

The Long Pursuit: Abraham Lincoln's Thirty-Year Struggle With Stephen Douglas for the Heart and Soul of America

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Review

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Morris, Roy, Jr. *The Long Pursuit: Abraham Lincoln's Thirty-Year Struggle with Stephen Douglas for the Heart and Soul of America*. Smithsonian Books, \$24.95 hardcover ISBN 9780060852092

The Lincoln-Douglas Rivalry

The *Long Pursuit* draws its title from author Roy Morris's belief that Abraham Lincoln's antebellum political competition with Stephen Douglas, during which Lincoln continually tried to equal the political fortune of his more famous Illinois rival, constituted not only a vitally important stage in Lincoln's life, but also a benchmark for the American story generally. Because Lincoln and Douglas helped define and determine the course of American politics during its most convulsive era, Morris observes, it now seems almost predetermined that they would take their great debate, so to speak, onto the national stage (xiv).

It is an oft-told story, the Lincoln and Douglas rivalry, which extended from their early days as rival politicians in local Illinois politics, through their famous debates during the 1858 Senate race, and to their final showdown in 1860, when Lincoln ascended to the White House, and Douglas became embroiled in the Democratic Party's split and his own political (and personal) demise. Morris tells the story well, with verve, flair, and a nice eye for telling anecdotes.

He also brings to the subject an admirable sense of balance. Morris recognizes Douglas's more appealing qualities—his rags-to-riches story, his indomitable energy, his tremendous oratorical talent—and correctly suggests that Douglas possessed a more realistic understanding of the secessionist threat than Lincoln. As Douglas understood better than Lincoln, time was not on their side during the crisis of 1860, Morris observes (202). At the same time, he pays due attention to Douglas's various missteps and character failings, including his latent racism and the overweening ambition that led the Little Giant to engage in unseemly political machinations and embrace divisive measures like popular sovereignty. On the flipside, Morris is generally sympathetic with Lincoln, but

he recognizes Lincoln's various quirks and failings, describing for example his ongoing (and somewhat snide) references to Douglas as the Judge as tiresomely and ostentatiously repetitive (63).

While generally well researched, Morris's narrative can be suspect in details. He writes that Lincoln lost his first law partner, John Stuart, when Stuart went off to Congress, when actually the two men remained partners well into Stuart's congressional term (31). As concerns the 1860 presidential campaign, Morris wrote that for once in his political life, Lincoln felt no need to campaign: in fact, Lincoln's absence from the campaign circuit was a matter of decorum, not his felt needs—presidential candidates in his time were not supposed to take the stump in their own behalf (188). Morris has also relied a bit too heavily on other secondary sources, and inadvertently repeats errors committed by earlier authors, as when he unquestioningly follows Stephen Oates's shaky assertion that Lincoln preferred men with high foreheads and avoided blue-eyed blonds in jury trials (54).

Morris also offers little in the way of deep comparative analysis. He seems more interested in writing an exciting story. In describing the 1858 Senate race, for example, he relates in a characteristically entertaining fashion such details as Lincoln and Douglas's appearance (Douglas was all clenched fists and high dudgeon—Lincoln with a comparatively higher, shriller voice, presented a more unpolished stage presence, fumbling with his glasses—) but writes relatively little about what they actually said, beyond the rather pedestrian observations that Douglas was bigoted and Lincoln scored a telling debating point with his Freeport Doctrine (107). Indeed, in the end, Morris never gets around to proving his basic point—that the Lincoln-Douglas rivalry was a reflection of larger American political and ideological trends—assuming instead that merely a colorful rendering of the two men's personalities and careers is itself sufficient evidence enough of their importance.

That said, *The Long Pursuit* has much to recommend it, in terms of quality narrative history. Readers unfamiliar with antebellum political culture will receive a solid primer on the subject, and anyone interested in reading a crackling good political yarn will likewise enjoy Morris's considerable storytelling abilities. But those who want a deep or original analysis of Lincoln and Douglas' political and intellectual perspectives may be disappointed.

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