

Shrewd Abraham: Historians Assay Lincoln's Public Image, Impact, And Martyrdom

Ronald D. Rietveld

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Review

SHREWD ABRAHAM

Historians essay Lincoln's public image, impact, and martyrdom

Rietveld, Ronald D.

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Hubbard, Charles *Lincoln and His Contemporaries*. Mercer University Press, ISBN 865546274

The superb essays in **Lincoln and His Contemporaries** were developed from the Centennial Lincoln Symposium at Lincoln Memorial University in April 1997. Edited by Charles Hubbard, executive director of that institution's Abraham Lincoln Museum, the book appries both Civil War scholar and buff alike of current interpretations in Lincoln scholarship regarding three crucial areas of importance: his embattled reputation as commander-in-chief, his aims and accomplishments regarding African American rights, and the role of enemy agents in destroying the President of the United States.

The first section contains three essays devoted to Lincoln's relationship with his generals. According to essayist Judge Frank Williams, in "Abraham Lincoln, Commander-in-Chief or Attorney-in-Chief," many of Lincoln's skills, his intuitiveness, and extraordinary common sense developed during his years as a practicing attorney. Although the problems he solved as a lawyer were different from those he solved as president, Williams holds that the incisive logic used in their solution was much the same. He points out how Lincoln's ability to compromise and negotiate settlements for his clients contributed greatly to Lincoln's later ability to gain the support and goodwill of his military and political contemporaries. These skills enabled Lincoln to lead the nation in time of war and thus redefined the American political and military system. Judge Williams brings his own legal experience to bear on his assessment of Lincoln's presidential ability.

Using contemporary printed images, contributor Harold Holzer identifies and traces three distinctly different public images of Lincoln. First, he suggests that during the first two years of his presidency, Lincoln was perceived as weak

and possibly even cowardly. Secondly, however, there was a distinct shift toward respectability in depicting Lincoln after the Battle of Antietam and the Emancipation Proclamation. And finally, after his assassination, contemporary artists deified and defined the president as much more than an ordinary hero. Holzer develops well the relationship of art and its effect on public opinion.

John Y. Simon's essay on "Lincoln and Halleck" is an outstanding explication of Lincoln's remarkable ability to deal with a wide range of personalities, especially that of General Halleck. Simon suggests that Halleck's incompetency became a buffer that deflected criticism of the overall military strategy, which might otherwise have been directed at the commander-in-chief. Simon makes an ironic case that this incompetent general served Lincoln very well. As chief military advisor to the president, Halleck failed miserably. But Lincoln used Halleck's disastrous career to broaden his own political base and to maintain public support for the Northern war effort.

The second section contains two essays that describe Lincoln's aims and accomplishments regarding the rights of African Americans, who as much as any identifiable group were affected dramatically by the president's wartime policies.

Hans Trefousse in "Lincoln and Race Relations" holds that Lincoln believed in and reflected liberal attitudes toward race relations. Trefousse argues that Lincoln's liberalism would have minimized the divisions in post-Civil War America; the president always considered African Americans to be human beings and not members of a separate species, whether equal to the whites or not. Later, President Johnson's racism contradicted Lincoln's ideas.

The disappointments and frustrations felt by African Americans during the Lincoln administration are ably developed in Edna Greene Medford's essay "Something More Than the Mere 'Union' to Fight For." Medford agrees that the black response to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation acknowledged the president's step toward fulfilling the expectations of African Americans. But it did not address Lincoln's failure, as blacks viewed his policies, to address their demands for equality under the law. Black abolitionists never forgot his slowness in advancing emancipation and his support of colonization.

The final section presents three essays that address the current debate regarding Lincoln's assassination and enemy agents and their conspiracies. Terry Alford focuses on profiling Lincoln's assassin. He portrays John Wilkes Booth as

a committed reactionary -- a fanatic, but not a fatalist -- who sought to create political and military disruption that Booth sincerely hoped would permit pro-slavery elements to retain control of the Confederate government and maintain its army in the field. Alford holds that "it is not possible to understand the murder outside the war that produced it," caused as it was by "the juncture of Booth's unique personality and the Confederate collapse in 1865."

William Hanchett's contribution "Shooting the President as a Military Necessity" holds that the murder of Lincoln involved more than Booth's "unique personality," that in fact he conspired with the Confederate leaders. It has long been believed, as Alford's essay contends for Lincoln's murder, that Booth developed his plan on his own initiative. Hanchett boldly declares that "recent scholarship has established beyond any reasonable doubt that Confederate leaders in Richmond and Canada formulated the plan [to capture Lincoln] and recruited Booth to carry it out," but that by March 1865 it was too late to capture Lincoln because Union cavalry blocked access to Richmond and there was no place to take a captured president. Hanchett asks: "Why should not southern leaders now have concluded that the doctrine of military necessity...justified direct attacks on him and members of his administration?" In Booth's own words: "Something decisive and great" must be done. So he murdered Lincoln.

Thomas R. Turner's concluding essay, "The Creation of an American Myth: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln," reveals the controversy which surrounds Hanchett's position regarding the Confederate plot and Booth. Turner states that there is no direct evidence to support a larger conspiracy theory or to link Booth to it; he holds that only circumstantial evidence supports Hanchett's claim of a larger conspiracy. However, Hanchett points to Turner's words in his 1982 work, *Beware the People Weeping*, that after removing all the perjured testimony at the Trial of the Conspirators in 1865, "there was still a volume of apparently untainted testimony that led to the...conclusion of southern involvement and foreknowledge of the plot." But in his essay Turner declares that "in cases such as this, the historian should demand more than circumstantial evidence." And so we have come full circle in viewing the conspiracy to capture or destroy the 16th president of the United States.

Ronald D. Rietveld, professor of history at Cal State -- Fullerton, has written extensively on Lincoln, the antebellum period, Civil War, and Reconstruction, and the history of religion in America. He is working on a new study of the Lincoln White House community.

