

Lincoln's Hundred Days: The Emancipation Proclamation and the War for the Union

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Review

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Masur, Louis P. *Lincoln's Hundred Days: The Emancipation Proclamation and the War for the Union*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, \$29.95
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Examining Lincoln's Most Critical Days

"How do you dramatize a decree? How do you turn emancipation into art?" Louis P. Masur asks in *Lincoln's Hundred Days* (264). These questions make his work an apt counterpart to a film released a few months after Masur's book, Stephen Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012). A tight chronological focus is a central strategy in both instances. Masur, reporting that an interval of one hundred days has been "the benchmark for presidential success" since Franklin D. Roosevelt's first term, highlights the period between the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation of September 22, 1862, and the final decree of January 1, 1863 (8). Spielberg picks up on New Year's Day in 1865 and recounts the month culminating in approval of the Thirteenth Amendment by the House of Representatives. Both narratives jump ahead at the end to Lincoln's almost mystical visit to Virginia at the close of the war. These parallels illuminate some differences between literature and film and also two competing interpretations of Lincoln and American politics.

The author of books centered on a single year, a single World Series, and a single photograph, Masur recognizes the limitations as well as the potential of the compression sustained by Spielberg. Where the movie devotes only a few minutes to its prelude and epilogue, the time frame announced in Masur's title is more emblematic than literal. The introductory account of the September 22 cabinet meeting on the Proclamation points out that "emancipation was a process, not a moment" (8). Almost a third of the book covers the period from the outbreak of the war until September 22, and a similar fraction covers the period from the signing of the Proclamation until the end of the war. But the central section encapsulates the fundamental change across time at the heart of

Masur's story: "over the hundred days, Lincoln became bolder" (281). The final Proclamation welcomed African Americans into military service, a crucial aspect of national citizenship. Lincoln backed away considerably from his longstanding support for colonization, although he was not yet as ready to imagine a biracial United States as he would become by April 1865. Compared to the legislative challenge that the president confronts in *Lincoln*, the coalescence of moral principle in *Lincoln's One Hundred Days* is a gradual development. Masur uses as an epigraph Ralph Waldo Emerson's observation in November 1862 that "liberty is a slow fruit."

This maturation is time-consuming, partly because it involves so many people. Spielberg locates the triumph of freedom in the halls of Congress and the White House and in the back rooms where lawmakers negotiate; Masur celebrates a democratic forum much wider than any movie could accommodate. His version of Lincoln is not a combination of Olympian sage and deal-making pragmatist but a thoughtful, cautious man of goodwill who "both led and responded to a transformation in public sentiment" (279). Masur contrasts his broad canvas with Francis Bicknell Carpenter's painting of *The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation* (1864), an oppressively stiff portrait of the president and cabinet. The extent to which *Lincoln's One Hundred Days* re-opens the blogosphere of the Civil War era is measured by comparison with Allen C. Guelzo's *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (2004), a scholarly work of similar scope and ambition. Masur's text is less than fifteen percent longer but his index is more than seventy-five percent longer, mostly because he discusses so many more people. Masur cites at least three times as many newspapers and magazines. He is concerned, moreover, not only with widely influential voices, but also with the private views expressed in soldiers' correspondence and other registers of popular opinion. The scene-stealing supporting role in *Lincoln* is Thaddeus Stevens, the blistering abolitionist who concludes at a key moment that temporary disavowal of his racial egalitarianism will best achieve his goals. The comparably colorful radical in the film version of *Lincoln's Hundred Days* would be diarist Adam Gurowski, whose passionate engagement in the crisis is the public spirit behind the Proclamation, even if he is disappointed by the president's slow and partial progress.

The emphasis on Lincoln's growth is the fundamental difference between the portraits offered by Spielberg and Masur. The president in *Lincoln* occupies the high ground before the story begins, and the movie describes his resourceful

efforts to bring other people, and the law, up to his moral level. The president in *Lincoln's Hundred Days* only eventually "came to understand that preserving the nation required emancipation, and that the abolition of slavery was an act of justice in its own right" (279). This approach aligns Masur with the most insightful work on Lincoln, much of which he cites in his impressively up-to-date annotations. To be sure, scholarly differences within this viewpoint remain significant. Masur is considerably less critical of Lincoln's hesitancy in abandoning colonization than the outstanding recent research by Eric Foner and Mark Neely. His president is less accountable for the sufferings of African Americans and more autonomously deliberate in his decisions.

Designed to reach a general readership, Masur's vision of democratic leadership is more inspiring than cinematic pining for a lost father figure. Spielberg follows Lincoln from legislative victory to a battlefield underworld in Virginia that foreshadows his own imminent death, which the film artfully presents from the viewpoint of his young son. Masur's parallel rendition follows Lincoln to Richmond, where the president sits in Jefferson Davis's chair and shares in a day of jubilee with freedpeople. Lincoln does not die in this book. As the president leaves Virginia, he tells his allies that "I came down among you without any definite plans, and when I go home I sha'n't regret a moment I have spent with you" (286). He is the model of a free man, alive to possibilities for educational self-experience. His self-emancipation is essential to his political legacy.

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