

Lincoln: A Life of Power and Purpose

David J. Gerleman

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Review

Gerleman, David J.

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Carwardine, Richard *Lincoln: A Life of Power and Purpose*. Alfred A. Knopf, \$27.50 ISBN 1400044561

The Makings of a Leader

Ethics, Principles, and Perception

As an uncompromising defender of the Union, self-taught military strategist, and superb political maneuverer, Abraham Lincoln makes a compelling claim to being the greatest president in U. S. history. Such admirable traits have ensured that Honest Abe remains a subject of immense fascination, but after a decade of prolific scholarship, is another book on Lincoln really merited? Certainly Oxford University scholar Richard Carwardine thinks so, and happily his book **Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power** proves that the mine of Lincolniana still can produce a richly diverse ore. This is the first study of the sixteenth president's political career and White House years written by a non-American historian. Rather than an impediment, the chasm of the Atlantic seems to provide Carwardine a clarity of judgment and an insightfulness that a native-born scholar could not have wholly duplicated.

Although he is not an American, Carwardine nevertheless displays a canny ability to deftly recreate the intense party politics of the United States during the 19th century—an era when political views were held with such fervent intensity that switching religious affiliations could be more easily accomplished than swapping political parties. Under Carwardine's skilled hand normally dry issues like the inner workings of political parties or Lincoln's rise to master the machinations, egos, and ambitions within the political machine come to life. The author contends that Lincoln's tenacious ethical convictions, political goals, and personal principles are what first led him to join the Whigs and then shift to the Republican Party after the demise of the Second Party System in 1854. Like other Lincoln scholars but with greater cogency, Carwardine asserts that Lincoln's humble roots and gradual advancement through the rough and tumble

of 19th century democratic politics equipped him with the skills needed to rise to historical and moral greatness.

Better than any previous biographer, Carwardine seeks to identify the wellsprings of Lincoln's leadership qualities. The author contends that, among the president's many innate political traits, Lincoln's supreme talent was his acute perception of public opinion and his ability to anticipate and influence its direction. This skill is what enabled Lincoln to achieve what he did and to mobilize public support behind the war and emancipation. Carwardine also credits Lincoln with being one of the first elected officials to develop a political agenda, utilize a variety of channels to advance it, and to aggressively seek other supports beyond the political realm to sustain it, including churches, humanitarian agencies, and the volunteer Union army. Carwardine adroitly succeeds in grasping both the pragmatic and moral dimensions of Lincoln as a national political leader facing the seemingly insurmountable challenge of holding a fractured country together despite the tremendous forces seeking to tear it asunder. The picture that emerges is one of a prudent, decisive, activist Lincoln who possessed a unique ability to master obstinate men and capricious public opinion.

Overall, the book is delightfully readable, analytical, and smart. Carwardine's lively style, fresh perspective, and insight are bound together by a compelling narrative. Particular attention is paid to the metamorphosis of Lincoln's religious views during the White House years. Carwardine argues that the War brought Lincoln into close contact with Protestant evangelicals who helped foster in him a belief that the country could only be saved if a higher purpose came out of all the bloodshed. Carwardine also traces the development of Lincoln's thinking about slavery and the meaning of American liberty, detailing how his views were transformed and revolutionized by the conflict. Further enhancing the work are over seventy well-chosen illustrations juxtaposed within the narrative text rather than less effectively relegated to the center of the book.

Carwardine's **Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power** places Lincoln firmly within the contest of his changing times and anyone who wishes to better comprehend the deeply complex man and leader ought to read this book. The author's balanced narrative and judicious research has already won this book the prestigious Lincoln Prize. It is a well deserved honor as Carwardine has created an innovative study of Lincoln that no serious student of the period can ignore.

After reading it one can better understand the private motivations behind many of Lincoln's controversial public actions and how the conspicuously religious non-conformist president came to see a divine purpose behind a brutal fraternal conflict. This glimpse into Lincoln's mindset leaves the reader with the eternally nagging question of how post-war politics might have been vastly different if the president had declined the invitation to Ford's Theater that fatal April evening.

Prof. David J. Gerleman teaches 19th- and 20th-century U.S. history at Marymount and George Mason Universities in Northern Virginia. He is currently writing an article on the Lincoln White House stables.