

### Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered

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## Review

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**Briggs, John Channing** *Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, \$35.00, hardcover ISBN 801881064

Lincoln's lectures

Author calls for a closer critique

Abraham Lincoln's words reflect his innate greatness. His personal eloquence eclipses that of modern presidents with teams of speechwriters. The author eschews the obvious question of how someone with only rudimentary schooling could write so eloquently for an equally important question: is there consistency in Lincoln's thought? When cynics question Lincoln's motives in office and whether he actually authored the famous 1864 letter to Mrs. Bixby, the answer is of paramount importance. John Channing Briggs, professor of English at the University of California, Riverside, tackles this challenging question through comparative analysis of 16 of Lincoln's writings.

For his 1838 Lyceum Address, On the Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions, Briggs suggests that Lincoln may have used Federalist Paper No. 49 in calling for a political religion. Briggs considers the 1842 Temperance Address a window on Lincoln's later addresses, and he concludes that David Donald's analysis of Lincoln's 1848 congressional speech on the Mexican War is insufficient, instead favoring Gabor Boritt's 1974 study. His call for a closer reading of Lincoln's speeches is reminiscent of a similar 1920s call by Southern New Critics, who argued that a reader needs to accept a work of art on its own terms rather than imbue it with the reader's own biases. Lincoln's July 1850 Eulogy for Zachary Taylor, portrayed a moderate hero unlike James Polk. And, unlike Lord Charnwood who was disappointed by the 1852 Eulogy for Henry Clay, Briggs argues that Lincoln shows Clay's opposition to slavery was long-standing, principled and at the heart of his legacy, concluding that Lincoln was preparing for a national political realignment. The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska speech depicts Stephen Douglas's attempt to don the mantle of Lincoln's heroes

Clay and Webster, Briggs writes, and that Lincoln's jurisprudence was broader than Douglas's technical jurisprudence.

In the June 16, 1858, House Divided Speech, Briggs concludes that Lincoln's intent was to open to debate the possibility of a civil war rather than adopting Douglas's moral indifference to slavery. Briggs considers Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions illustrative of Lincoln's approach to public lectures: heavy reliance on humor to engage the audience and counter any tendency toward pomposity. Lincoln, the only president to hold a patent, used his September 30, 1859, Milwaukee Address on farming and self-government to praise mechanical progress.

Briggs reserves the final third of his book for analysis of Lincoln's Cooper Union Address of February 27, 1860, and his major presidential speeches. Briggs concludes that while the Cooper Union speech represented a major gamble for Lincoln, he stacked the odds by using mathematical evidence and archival research to determine the Founder's intentions. Lincoln appropriated biblical analogy to characterize Americans as the almost chosen people; to him, George Washington was the touchstone of America's experiment in self-government; and the republic represented the last best, hope of earth. Lincoln employs humor to keep his political religion of subjective equality in check, and he exhibited classical, universal magnanimity in his stance toward the South, according to Briggs.

In a postscript on the Letter to Mrs. Bixby, Briggs favors Lincoln's authorship, but suggests to assign the consolation expressed in it to any individual misses the larger point of the Lincoln message. It's not an easy read, but this work is destined to become a standard reference on Lincoln's writing.

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