

A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Consensus Is Hard to Find

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Feature Essay

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Williams, Frank *A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Consensus is Hard to Find.*

Approximately 65,000 books have been published on the Civil War plus another 16,000 on Abraham Lincoln—more than one a day since the war ended. But between the study and storytelling, there is a tremendous lack of consensus about what the Civil War means.

150 years later, it is difficult to fully understand and appreciate the lessons of the Civil War. The Civil War does not easily fit our Pollyannaish perception that with war, comes peace, progress and freedom. Instead, the Civil War marks a pivotal moment in our nation's history that tells a story not only of survival in that moment but also the vision of a nation fulfilling the promises in the Declaration of Independence. Today, Abraham Lincoln's legacy reminds us of this vision.

The stream of blood that was initiated with the firing on Fort Sumter passed through Gettysburg, Reconstruction and into the civil rights era, right down to the present. 150 years later, it is more relevant than ever.

The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise to the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves and then we shall save our country.

In four simple sentences, President Lincoln delivered an important message in his Second Annual Message to Congress in December 1862 that would continue to have meaning for our nation. It is difficult to imagine more prescient words delivered by any president in our lifetime.

As we celebrate and remember the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, it is important to reflect upon the uncertainty that afflicted our nation and the hope to which the President, the country and troops – both Union and Confederate – clung to so dearly. For a powerful account of the battle that changed the face of

the war and its military and political repercussions, read Allen C. Guelzo's prize-winning *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion* (Vintage Civil War Library).

No president has such a hold on our minds as Abraham Lincoln. He lived at the dawn of photography, and his pinecone face made a haunting picture. He was the best writer in all American politics, and his words are even more powerful than his images. The Civil War was the nation's greatest trial, and the race issue that caused it remains with us today. Lincoln's death by murder gave his life a poignant and violent climax, and allows the always fascinating game of "what if?"

It is not by chance that one of Lincoln's best speeches was delivered on a battlefield on the occasion of dedicating a cemetery for those who fought, died, and were buried there. Lincoln said that the brave men, living and dead, who struggled on this ground, this battlefield, had "consecrated" it better than he or anyone else could. Their cause was great and noble. We also remember Lincoln saying that their work was "unfinished," and that we, the living, should "highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation under God, shall have a new birth of freedom," and that government of, by and for the people "shall not perish from the earth."

We remember it because he took great pains to say things beautifully.

For two recent books on the Gettysburg Address, see Jared Peatman's *The Long Shadow of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address* (Southern Illinois University Press) and Martin P. Johnson's *Writing the Gettysburg Address* (University Press of Kansas), for which he received The Lincoln Prize.

Joseph R. Fornieri's *Abraham Lincoln: Philosopher Statesman* (Southern Illinois University Press) takes us down the path describing Lincoln's political greatness as a statesman. As a great leader, he saved the Union, presided over the end of slavery, and helped to pave the way for an interracial democracy. Fornieri contends that Lincoln's political genius is best understood in terms of a philosophical statesmanship that united greatness of thought and action. In other words, Lincoln was pragmatic.

Harold Holzer's companion book for young people to the, now classic, Steven Spielberg film, is *Lincoln: How Abraham Lincoln Ended Slavery in America* (HarperCollins). It begins on January 31, 1865 as the president

anxiously awaits word on whether Congress will finally vote to pass the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution ending slavery forever. Using letters, speeches, memoirs and documents by Abraham Lincoln and others, Holzer covers Lincoln's boyhood, his move from Kentucky to Indiana and Illinois, his work as a lawyer and congressman, his unsuccessful candidacies for the U.S. Senate and his victory in two presidential elections, as well as his multi-tasking as President and Commander-in-Chief during the Civil War. Holzer also joins others like Louis P. Masur in *Lincoln's Hundred Days: The Emancipation Proclamation and the War for the Union* (Belknap-Harvard University Press) and James Oakes in *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States 1861-1865* (Norton), with another book on the Emancipation Proclamation. *Emancipating Lincoln: The Proclamation in Text, Context, and Memory* (Harvard University Press) is the primer on how Lincoln changed the war's aim from reunion to reunion and freedom as it is difficult to add a war aim in the middle of a conflict.

Holzer's *Lincoln and the Power of the Press: The War for Public Opinion* (Simon & Schuster) demonstrates how Lincoln as lawyer, politician, and then as president, was able to co-opt the press by following his own advice articulated in one of his 1858 debates with Senator Stephen A. Douglas, "public sentiment is everything."

At the end of the Civil War, Americans faced a formidable challenge: how to memorialize 750,000 dead soldiers, Northern and Southern. As Walt Whitman mused, it was "the dead, the dead, the dead—our dead—our South our North, ours all" that preoccupied the country. After all, if the same number of Americans per capita had died in Vietnam as died in the Civil War, 7.5 million names would be on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, instead of 58,000. Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (Knopf) helps explain the conundrum. Freedom, too, is no guarantee of well-being. See also Jim Downs's great study of how African-Americans despaired in *Sick From Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Oxford).

This serves as an extremely timely reminder that the American experiment, contrary to the Founders' assertion, has not been a "self-evident truth," but in fact a highly debatable proposition that needed to be proved, not just in July 1863 at Gettysburg, but on many days and in many places since.

Forthcoming include William C. ("Jack") Davis's *Grant and Lee: The War They Fought, The Peace They Forged* and James M. McPherson's *Embattled Rebel: Jefferson Davis as Commander-in-Chief*.

Lincoln would state, "that in time of war blood grows hot, and blood is spilled....Confidence dies, and universal suspicion reigns. Each man feels an impulse to kill his neighbor, lest he be first killed by him. Revenge and retaliation follow....But this is not all. Every foul bird comes abroad and every dirty reptile rises up. These add crime to confusion." William A. Blair describes how the President coped in *With Malice Toward Some: Treason and Loyalty in the Civil War Era* (UNC Press).

While there have been thousands of books about Lincoln, there are virtually none about his foreign policy. Part of the concern is that Lincoln had a powerful and, arguably, competent Secretary of State in William Henry Seward. But Kevin Peraino solves this dilemma in *Lincoln in the World: The Making of a Statesman and the Dawn of American Power* (Crown). The author chose only those events in which Lincoln was deeply involved with focus on five distinct conflicts defined by the author as "a Lincolnian foreign policy" – his objection to the Mexican War, his disagreement with Secretary of State William H. Seward over the control of foreign policy, the *Trent* crisis of 1861, the "molding" of public opinion, and the French occupation of Mexico.

The Concise Lincoln Series from Southern Illinois University Press continued with *Lincoln and the Union Governors* by William C. Harris, *Lincoln and the U.S. Colored Troops* by John David Smith, and Thomas Horrocks' *Lincoln's Campaign Biographies*.

John McKee Barr, with a full warts-and-all biography of a dedicated minority, tells us how they viewed Abraham Lincoln as not only the worst president but a dictator and criminal who violated the Constitution while he created the overbearing federal power we know today—and the idea of racial equality to boot. In *Loathing Lincoln: An American Tradition From the Civil War to the Present* (Louisiana State University Press), Barr surveys the broad criticism about Lincoln that emerged onto the national stage. But Lincoln is redeemed in the late James A. Rawley's encyclopedic *A. Lincoln Dialogue* (University of Nebraska Press). Edited by William C. Thomas, Rawley examines critically Lincoln's major statements and papers with the comments of his critiques and supporters.

For the regicide of our 16th President, look for Terry Alford's forthcoming *Fortune's Fool: The Life of John Wilkes Booth* (Oxford) and Frederick Hatch's *The Lincoln Assassination Conspiracy Trial and Its Legacy* (McFarland).

When will the Civil War end? Elizabeth Varon's *Appomatox* and Michael Vorenberg's forthcoming *Appomatox Myth: The Struggle to Find an End of War* are sure to shed some light on this. Adam Goodheart's *1865* and the Library of America's *The Civil War: The Final Year By Those Who Lived It*, edited by Aaron Sheehan-Dean, at least bring us to the war's conclusion chronologically.

A century and a half after his death, we are a nation because of Lincoln's undeterred will and unrelenting hope. Leading our nation through civil war is perhaps his greatest living victory, but, posthumously, his greatest victory and endearing legacy is the hope he instilled in our nation and in each of us.

Frank J. Williams is the Chair of The Lincoln Forum, the author of Lincoln as Hero, and is a contributing columnist for the Civil War Sesquicentennial.