One Man Great Enough: Abraham Lincoln's Road to Civil War

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Review

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Summer 2008

Waugh, John C. One Man Great Enough: Abraham Lincoln's Road to Civil War. Harcourt, $28.00 hardcover ISBN 9780151010714

Lincoln's Pre-Presidential Years

It is not surprising that there is strong, sustained interest in Abraham Lincoln's pre-presidential years. He had almost no formal education and less experience than any of the 2008 candidates. Yet he confronted the most difficult circumstances any new president has encountered, and historians usually rate him as the strongest of all presidents. How can this record be explained? Something in Lincoln's experience—perhaps a serendipitous event, an especially influential mentor, or timely and appropriate advice—must have had a profound influence.

Among the many volumes on the pre-Presidential Lincoln are Senator Paul Simon's Lincoln's Preparation for Greatness: The Illinois Legislative Years (1965), Don E. Fehrenbacher's Prelude to Greatness (1962); Douglas L. Wilson's Lincoln Before Washington (1997) and his Honor's Voice (1998), William C. Harris's Lincoln's Rise to the Presidency (2007) and Roy Morris, Jr.'s The Long Pursuit (2008). These books propose different factors to explain Lincoln's achievements: experience as a state legislator, sense of humor, conservatism, or impassioned advocacy against Stephen Douglas.

John C. Waugh's recently published One Man Great Enough: Abraham Lincoln's Road to Civil War fits within this category of books. Unlike his earlier Reelecting Lincoln (1998), devoted only to the chronology of the 1864 election, this work covers Lincoln's entire pre-Presidential life. Unlike other works mentioned above, Waugh does not offer an analytical argument or interpretation. What he offers instead is a compelling narrative, probably intended for general readers rather than for Lincoln scholars. There are few new ideas here; the strength of the book instead is its amassing of voluminous information into a good story.
Waugh's book has 31 brief chapters. Nearly half cover the period before 1854, when the Kansas-Nebraska Act brought Lincoln back into politics. The remainder trace Lincoln's 1858 Senate race, his speaking and political activities during 1859, and the 1860 presidential election.

Waugh's tale begins with the resolution Lincoln and Dan Stone introduced in the state legislature in 1837, in response to another resolution, passed overwhelmingly, decrying abolition societies and their doctrine. Lincoln, who had been one of six to vote no, wanted to express his sentiments but recognized that many legislators were sympathetic to slavery. His motion, therefore, was delicately phrased–declaring slavery to be both unjust and inexpedient but adding that the promulgation of abolition doctrine tends rather to increase than to abate its evils (3). Waugh cites this episode as the beginning of Lincoln's antislavery advocacy, but it is as least as interesting for the way the young legislator calibrated his remarks to the reality of the situation. This would be a hallmark of his career. He was a practical politician rather than a moral reformer. Slavery was wrong, but what he could do about it was constrained by the Constitution and public opinion. He would be willing to tolerate slavery where it already existed in return for pledges that it not be allowed to spread into new territories. He would compromise on tactics but not on goals, being convinced that confining slavery to its present boundaries would cause it eventually to die. He would be willing to wait for a century, so long as the final result was not in doubt.

Waugh moves quickly through Lincoln's early life–his birth in Kentucky, his youth in Indiana (marked especially by his mother's death and his stepmother's nurturing), and his removal to Illinois at the age of 21 in order to escape what he described as enslavement to his father. Subsequent chapters take up his life in New Salem, his entry into politics (including his early call for woman suffrage), and his successful campaign to move the state capital from Vandalia to Springfield. The murder of abolitionist editor Elijah Lovejoy is covered in some detail since Waugh assumes that it was the catalyst for Lincoln's first major speech, the address to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield in January 1838. Waugh does not refer to the scholarly controversy over that speech's meaning and significance, although he does note that Lincoln never mentioned Lovejoy by name and that his condemnation of Lovejoy's murder–if that is what the speech was–was elliptical.
During the 1830s, Lincoln also moved to Springfield, established his law practice, and first encountered Stephen A. Douglas. They were speakers for the Whig and Democratic parties in 1836 and 1840 and Douglas won a race for Congress in 1838 against Lincoln's law partner, John T. Stuart. The history of Lincoln's long and textured relationship with Douglas will color one's understanding of their later rivalry as candidates for the Senate and the Presidency. Waugh's extensive treatment of the 1840 election also explores the first debates that took place between Lincoln and Douglas, speaking respectively in behalf of William Henry Harrison and Martin Van Buren.

A significant literature has developed regarding Lincoln's marriage. Without pursuing the story in any detail, Waugh notes the complexity of his relationship with Mary Todd from the beginning. He portrays Lincoln as entering into the marriage out of duty and honor more than love. He then chronicles Lincoln's developing law practice and his growing role in state politics, the significance of the 1844 election and the controversy over Texas annexation, and Lincoln's election to Congress in 1846. Lincoln seemed awkward and out of place in Washington but nevertheless argued vigorously against the Mexican War, pointedly challenging President James K. Polk to identify the spot of American soil on which American blood had been shed (the justification Polk had used for war).

Lincoln did not run for re-election to Congress, so that other Whigs might have a chance, but the Democrats captured the seat. Out of office, he lost interest in politics and focused instead on his law practice. He became known for conceding as many points as he could to the opposition without yielding on the points that would be absolutely necessary to carry his case. This trait made his arguments clear, consistent, and well focused, and he would later adopt the same practice in politics. As is well known, the Kansas-Nebraska Act rekindled Lincoln's interest in politics and his conviction that fate had given him a role to play. This awakening was the pivot on which Lincoln's career turned; thereafter, his efforts were devoted almost entirely to preventing the extension of slavery.

Roughly the second half of the book is devoted to the years from 1854 to 1861. Again, Waugh's account covers familiar ground. He examines the famous Peoria speech, Lincoln's 1854 campaign for the Senate seat won by Lyman Trumbull, the party realignment following the Whigs' collapse, Lincoln's emergence as a Republican, the House Divided speech, and the Lincoln-Douglas debates. He also explains how Douglas's break with President James Buchanan
over the Lecompton constitution raised the threat that the Little Giant would lose Democratic votes, although in the end Buchanan did him little damage.

Waugh's description of the debates will be useful for readers who know little about them except that they gave Lincoln valuable name recognition. Waugh follows the chronology well and reminds readers of the highly partisan nature of press coverage. Reading an account in the Chicago Press and Tribune and another from the Chicago Times would lead one to wonder whether the two accounts were of the same debate. Waugh's treatment is conventional. He selects a few key lines from each debate, and as many accounts overstates the significance of Lincoln's second interrogatory at Freeport. There is virtually no analysis or interpretation, and no extended argument about the short- or long-term effects of the debates, save for the obvious judgment that they increased Lincoln's stature nationally.

The final section of the book covers events after 1858. Lincoln's speaking tours in 1859 are discussed quite briefly, but the preparation of the Cooper Union address and Lincoln's anticipation of delivering it are considered in far greater detail. Waugh mentions the origin in 1860 of the railsplitter legend, and he follows the machinations of the Republican convention at which Lincoln unrealistically had instructed his managers to make no binding commitments. The complexity of the ensuing four-way race is presented clearly, as is Lincoln's consistent refusal to take seriously the claim that the South would secede in the event of his election. Waugh also describes the intricacies of Lincoln's Cabinet selections, the preparation of his Inaugural Address, and the President-elect's extended railroad trip from Springfield to Washington. The book ends with the delivery of the Inaugural Address; an epilogue recounts the death, soon after, of Stephen A. Douglas.

This book is written as a narrative, and the tale is well told. The sources are well-known primary documents, with enough little-known anecdotes to keep the story interesting. Waugh draws extensively on newspaper accounts. There is little reference to recent scholarship, and there is little in the way of interpretive analysis. Readers expecting to find an explanation of how Lincoln was able to rise from humble origins to the Presidency will not find it here. But readers in search of the story will be rewarded for their efforts. The book breaks no new ground, but it makes an inspiring narrative easily available to readers for whom it is unfamiliar.
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