

Civil War Book Review

Winter 2016

Article 17

Lincoln's Political Thought

Thomas C. Mackey

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

Recommended Citation

Mackey, Thomas C. (2016) "Lincoln's Political Thought," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.1.18

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss1/17>

Review

Mackey, Thomas C.

Winter 2016

Kateb, George *Lincoln's Political Thought*. Harvard University Press, \$24.95
ISBN 9780674368163

"The Sort of Thing that People who Like this Sort of Thing will Like"

The story is told that one morning during the United States Civil War newspaper reporters entered the Executive Mansion looking for President Abraham Lincoln. When they located him, they found him reading a book. One of the reporters asked the President if he liked the book and Lincoln replied saying, "Well, this is the sort of thing that people who like this sort of thing will like." Such is the case with this book by George Kateb, the William Cromwell Professor of Politics, Emeritus, at Princeton University. A present-minded political scientist and political theorist, Kateb is known for his defense of liberal political theory and the modern administrative state in books such as *Human Dignity* (2011); *Patriotism and Other Mistakes* (2006); *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (1992), as well as books assessing the political thought of people such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Hannah Arendt. In this book, really a series of interconnected analytical essays, Kateb eschews openly historical arguments and any effort to grasp or grapple with historical context in his analysis of Lincoln. Rather, his goal is to parse Lincoln's spoken and written words, but only those words of "lasting theoretical interest" to the author. He excludes "Lincoln's views on a wide range of matters of public policy and party politics as not essential" to Kateb's efforts, "no matter how important they were to Lincoln, his party, and the country." According to Kateb, two ideas/ideals dominated Lincoln's political thought: "a commitment to human equality and the fate imposed on it by the existence of institutionalized slavery, the worst antithesis to human equality" (ix). Struggling with his own idealized understanding of the 1787 United States Constitution and his own inner sense of human equality drawn from the 1776 Declaration of Independence, Lincoln dealt with his own, to use Kateb's word, "ferocities" as well as the entrenched ferocities of the pro-slavery world of the mid-nineteenth century. As stated at the

end of the Preface, Kateb's alleged thesis is that "in democratic politics, perhaps all politics, it is nearly impossible to do the right thing for the right reasons, actually held and honestly stated" (xiii). While hardly an original conclusion since political leaders, philosophers, historians, and political scientists have spilled much ink through the millenniums making just this point, Kateb's elaboration of this point constitutes the rest of this volume.

What the reader then encounters is a slog through Kateb's jargon and stream-of-consciousness riffs on Lincoln, the Constitution, and the nation in what Kateb identifies as Lincoln's political thought and values. At the same time, he is just as interested in bashing the numerous levels of historical context of Lincoln's times for not holding modern liberal values and dismissing southerners and their arguments and values. Kateb argues, "the ferocities of race, regional patriotism and cultural identity – the South's political religion – drove the South to denial of Lincoln's political religion and to secede, and kill and die to make that secession successful" (53). In addition to not taking seriously the larger context in which and with which Lincoln engaged, Kateb intrudes himself into the ideas and thoughts of that era and Lincoln. Scattered throughout this text are statements such as "He should have seen" (82), "Lincoln had to" (86), "I speculate" (97), "I want to believe" (101), Lincoln exceeded Jefferson in his concern for equality while "pretending" he was only using Jefferson's words (104). At times, Kateb's language and narrative loses its analytical rigor such as describing Lincoln, as many southerners would have ironically, as a "dictator" (141) while at other times his control of the logic of his analysis only creates mushiness such as his tortured aside where he tries to clarify the concepts of "rights" versus "privileges" in the era of Lincoln (157).

Lincoln finds himself in good company in this volume drawing its sources for Kateb's understanding of the old Constitution—the "frozen" Constitution in his words—prior to the transformation of Lincoln, the Constitution, and the nation. Political philosophers and writers such as Homer, Thucydides, Plato, Old and New Testaments, Gnosticism, Rousseau, Hobbes, Paine, Jefferson, Thoreau, Emerson, Melville, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Lenin, Leo Strauss and Joseph Conrad (to mention just a few of the names dropped in this slim volume) put in appearances in this work. To understand Lincoln's metaphysical world and religion, like Dante, Kateb leads the reader through spirals of Lincoln's thought on God, destiny, and equality in Chapter Seven, "Lincoln's World Outlook." Historians will be bothered by the political scientist in Kateb who moves through time and space at will. A paragraph will start in 1862, then shift to 1858, as if the

context did not matter (21). This effort at “thick description” certainly yields the thick part of that approach to scholarly writing while providing little of the description part of that approach to scholarly writing. Nor has Kateb bothered himself with reading widely and deeply in the primary and secondary sources; his bibliography contains 37 citations.

Further, historicism pervades the work. Long descents into current political punditry arise time and again. At one point, Kateb argues that later presidents used Lincoln’s actions to act in “bad faith.” To provide a flavor of the writing of this volume, he continued: “The injury of injuries that the Constitution experienced was that it was shown up as inadequate to the unprecedented emergency in which the Union faced destruction, and since that time has been treated, under such cover, as inadequate for much lesser emergencies or for spurious ones. Since that time, the need to produce justifications of unconstitutional actions has tended to produce all sorts of contrived rationalizations with the frequent result that innocent or unoffending people have been more readily seriously harmed and that accused people have been treated despotically. The pattern continues” (152). At times, Kateb becomes a cheerleader for Lincoln, at one point writing: “We want Lincoln to be a political leader who always acted with single-minded purpose to end slavery as rapidly as possible, and did so for the best moral reasons” (47-48). These episodes of modern soapboxing, as well as the hubris and ego of this work, detract from the analysis, and further limit this overall effort. A hand full of readers may appreciate the eruditeness of Kateb, but understand little of Lincoln -- who remains an enigma.

Indeed, no audience can be discerned for this volume. It is not accessible to nor intended for a general audience. Undergraduates are not the intended audience nor are graduate students in United States History or Political Science. Specialists in the history of the presidency will not find this volume useful and Lincoln specialists will find most (perhaps all) of this book off-putting, if not dead wrong, in its organization, logic, and arguments. Perhaps other political theorists of liberal political theory will find these arguments appealing, but few others will. Thus, this volume is the sort of thing that people who like this sort of thing will like.

Thomas C. Mackey is a Professor of History at the University of Louisville and the author or editor of four books the more recent being the four volume series, A Documentary History of the Civil War Era, published by the University

of Tennessee Press.