

Father Abraham: Lincoln's Relentless Struggle to End Slavery

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Review

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Striner, Richard *Father Abraham: Lincoln's Relentless Struggle to End Slavery*. Oxford University Press, \$28.00 ISBN 195183061

Moral Statecraft

Lincoln and Abolitionism

Of all of our political icons, Abraham Lincoln and George Washington are perhaps the two that Americans most want to trust. No longer guided by the great man school of history, we recognize both their feet of clay and the fact that neither were singularly responsible for the events of their age, but our hopes of being reassured that power does not always corrupt remain undimmed. In recent decades, the rising historiographical reputation of the abolitionist movement has highlighted the gulf between the moral fervor and profound sacrifice of radical abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison with the pragmatic, free labor, and anti-expansionism of the Republican Party and the Conscience Whigs. While the radicals practiced (imperfect) interracial cooperation, organized vigilante networks, spirited fugitives away from bondage, and torched copies of the Constitution, Abraham Lincoln preached containment, professed uncertainty about black equality, and in his own words, bit his lip and kept quiet. As the anti-slavery leaders who have been ignored, maligned, or trivialized by previous generations of historians have finally come front and center, the reputation of the man once deemed the Great Emancipator has suffered.

Richard Striner's tightly argued **Father Abraham** contends that such an inverse correlation is simplistic and wrongheaded. As he notes on page 48, Lincoln's present-day detractors say his anti-slavery politics fail to measure up to the morally uncompromising stand of the boldest abolitionists, those who consistently supported civil rights for all Americans. But abolitionists *by themselves* could not summon the power to eliminate so deeply entrenched an institution as slavery. The summoning of power requires strategy as well as

ideals. For Striner, Lincoln's unique contribution to the anti-slavery movement lay in his ability to attain and strategically manipulate power through a Machiavellian genius for politics. He marshals compelling evidence to support this claim, showing time and again the ways in which Lincoln's astute sense of timing and command of the political process enabled him to insert anti-slavery measures into national policy at the precise moments when they had the greatest chance of winning popular acceptance.

Striner does not hesitate to grapple with Lincoln's problem passages, the statements and writings that have served as the basis for many modern historians' conclusions that Lincoln was at heart a classic free-soiler and colonizationist - a racist who combined a hatred of slavery with a desire to maintain white supremacy and purity through compensated emancipation and deportation. But for each he offers an alternate explanation rooted in an understanding of Lincoln as a pragmatic strategist and master of the art of appearing to say one thing while leaving open the possibility of saying another thing entirely. According to Striner, Lincoln's personal correspondence, speeches, and little known behind-the-scenes maneuvering in the White House, as well as Frederick Douglass's contemporary estimation of the man he called in 1865 the black man's president, emphatically demonstrates the sincerity of his anti-slavery convictions and the authenticity of his respect for African Americans and their intellectual capacities. Any public deviation from these convictions was merely tactical, a political ploy to build northern support and strengthen the constitutional grounds upon which he would consciously and deliberately turn the war he had carefully framed as a struggle to preserve the Union into an abolitionist crusade.

Lincoln's own statements have convinced many that the so-called Great Emancipator was a gradualist who, like the majority of the nation, was forced to adopt emancipationist measures only in the face of military necessity. But **Father Abraham** argues that these public faces were dissembling and duplicitous in nature, intended to conceal the behind-the-scenes political and military maneuvering of a man who was anything but moderate on what he considered the great moral issue of the age. Indeed, Lincoln was far closer to the Radical Republicans than is often acknowledged, blending his more familiar carrot approaches to bringing occupied Confederate states back into the Union with lesser-reported stick demands of universal emancipation and immediate access to the franchise for at least some black residents. Striner argues forcefully that though Lincoln's words might have been contradictory, his actions were not.

By holding himself back, biting his lip, shoring up his constitutional bases, and relentlessly assailing the fortress of public opinion, he built a political coalition both willing to destroy slavery and possessing the military muscle to do so.

Lincoln's moral statecraft may have included compromise, concealment of true motives, and a certain willingness to play fast and loose with the truth—tendencies that seem at odds with his fundamental honesty and give pause to many modern Americans weary of political deception. But as Striner maintains, Lincoln never contented himself with the best results he could attain unless they passed a certain threshold of decency. His ethical politics and his crafty methods went hand in hand, as he propelled the nation down the road toward greater freedom and equality. Nonetheless, ethical questions remain. Do moral visions justify tricky politics? Who determines whether a vision is moral? What about the rights of those who disagree? Can duplicity ever be admired? While providing us a new angle on Lincoln, Striner also leaves us with a new set of questions.

Jill Ogline is a doctoral candidate in the History Department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her dissertation explores the campaign for civil rights and equal education in Prince Edward County, Virginia, site of the nation's longest post-Brown v. Board of Education school closing. She is a veteran interpreter, having worked for the National Park Service in the Northeast Regional Office and at Independence NHP, Gettysburg NMP, and Eisenhower NHS.