

# Lincoln and Liberty: Wisdom for the Ages

Bernard Von Bothmer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Von Bothmer, Bernard (2015) "Lincoln and Liberty: Wisdom for the Ages," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 3 , Article 26.

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.17.3.27

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol17/iss3/26>

## Review

Von Bothmer, Bernard

Summer 2015

**Morel, Lucas E.** *Lincoln and Liberty: Wisdom for the Ages*. University Press of Kentucky, \$40.00 ISBN 9780813151014

### Essays on the Lessons of Lincoln

Love of Abraham Lincoln is one thing that both conservatives and liberals each share. Many today, writes Lucas E. Morel in the preface to this informative and often provocative series of essays, are overly preoccupied with the 16th president's "openness to change" (ix). But to these contributors, Lincoln was "fairly well set in terms of his political philosophy" (xii). The essays in *Lincoln and Liberty: Wisdom for the Ages* "seek to understand Lincoln as he understood himself and attempted to make himself clear to his day and age" (xii), and illustrate that Lincoln still has much to teach us today. Indeed, there are insights here to broaden one's understanding of Lincoln for even the most seasoned scholar.

In the book's Introduction, "Lincoln, Dred Scott, and the Preservation of Liberty," Justice Clarence Thomas writes of his "deeply personal and long-standing" attention to and admiration of Lincoln, whose life's lessons can help us deal today with "the growing social and political apathy towards the principles of liberty on which our country was founded" (2). In tracing how Lincoln addressed the notion of liberty throughout his career, Thomas echoes current tensions in the Supreme Court today, arguing that, "Although modern threats to our liberty do not come in forms as obvious as slavery, they undermine the same principles that Lincoln fought so hard to preserve" (6). In Lincoln's response to the Dred Scott case, Thomas sees a kindred soul, for "the first mechanism the framers chose to restrain the powers of the federal government was the separation of those powers." Dred Scott, Thomas writes, "is the paradigmatic case of bad judging, because it abused the Constitution to take a political issue out of the democratic sphere" (10).

Part I, "Lincoln's Character," examines the literature that informed Lincoln's outlook, how that outlook, especially over race, changed over time, and how perceptions of those views changed after his death. In "'The Great Invention of the World': Lincoln and Literature," Fred Kaplan astutely calls Lincoln an "essayist" (18). Kaplan shows how Lincoln was influenced by Thomas Dilworth's *New Guide to the English Tongue*, first published in 1740, a book that advanced the notion, according to Kaplan, that "learning to read and learning moral conduct were one and the same" and where Lincoln might very well have read a passage that would inspire him years later to write of "the better angels of our nature" (20). Kaplan goes on to demonstrate how Aesop's fables, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and William Grimshaw's and James Riley's American history books all played a role in Lincoln's thinking about social mobility and slavery, and how his love of poetry, specifically Burns and Byron, and, most especially, Shakespeare, impacted Lincoln's writing, view of human nature, and values. "These writers became his frame of reference," Kaplan concludes (35).

In "Lincoln, Shakespeare, and Tyranny," John Channing Briggs expands upon themes raised by Kaplan, illustrating how Lincoln's "lifetime of rereading and the witnessing of many performances" of Shakespeare's works informed his ideas about American slavery (40). "What Lincoln found most compelling in Shakespeare," Briggs writes, "was the *personal* side of the tyrant as well as the tyrant's insidious influence over others" (42), which would become useful to the president as he waged the Civil War. The works of Shakespeare, especially Lincoln's favorite play, *Macbeth*, were never far from the president's mind.

In "Lincoln and Race," Michael Burlingame convincingly challenges three commonly held notions concerning Lincoln. First, the charge that Lincoln was a "reluctant emancipator." "Lincoln loathed and despised slavery from his early years" (59), Burlingame argues, noting the many times Lincoln both privately and publicly expressed courageous and, it should be noted, unpopular views regarding slavery throughout his career. Second, on the topic of colonization, Burlingame demonstrates that "Lincoln supported colonization not because he suffered from 'color-phobia' but because he faced intractable political realities. Southerners would not emancipate their slaves unless the freedmen were colonized" (67). Most Northerners, too, felt the same: nearly three-fourths were probably anti-slavery, but "90 percent of them were antiblack" (68). Lincoln felt he was left with no other choice. Finally, regarding Douglass' famous 1876 claim that Lincoln was "predominately the white man's president" (70), Burlingame

notes that one cannot ignore Douglass' June 1, 1865 tribute to Lincoln, as well as the close and deeply personal relationship the two men shared while Lincoln was alive.

It is Douglass' words that form the focus of Diana J. Schaub's chapter, "Learning to Love Lincoln: Frederick Douglass's Journey from Grievance to Gratitude." Schaub analyzes Douglass' "increasing and deepening appreciation" for Lincoln from before the war to 1876. She begins by looking at Douglass' reaction to and criticisms of the Freedmen Monument, and how he helped shape the final design. To Schaub, Douglass' April 14, 1876 remarks at the unveiling of the monument in Washington, coming at the end of Reconstruction, carry enormous significance. "What Lincoln's 'Gettysburg Address' did for the Union," she writes, "Douglass' 'Oration on Lincoln' did—or sought to do—for racial union" (84). Schaub's meticulous dissection of the key themes of the address is especially insightful regarding how Douglass in his remarks skillfully navigated the treacherous divide that separated white from black America, and she convincingly argues that black America today should have a greater appreciation for the legacy of Lincoln.

Part II, "Lincoln's Politics," contains an especially rich selection of essays. Thomas L. Krannawitter, in one of the collection's more moving pieces, "Lincoln and Political Principles," stresses that Lincoln's reverence for the principles upon which this country were founded, especially the notion of equality, makes Lincoln "eminently conservative." For Krannawitter, Lincoln teaches us several things, among them that a free form of government can only be founded upon "egalitarian natural right principles;" that the set of values that inspired the Nation's founding are "timeless," as relevant today as they were in past centuries; and that they are "universal," common to all mankind, regardless of race (106). Krannawitter expands upon these themes by walking the reader through Lincoln's writings and public remarks, noting that "For Lincoln, no moral or political question was more important or more meaningful than the question of whether it is true that all men are created equal" (115). Teachers looking to introduce students to why Lincoln is our greatest president might well assign this essay. "There was no better student," Krannawitter concludes, "and therefore no better teacher, of American political principles than Abraham Lincoln" (122).

Lucas E. Morel sees Lincoln as an especially astute political philosopher in "Lincoln, Liberty, and the American Constitutional Union," illustrating how the constant struggle between freedom and slavery were never far from Lincoln's

thoughts, and actions. "We know how much Lincoln was devoted to liberty by the seriousness with which he took the greatest threat to liberty—namely, the spread of slavery into the federal territories" (138). Lincoln's love of his country was based on "what it could accomplish on behalf of liberty" (139).

Steven Kautz's following chapter, "The Democratic Statesmanship of Abraham Lincoln," frustratingly jumps from topic to topic: Douglass' critique of Lincoln; Lincoln as salt-of-the-earth; an extended, and at times rather abstract, analysis of Lincoln's views on slavery and freedom; an especially convincing justification, from both a military and tactical standpoint, of the Emancipation Proclamation; and a concluding section on attitudes towards the newly freed slaves. This chapter's cut-and-paste style and lack of a central governing theme contrast with the easy flow of the book's other sections.

In "'Public Sentiment Is Everything': Abraham Lincoln and the Power of Public Opinion," Allen C. Guelzo, after giving an overview of the history of that ever-mysterious thing called public opinion in America, observes that Lincoln at times thought that public sentiment "could be cultivated, persuaded, shaped, and molded by an appeal to self-interest" (179). Lincoln used a wide variety of strategies, from placing anonymous editorial in papers to even brazenly manipulating the press, in order to further his goals. But it was an effort fraught with limitations, too. "His regard for public opinion was thus ambivalent—sometimes bowing to it, sometimes disregarding it, and occasionally arguing his point with it," Guelzo concludes. "One thing he never imagined being, however, was its oracle" (186).

Matthew Pinsker, in "Lincoln and the Lessons of Party Leadership," deftly illustrates how Lincoln's basic political skills are often underappreciated. "There is no cannon for Lincoln's behind-the-scenes political career," he notes. Even before the presidency, Pinsker sees a man of "often-underrated managerial talents" who possesses a "competitive fire at its most intense" (193). As president, Lincoln's listening skills, his "aggressive attitude about gathering political intelligence" (196), and his finely developed people-skills all helped him tremendously. Lincoln could also be fiercely partisan, and utterly relentless in achieving his political objectives. Scholars have been too preoccupied with Lincoln's "words and ideas," Pinsker concludes, at the expense of examining his "competitive behavior within the political arena." Lincoln's success in successfully waging the Civil War came from "how he learned to bend, and perhaps even break, the rules of partisan life during the 1840s and 1850s" (203).

Lincoln's philosophic and religious sensibilities are the subject of Joseph R. Fornieri's "Lincoln's Theology of Labor," which the author argues was based primarily upon a reaction to southern slavery and its many passionate defenders. In opposition to this, Lincoln "developed a theology of labor to vindicate free labor and the right to rise" (214), a belief system based on the Bible's justification, in Genesis 3:19, of earning the rewards of one's work; on ideas articulated in William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802); and on "the republicanism of the founders, based on the related principles of liberty, equality, and consent" (215).

Part III, "Lincoln at War," is composed of two essays. In the book's longest chapter, "Abraham Lincoln as War President: Practical Wisdom at War," Mackubin Thomas Owens stresses that "Lincoln saw the Declaration of Independence as the *foundation* of" republican government—"the real thing he aimed to preserve"—"and the Constitution as the *means* of implementing it" (226). Owens examines Lincoln's efforts to achieve this through his exercising of the war power; through his response to secession; through his handling of domestic politics, including the issue of civil liberties; as a military strategist, including an extensive look at his use of emancipation; and his contentious relationship with his generals, especially McClellan. What Owens comes to admire most regarding Lincoln is his sense of prudence, as well as his ability to never lose sight of the big picture, though many readers might challenge Owen's concluding claim that "George W. Bush correctly took his bearing from Lincoln" (264).

In "Lincoln's Executive Discretion: The Preservation of Political Constitutionalism," Benjamin A. Kleinerman forcefully defends Lincoln from the charge that he overstepped his presidential authority by noting the "paradox" that Lincoln's "commitment to constitutionalism required that he remain both independent of Congress and that he possess powers that Congress could not possess" (279). Kleinerman argues later, in discussing the war power, that "cases of rebellion or invasion simply change the applicability of otherwise inviolable constitutional rules and only in ways that apply directly to that which military necessity requires" (300). Emancipation, too, was guided by Lincoln's reverence for the Constitution. Congress of course has a role to play, Kleinerman posits, but "we should be wary of going too far in our efforts to strip the executive of all independent power" (306).

The book's final section, "Lincoln and Modern-Day America," is composed of Ronald J. Pestritto and Jason R. Jividen's provocative and hard-hitting essay, "Lincoln and the Progressives." The authors vigorously challenge the notion that progressives, either today or 100 years ago, can claim Lincoln as one of their own. Herbert Croly, they claim, had a vastly dissimilar view of human nature than Lincoln; furthermore, "they profoundly disagreed as to the real meaning of equality" (324). Theodore Roosevelt's principles "actually departed from Lincoln's," they argue (326), and whereas Roosevelt championed "redistribution ... Lincoln's pursuit of equality suggests the justice of an equality of rights but not an equality of rewards" (327). Roosevelt also misrepresented Lincoln on the subject of direct democracy, among other issues. "Lincoln had more in common with the American founders," they write, "than he did with Roosevelt" (333). Wilson's analysis suffered from similar errors of interpretation, they claim. While Lincoln revered the Nation's founding and its initial principles, the Progressives wanted to transcend them. And whereas "For Wilson, the great promise of presidential leadership was in its prospects for transcending the Constitution," they argue, Lincoln's chief goal was the "preservation of the Constitution" (345).

The enormously wide-ranging and strikingly original approaches to such a broad variety of subjects make *Lincoln and Liberty: Wisdom for the Ages* suggested reading for both scholars and students alike, regardless of one's political orientation.

*Bernard von Bothmer teaches American history at the University of San Francisco and at Dominican University of California. He received a B.A. with honors from Brown University, an M.A. from Stanford University, and a Ph.D. in American History from Indiana University, and is the author of Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush (University of Massachusetts Press, 2010). He can be contacted at [bvonbothmer@yahoo.com](mailto:bvonbothmer@yahoo.com).*