

### Abraham Lincoln and the Structure of Reason

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## Review

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**Hirsch, David and Dan Van Haften.** *Abraham Lincoln and the Structure of Reason*. Savas Beatie, \$34.95 ISBN 978-1-932714-89-0

### Looking at Abraham Lincoln in New Ways

In a field as overcrowded and rife with repetition as Lincoln studies, it is imperative that any new study rise above the mediocrity; that it be thematically intriguing, logically arranged, narratively compelling, intellectually relevant, and smartly marketed. In its total failure to accomplish these objectives, one of the latest publications in the Lincoln field, *Abraham Lincoln and the Structure of Reason*, proves once again that Abraham Lincoln is not a subject to be tackled lightly.

Lincoln's "near mastery" of Euclid's first six books of geometry in the 1850s is common knowledge today, especially because it was an acknowledged source of pride for Lincoln himself. Nearly all studies of Lincoln mention the large impact this understanding and application of mathematical logic had on his personal, political, legal, literary, and oratorical accomplishments. Yet in *Abraham Lincoln and the Structure of Reason*, authors David Hirsch and Dan Van Haften claim not only to have "discovered" exactly how Euclidean geometry was the foundation of Lincoln's ultimate greatness, but also that they can teach anyone how to similarly apply it and therefore that "any literate person can become an Abraham Lincoln" (xvii).

*Abraham Lincoln* begins with Lincoln's study of Euclid and how he applied it to his life and works. The authors explicate Euclid's elements themselves—enunciation, exposition, specification, construction, proof and conclusion—and parse many of Lincoln's own speeches and letters to show his application of this system to his political literature and oratory. This underlying mathematical structure, which the authors prove quite convincingly, they claim is more important and more powerful than the poetry of Lincoln's words. It is

the structure that made his words understandable and compelling. Proposing this is an admirable achievement (although the same point was made in 1965 by Edward J. Kempf in volume one of his three-volume study, *Abraham Lincoln's Philosophy of Common Sense*); and Hirsch and Van Haften examine Lincoln's debt to Euclid more deeply and thoroughly than any previous study. The thesis also gains credibility by the fact that author Van Haften is an engineer with a graduate degree in mathematics.

Unfortunately, this interesting concept and examination of Euclid's impact on Lincoln—which ostensibly is the purpose of this book—is not totally what *Abraham Lincoln and the Structure of Reason* is about. This comprises at most six of the sixteen chapters. The rest is a treatise on the legal profession, including how Euclid's elements can and should be used to improve a lawyer's skills. This section uses anecdotes and writings of Lincoln only as examples, and is not a real analysis of Lincoln as lawyer or otherwise. This utter incongruity makes more sense when the reader sees that author Hirsch is a lawyer.

*Abraham Lincoln and the Structure of Reason* is actually two books: one mathematical that examines Lincoln and one legal that does not. It is clear that this originally was meant to be an educational book on practicing law where Lincoln's life was only filler, and the Euclid parts were realized later then patched in and tried to fit. The authors admit this in their conclusion, when they state, "Lincoln's role in this book started out merely as a teaching tool for [legal] lessons relevant to our day. . . . But as we authors listened to Lincoln, Lincoln's role grew" (247). The authors should not have let Lincoln's words change their original intentions. Van Haften's Euclid-Lincoln examinations should have been written up as a separate scholarly article, and Hirsch's original law school-type primer left on its own.

Unfortunately, the poor cobbling together of disparate topics is not the only problem with this book. It reads like a technical manual, or a mathematical or legal textbook, rather than history, and is therefore unsurprisingly dull. There is no real analytical narrative, just pages and pages of unnecessarily long quotations, most without attribution in the text. Many of these quotations, too, are repeated multiple times in the same contexts throughout the book, which divulges either of lack of skillful writing or of conscientious editing. And while the authors' breakdown of Lincoln's writings into Euclid's six elements of proposition is important and useful, their examples are egregiously overdone, compiled as they are into *twenty-one* tables and *eleven* appendices.

In the midst of all this extraneous material, there also is an enormous and glaring gap in that there is no consideration at all of how Lincoln's use of logic (or training as a lawyer) influenced his presidency during the Civil War. Lincoln is the monumental historic figure that he is *because* as president he saved the Union. Therefore any study of his early life is significant substantially as it illuminates his achievements as president. Therefore, it is derelict of the authors to include no consideration of how Lincoln's logical and mathematical mind could have impacted his presidency, such as how the logic in his speeches allowed him to convince the public of the correctness of his policies and to therefore lead them in the direction he wanted them to go; his rationalizations for legal issues such as suspension of habeas corpus or the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation; his decisions on military tactics and planning; his penchant for technology and innovation in weapons, medicine, transportation, and communication, which is all a direct corollary to his logical and technically-inclined intellect.

There is a small nugget of Euclidean gold hidden in this book, unfortunately it requires great effort to extricate it from the technical morass, the unconnected legal diversions, and the overabundance of quotations and tables and charts that consume the work. Ultimately, *Abraham Lincoln and the Structure of Reason* is a book not truly focused on Lincoln—only tangentially—and as such is a hodgepodge of subject with a misnomer title that makes an exasperating read.

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