

Lincoln's Defense of Politics: The Public Man and His Opponents in the Crisis Over Slavery

John S. Benson

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

Recommended Citation

Benson, John S. (2006) "Lincoln's Defense of Politics: The Public Man and His Opponents in the Crisis Over Slavery," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 8 : Iss. 3 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol8/iss3/15>

Review

Benson, John S.

Fall 2006

Schneider, Thomas E. *Lincoln's Defense of Politics: The Public Man and His Opponents in the Crisis over Slavery*. University of Missouri Press, \$39.95 ISBN 826216064

Selling Emancipation

Lincoln Returns to his Moral Center

Like most presidents, Abraham Lincoln faced the realities of public office and the fact that there is a difference between campaign speeches and policy. Lincoln gained national attention with his stand against slavery and adherence toward national unity. But with his election to the presidency and the widening margin of sectionalism, Lincoln constrained his rhetoric and promised unity at the cost of emancipation. But as war came and stayed, Lincoln returned to his moral center. The rest we know as history.

Most Civil War books concentrate on the battles fought and the men who fought them. This is what the public demands, and so this is what is written. Not until recently were authors willing to expand their horizons and write on the intellectual aspects surrounding the war. **Lincoln's Defense of Politics** expands on that trend.

This book started as a doctoral dissertation by Thomas E. Schneider, a Research Associate at the Editorial Institute at Boston University. It is, therefore, academic in nature and prose. Schneider delivers an interesting work that explores the logic and basis of the belief system of many of those most outspoken and most prolific during the slavery crisis. It is intelligent, thought provoking, and well researched, despite the fact that it relies heavily on Harry V. Jaffa's 1959 work, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (University of Chicago Press, ISBN 0226391132, \$22.50 softcover). At its heart, this book was written to sell the author's abilities to an academic board. It is, therefore, not toned down for the masses. The writing

style is sometimes confusing and requires serious concentration. Key points are often buried under prose, requiring several re-reads to decipher. For example, by the end of the preface, this reviewer was left to wonder what the focus of the book really was; why are we here? The title suggests an analysis of Lincoln's speeches or a comparison between Lincoln and his opponents. Not so. Speeches are rarely highlighted. Chapters focus on individuals, not Lincoln. Logically one would expect the author to provide an early definition of Lincoln's defense of politics and carry that definition throughout the narrative. However, the path taken is so convoluted and heavy with surplus wording that it is not until page 178 that Schneider actually defines what Lincoln's defense of politics is.

Chapter one focuses on A Divided Lincoln, which Schneider sets up as a discussion of the differences between law and morality. While a good topic, Schneider loses focus in a blur of words and makes a weak case for the division between these esoteric topics. Schneider does, however, present a good case on Lincoln's intellectual divide and his struggle to rationalize his morals with his national responsibilities.

Chapter 2 looks at Stephen A. Douglas and is subtitled The Missing Constitutional Basis. This chapter is mistitled, as it rarely explores any constitutional theory or basis. Schneider does, however, point to Douglas's failure at the ballot box and makes an excellent case for Douglas's failure coming not from the lack of a constitutional basis or understanding but from an inability to take a side when decisiveness was most needed.

Other chapters explore such individuals as Alexander H. Stephens, John C. Calhoun, George Fitzhugh, John Locke, Henry David Thoreau, William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglas. Schneider chooses his topics well and sheds light on many who have remained overlooked by the mainstream. The author has found new ground in an otherwise over thought and written market.

While many of his chapters are over thought or overcomplicated, Schneider finds firm footing by chapter 8, where he explores William Lloyd Garrison: From Disunionist to Lincoln Emancipationist. Here, Schneider presents clear, interesting writing. Schneider argues that to successfully emancipate, Lincoln needed two things: military victories and public opinion. Military victories would come through perseverance. Public opinion would, however, require the successful intellectual sale of emancipation to the public—a sale provided by Garrison.

Schneider's work clearly presents the case of an author bound for great achievement. He is intelligent and insightful but must tone down his approach and clarify his message if he is to have mass appeal. Hopefully he will continue to research and write about the Civil War, as he has proven his ability to broaden our field of knowledge.

John S. Benson, Esq. is a partner in the law firm Penglase Wiley & Benson in Bucks County Pennsylvania. He is a former President of the Bucks County Civil War Roundtable and teaches an honors course in the Civil War at Delaware Valley College.