abraham Lincoln.

It won't be inexpensive, either. It will cost you $37.50

But if you can afford it, you should go to the trouble of ordering a copy of Don E. Fehrenbacher's *Lincoln in Text and Context: Collected Essays*, published by Stanford University Press. It brings together nineteen articles written over the last thirty-five years by this masterful historian. Although eighteen of the essays were previously published elsewhere, many appeared only in pamphlet form, in other volumes of essays edited by other historians, or in scholarly journals. Even specialists are all but certain to find essays here never encountered before.

Readers will also find some "classics." It is nice to have readily at hand two of the most famous essays Fehrenbacher has written: "Only His Stepchildren" and "The Changing Image of Lincoln in American Historiography." The former is one of the best articles available on the subject of Lincoln and race. The latter is one of the three best discussions of the Lincoln literature written since World War II (the other two are David M. Potter's "The Lincoln Theme in American National Historiography" and Gabor S. Boritt's historiographical appendix in his book *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream*). The other subjects in Fehrenbacher's book are: "The War with Mexico: Antecedent of Disunion," "The Galena Speech: A Problem in Historical Method," "Political Uses of the Post Office," "Lincoln and the Mayor of Chicago," "The Republican Decision at Chicago," "The Election of Lincoln as a Crucial Event," "The New Political History and the Coming of the Civil War," "Lincoln and the Constitution," "The Paradoxes of Freedom," "From War to Reconstruction in Arkansas," "The Weight of Responsibility," "The Death of Lincoln," "The Anti-Lincoln Tradition," "The Deep Reading of Lincoln," "The Fictional Lincoln," "The Minor Affair: An Adventure in Forgery and Detection," and "The Words of

Lincoln."

The close focus implied in the titles of some of the essays may seem a little off-putting at first, but rest assured that Fehrenbacher often finds the broadest significance in the narrowest examples. Consider, for example, "The Words of Lincoln." There Fehrenbacher takes one of Lincoln's best known speeches, the House Divided speech of 1858, and shows that one paragraph has often been placed out of order in editions of Lincoln's works — including one edited by Fehrenbacher himself, as he sheepishly but honestly admits. Yet two other editions of Lincoln's works get it right. The problem lay in the source of the text copied in the books. The version of the speech printed in the *Illinois State Journal* and probably proofread by Lincoln himself contained the transposed paragraph; a reporter's stenographic copy reprinted in the Chicago *Tribune* contained the proper paragraph order. Thus the text with the superior provenance produced the inferior rendering of the speech. And to cap the irony, Roy P. Basler, the head of the team that edited the standard version of *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, came up with the most faithful text possible by combining the two versions in an early edition of Lincoln's selected papers and then calmly oversaw the customary transposition of the paragraph in the later standard edition of Lincoln's collected works.

Nothing having to do with the text of the House Divided speech can exactly be termed "minor," but this business of proper placement of one paragraph in the vast Lincoln corpus may seem as though Fehrenbacher is a fussy stickler for detail. Yet the lesson to be learned from this example of error perpetuated over decades of thoughtless copying and inattentive reading is downright chilling: just how good are even the basics in the Lincoln field, despite more than a century of intensive and even repetitive scrutiny?

Fehrenbacher's own work, despite his admitted slip up on the proper text of the House Divided speech, has always been marked by close and careful attention to the documents and to their historical context — especially when the issue is important. Careful work with the usually accepted — but clearly corrupt — text of a speech Lincoln gave in Galena in 1856, for example, clarifies Lincoln's views on judicial review, views that are still quoted in constitutional controversies to this day. On the other hand, Fehrenbacher warns against reading Lincoln too deeply when he deals — fairly, on the whole — with the psychohistorians' use of evidence. Professor Fehrenbacher's careful eye for detail makes all of us regret something we have written about Lincoln.

And many of us likewise wish we had said what he said first. A wonderful example is the term he coined to describe his own style of historical writing: "thick narrative," he calls it. He insists that there is a necessity for narrative as well as analysis in history — "not story-telling narrative but 'thick' narrative, which examines the complex tissues of change as it proceeds along a chronological course." Or, as he puts it in another place in the book, "'thick' narrative history[is] . . . a chronological account that pauses repeatedly to query and reflect and perhaps explain." He wishes to avoid history that is all structure and no event. "One must pay close attention to the sequence, interaction, and reverberation of events, as well as the play of contingency and individual personality."

Fehrenbacher seems to have written such narrative history before he knew how to describe it. His attempt to articulate a description of his approach has been prompted by the challenge of the "new political history."

Some of the most provocative insights in the book appear in "The New Political History and the Coming of the Civil War," Professor Fehrenbacher's presidential address to the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association in 1984. Reprinted here, this article provides probably the best critical evaluation in print of the ideas of this new school of historical writing as they have affected study of the Civil War era. Much in evidence here is a quality of Professor Fehrenbacher's well known to other historians in the field: his unflinching critical capacity. Although a generous scholar who is sincere in his belief that "The past is not an exclusive preserve of historians," he brooks no foolishness in the discipline and has little sympathy for errors on the part of professionals. When he points mistakes out, the effect is usually devastating.

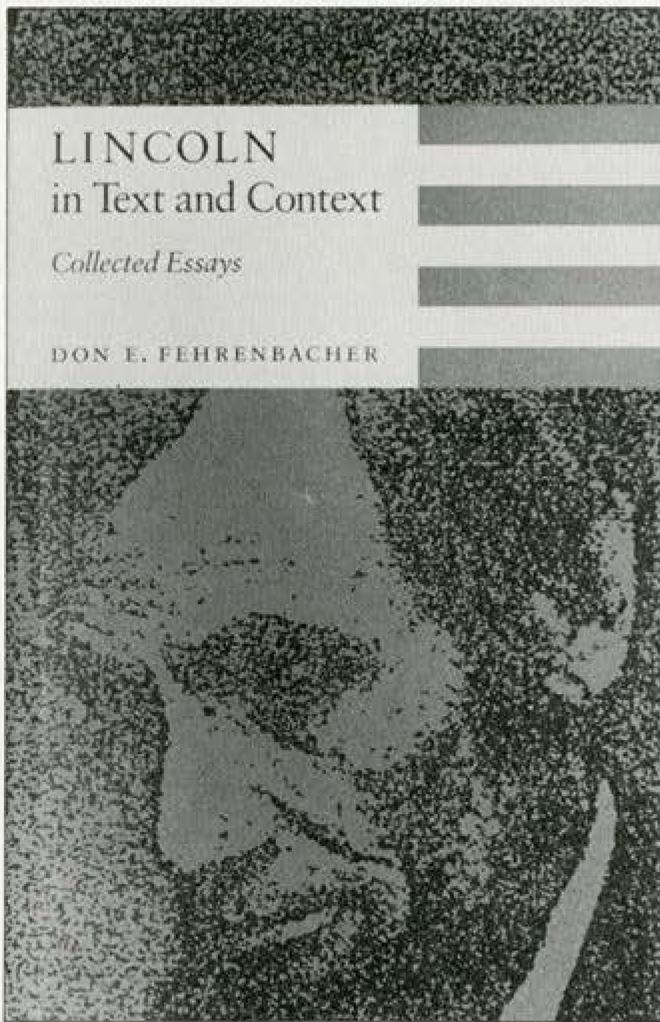
The principal finding of the new political history is often called "the ethnocultural thesis," an assertion that religious preference is the best predictor of party preference in nineteenth-century elections. Such a finding was profoundly disturbing to historians studying the causes of the Civil War. Scholars had previously tended to assume that the determinant of party preference was antislavery sentiment, economic self-interest, sectional prejudice, or some similar force. It was not easy to see how ethnicity was related to Civil War issues, and the new political historians naturally began to argue from their ethnocultural thesis that the issues emphasized in traditional accounts of the coming of the Civil War, particularly slavery, could scarcely have been as important to mid-nineteenth-century Americans as had previously been thought.

Among the most prominent historians associated with this ethnocultural thesis is Joel Silbey, of Cornell University. In his 1967 book entitled *Shrine of Party*, Professor Silbey emphasized the persistence of party loyalty in the period 1841-1852, whereas previous historians writing about this period had emphasized the rise of sectional issues involved in the Compromise of 1850 that were disruptive of party loyalties. Examined under the withering scrutiny of Fehrenbacher's critical gaze, the techniques and results of Silbey's book seem clearly inadequate. Fehrenbacher begins his detailed critique with a discussion of "Guttman scaling,"

> a technique for measuring intensity of attitudes, positive and negative, on a particular issue or cluster of related issues. Although devised for another purpose, the technique has proved usable and useful in roll-call studies, but it is not automatically scientific. The procedure involves certain qualitative and arbitrary decisions which, if misguided, can lead to bizarre results. For example, Silbey's scalograms on the "compromise issue" in 1850 are simply out of touch with reality. They indicate, among other things, that there were "pro-compromise" majorities in both houses and that only 31 percent of the members of Congress were "anti-compromise"; that Southerners were far more "pro-compromise" than Northerners (86 percent to 44 percent in the House); that only one out of eighteen Southern Democratic senators was "anti-compromise"; that John Wales of Delaware, one of only four men to vote for passage of all six compromise measures in the Senate, was nevertheless "anti-compromise"; and that of the twenty senators from the future Confederate states appearing on the scalogram, every single one was more "pro-compromise" than Stephen A. Douglas. Nineteen of those twenty, incidentally, appear on a scalogram of "sectionalism" for the same session of Congress and score an average of 17.2 on a scale of 18, with the 18 representing the pro-Southern extreme; yet all nineteen turn up as "pro-compromise" on the "compromise" scalogram. They include such men as Andrew P. Butler, Jefferson Davis, Robert M. T. Hunter, James M. Mason, and Pierre Soule, all of whom were actually enemies of the Compromise from beginning to end.

It is crucial to deal with these arguments in detail, as Professor Fehrenbacher has done here. To dismiss the prodigious labors of quantified voting analysis by saying simply that the ethnocultural thesis cannot explain the coming of the Civil War constitutes little more than a "cheap shot." It is not fair to dismiss their conclusions with some sweeping generalization and ignore their evidence and methods. Their work must be evaluated as any other historical work is. Nor can their labors be dismissed by the "body count" method, that is, by saying that narrative history attracts readers and analytical history does not. Such has never been a true measure of scholarship, and it never will be. Such considerations make Fehrenbacher's "thick narrative" most appealing.

Fehrenbacher characterizes as "the observational or analytic version of the ethnocultural interpretation" the argument that the old party system was broken up in the 1850s less by the struggle over sectional issues provoked by the Kansas-Nebraska Act than by "ethnic and religious conflicts at the local level over such issues as prohibition, sabbatari-



anism, and Know-Nothingism." This view was rooted in the assertion that Americans divided along party lines according to their religious styles, with "fervently puritan" pietists (Whigs and Republicans) seeking to control the moral lives of the "coolly ritualistic" anti-pietists who adhered faithfully to the Democratic party. On this view of American history, which has an astonishing number of adherents, Fehrenbacher unleashes a devastating attack:

> The reductive version of the ethnocultural thesis, aligning aggressive, culturally imperialistic pietists against defensive, pluralistic ritualists, had the advantage of boldness and clarity, but not of sufficient credibility. A stereotype characterization of Republicanism that would surely have pleased Jefferson Davis was its principal contribution to the literature of the sectional conflict.
>
> Of course the Republican party was actually a congeries of unusually heterogeneous elements. If one attempts to apply the ethnocultural stereotype even to the members of Lincoln's cabinet, the results are hilarious. William H. Seward, despite his Whig background, was a member of the liturgical Episcopalian church and behaviorally an anti-pietist. Salmon P. Chase would seem to have been the ideal pietist in the cabinet, but his religiosity was largely derived from his uncle and guardian, an Episcopal bishop. Montgomery Blair, probably the most puritanical cabinet member in his personal conduct, was a Presbyterian all right, but also a former Jacksonian Democrat who returned to the Democratic fold after the war. Gideon Welles regarded himself, perhaps not with entire accuracy, as a Jeffersonian freethinker. And no one is likely to classify Simon Cameron as a pietist. Are we nevertheless to believe, simply on the basis of correlations between voting and church membership, that the nearly two million men who voted for Lincoln in 1860 fitted the stereotype far better than this handful of advisers?

This ludicrous example only serves to sharpen the impact of Fehrenbacher's discerning revelation of the historical inconsistency of the ethnocultural thesis in its two guises: ". . . while the observational version of the ethnocultural interpretation minimized the emotional and moral appeal of the slavery issue among Republican and Democrats alike, the reductive version portrayed the new republican party as a body of fervid, self-righteous crusaders for a better world, including a world without slavery." And neither view would help much to explain the men who made up Abraham Lincoln's cabinet.

The image of the Republicans suggested by the ethnocultural thesis (in its reductionist version) does not necessarily fit even the Southern caricature of that despised Northern sectional party. As Fehrenbacher shrewdly points out, "... when Confederate propagandists vilified Lincoln, they portrayed him, not as a puritan fanatic, but rather as a blasphemous, lecherous, pornographic drunkard."

Professor Fehrenbacher is not overly kind in dealing with the new political history here, but readers should remember that he seldom wastes his ammunition in demolishing an unworthy foe. Perhaps this is the tacit manner in which he acknowledges the worth of the new political history: by working so hard to answer it.

Lincoln in Text and Context is a useful, informative, and engaging book even for persons whose interest in Lincoln does not reach to the esoteric questions discussed in "The New Political History." The nineteen essays in this book provide among other things, brief summaries of the content or significance of dozens and dozens of Lincoln books. I cannot believe that any Lincoln student is so well read that he could not find some title discussed in here in such a way as to surprise him and to cause him to read some Lincoln book he had never heard of before or had previously underestimated. "The Fictional Lincoln," the only essay printed for the first time in the book, provides especially abundant examples of this. Professor Fehrenbacher's rediscovery of Honore Willsie Morrow as an able forerunner of the best in modern fictional writing on Lincoln was especially valuable for me.

He is tolerant of the work of psychohistorians, though on balance they may well deserve less patience than the new political history and have made a far less significant impact on the history of the Civil War era. "The Deep Reading of Lincoln" gives the psychohistorians their day in court, nevertheless, and though Fehrenbacher cross-examines the authors in his usual tough manner, he does not seem to demand as stiff a penalty for their failings as he demands for the quantifiers. As in the case of Lincoln fiction, he offers useful summaries of several works and finds more matter of interest in some of these works than most of us previously realized was present in them.

In "The Anti-Lincoln Tradition" Fehrenbacher offers readers the same service: analyses of old literature so intriguingly written as to constitute a virtual rediscovery of these largely discredited works. Yet somehow he seems not to achieve quite the overall grasp of this body of literature that he does with other great classes of Lincoln literature. He never really explains the depth of this minority opinion and he considerably underestimates the work of Ludwell Johnson, who is by far the best of the avowedly anti-Lincoln writers and whose works really must be contended with by Lincoln's defenders. He gives Johnson short shift in a rare instance of bibilographical skimpiness, simply not citing or dealing with some of Johnson's more troublesome works.

This is one place where Fehrenbacher, a modest man who keeps to a minimum any autobiographical copy in this book, reveals some of his own underlying assumptions or attitudes as an historian. He does not often criticize Lincoln. His background rather powerfully disposed him to think the best of Lincoln and to cross-examine Lincoln's critics closely. In the brief "Preface" Fehrenbacher says:

> The first house that I can remember fronted on the Lincoln Highway, which ran through the middle of my home town. A few blocks away were Lincoln Park and Lincoln School, and the best hotel in town was called the Lincoln Tavern.

On one schoolyard corner was a big boulder with a tablet commemorating the speech delivered there by Abraham Lincoln during the political campaign of 1856. In the 1920's the time elapsed since the Civil War was less than a full life span. Remnant members of the Grand Army of the Republic still took part in the annual Fourth of July ceremonies, and my grandmother vivified the war for me with the few known details of her father's death in the Battle of Stone's River. No doubt this personal background had something to do with the direction that my historical studies later took.

Other outlines of his historiographical outlook are also discernible. For example, he has little use for the New Left, at least in so far as it affected historical interpretation. In part, this is a function of the ineptitude of the work of that movement on the middle period of American history; their impact on other periods of historical enquiry was more respectable. It may also be in part a function of a sort of fundamental patriotism that is pronounced in writers of Professor Fehrenbacher's generation. In a previous *Lincoln Lore*, when I suggested that the memorial occasions of some of Richard N. Current's recent Lincoln essays had put a premium on a celebratory tone, Professor Current called me on the telephone and explained — amiably — that the occasions had nothing to do with it. He would "plead guilty" to being an old-fashioned patriot.

Fehrenbacher's book contains serious history but it is not solemn. Witticisms appear here and there, from a four-line ditty about a school of American historical interpretation written in the style of Gilbert and Sullivan to briefer remarks. Discussing historian William E. Barton's study of Lincoln's genealogy, Fehrenbacher says: "Barton examined the many rumors that Lincoln was illegitimate. He tracked down seven putative fathers, including John C. Calhoun, and then destroyed the case for each one, leaving Thomas Lincoln secure in his moment of glory." A bit broader is Fehrenbacher's ridicule of this silly passage from Albert Beveridge about Lincoln as a reader in New Salem:

> In his reading and study Lincoln was a very miser of time, never wasting a moment. . . . When going to his meals a few steps distant, or walking through the dust or mud of New Salem's street, or strolling out into the country, always an open book was in his hand or closed beneath his arm, while he murmured to himself what he had just read. Even when he chanced to be with women and girls, whom he would try to amuse, Lincoln would take a book with him and read between jokes. When passing from one group of men to another, he would read as he walked, closing the volume as he joined the company.

Concludes Fehrenbacher: "One suspects that the people of a pioneer community would have sent such a fellow to some place other than the state legislature."

The text of these essays by Don E. Fehrenbacher is lively. The context is intellectually rich. Abraham Lincoln has been well served here.

THE CASE OF J. J. NEAGLE
Two Unpublished Lincoln Documents

On January 7, 1863, a 35-year-old man who had just arrived from Baltimore knocked at the door of a residence in Washington, D.C. He was greeted by a woman in the advanced stages of pregnancy — the man's sister, whom he had not seen for a long time.

This meeting was the stuff of Civil War romance, brother divided from sister by differing sectional loyalties. When the war broke out, the brother, James H. Keller, left his New York family for Richmond, convinced that the South was right. His father, James P. Keller, did not approve. The young man's sister, Virginia, probably disapproved also, as she was married to J. J. Neagle, who joined the U.S. Army, served in the Quarter Master Corps, and eventually found himself living in Washington, where he had been placed in charge of heating and ventillation for the military hospitals in the city.

Virginia's brother had made the dangerous trip across the lines to find out how his family was getting along and to pick up some clothing left behind when he first went south. So he said, anyway. He was scared and needed help to get back to Virginia. He asked Neagle to help him get to Maryland, so that he could find his way south. Keller's father, when he learned of the son's visit, informed the military authorities in Washington.

Before the military could act, Neagle — anxious to shelter his pregnant wife from stress — had agreed to aid his brother-in-law. Because of his hospital work, Neagle had an ambulance at his disposal. He ordered the teamster to take them to Long Oldfields, eight miles from Washington. Finding no way to reach Virginia from there, they drove on to Port Tobacco and finally to Leonardtown, Maryland, where Neagle and his driver left Keller to make his way back south.

When Neagle returned, he discovered that his father-in-law had denounced Keller to the military authorities. He decided that he had better turn himself in to the provost marshal. He also discovered upon his return home that he was a father. Virginia had given birth to a son an hour after her husband's departure.

The military authorities regarded Keller as a Confederate, though Neagle denied that his brother-in-law was in Confederate service. Keller had maintained to his family that he was a travelling agent for a tobacco company. Neagle was arrested for helping a Confederate to escape and was imprisoned until February 19, 1863.

Mrs. Neagle proved resourceful. She wrote letters and visited Washington officials to gain her husband's release from punishment for undertaking "his unfortunate mission of love, with my brother, at *my earnest request*." A month of solitary confinement and dismissal from employment seemed punishment enough. Husband and wife meanwhile exchanged letters in which they discussed naming their new boy.

On February 19, 1863, Neagle was released on condition that he remain north of Philadelphia for the duration of the war. Unemployed, penniless, and homeless, he moved to New York and entered law practice with Mrs. Neagle's uncle. He handled patent cases and from time to time needed to travel to Washington on business, but the conditions of his parole would not permit it.

Neagle and his wife soon began a letter-writing and pleading campaign to expand the conditions of his parole, so that Neagle could go to Washington when patent cases required it. Their campaign began as early as May 1863 and they were still trying in December. In the meantime, Neagle had been drafted in New York and had furnished a substitute. He maintained that it was "not quite fair to hold me as a prisoner of state and at the same time to compel me to do military service."

Finally, on February 13, 1864, President Lincoln intervened in the case, answering a letter from Mrs. Neagle:

> I have carefully read your letter, herewith returned. As I understand it your husbands offence was that he knowingly and wilfully helped a rebel to get out of our lines to the enemy to join in fighting and killing our people, and that he did this for love of you. You pretend, nevertheless, that you and he are loyal, and you may really think so, but this is a view of loyalty which it is difficult to conceive that any sane person could take, and one which the government may not tolerate and hope to live — And even now, what is the great anxiety of you and your husband to get to Washington but to get into a better position to repeat this species of loyalty? There is certainly room enough North of the Susquehanna for a great variety of honest occupations.

The president definitely showed his sterner side in this letter.

But he was soon to show this gentler side. In March, Lincoln wrote the following endorsement:

> After reading the first of these letters and writing the one signed by myself, Senator Harlan, of Iowa, came with this lady and told me he had become well enough acquainted with the family that he is sure none of them have any designs against the government and that they have been diligent friends and workers for our sick and wounded in the Hospitals, to propose that the husbands parole be enlarged so that he may occasionally visit Washington.

On March 10, the Secretary of War enlarged the parole "as proposed by the President."