

Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World

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Review

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Foner, Eric, ed. *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and his World*. W.W. Norton & Company, \$27.95 hardcover ISBN 9780393067569

Lincoln in the Context of His World

Eric Foner has put together an excellent volume of eleven essays that discuss Abraham Lincoln in the context of 19th century America. What makes *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World* stand out is that it does not simply chronicle Lincoln's words and deeds, but rather places them in the context of his world. The editor and contributors believe there is something new to write about Lincoln "if one takes as a starting point the complex interrelationship between the man and the times in which he lived" (11). The authors also hope to elucidate on the new interpretations of the era as they apply to Lincoln "in the hope of producing a more nuanced understanding of both the man and his world" (12). The volume is divided into three sections, but no single theme unites the essays. The first section covers Lincoln's political career and the White House years, the second examines the issues of slavery and race, while the third part addresses various aspects of Lincoln's life within 19th century American society. A final essay discusses Lincoln and how his image and words have been remembered, used, and misused.

The first section of this book looks at Lincoln's political career and includes essays by noted scholars James M. McPherson and Sean Wilentz among others. McPherson addresses Lincoln's performance and conduct as commander in chief. The president entered the White House with virtually no military background at all, but had to lead the country through the Civil War. In that capacity, McPherson explains, Lincoln had to formulate and carry out functions that would today be called national policy, national strategy, military strategy, operations, and tactics, although they were not systematically defined that way in 1861. This was a daunting task under the best of circumstances, and Lincoln faced these issues and conquered them in the midst of a national crisis.

McPherson concludes that Lincoln settled on a “clear national policy, and through trial and error evolved national and military strategies to achieve it” (36).

Sean Wilentz’s essay traces Lincoln’s interest in and knowledge of Andrew Jackson’s political philosophies. Wilentz suggests that Lincoln was attracted to the words, ideas, and actions of America’s seventh president. Besides Jackson, Lincoln cited Jefferson’s ideas on equality and territorial issues, particularly after 1854. In making the connection between Lincoln and Jackson, the author determined that the crises over the Kansas-Nebraska Act “shifted Lincoln’s perspective on Jackson’s presidency” (73). As the sectional crisis continued in the 1850s and early 1860s, Lincoln came to have a greater appreciation for Jackson’s handling of sectional extremism. Lincoln in fact quoted Jackson’s bank veto message in his remarks opposing the Dred Scott decision and reviewed Old Hickory’s nullification proclamation when composing his first inaugural address. Wilentz clearly establishes that Republican Abraham Lincoln consulted Democrat Jackson at critical times in his political career.

The second section of *Our Lincoln* addresses the president’s positions on slavery and race. James Oakes discusses Lincoln’s views on equality between the races. Oakes explains that Lincoln believed race relations were regulated on three different levels--natural rights, citizenship rights, and rights regulated by the states. On natural rights Lincoln distinguished slavery from racism, and claimed that the rights of free labor applied to both whites and blacks; generally speaking he favored equality of the races. On citizenship rights Lincoln said almost nothing publicly until the Dred Scott decision, but by his first inaugural the new president endorsed black citizenship rights. On rights regulated by the states Lincoln refrained from meddling in matters that states control; in other words, he was willing to make concessions.

In his own essay, Eric Foner outlines Lincoln’s position on colonization. From the earliest days of his public career Lincoln’s outlook on slavery closely paralleled Henry Clay’s, and he supported the concept of colonization. In his 1852 eulogy of the Great Pacificator Lincoln mentioned colonization; two years later in his well-known Peoria speech he included a passage where he envisioned freed slaves’ return to Africa. The new president made known his support for colonization from the very beginning of his administration, and in his December 3, 1861, annual message Lincoln asked Congress for funds for colonization. Foner reveals that the most controversial moment of Lincoln’s career came on

August 14, 1862 when he supported colonization when meeting with a black delegation. The president apparently failed to consider the ramifications of such a public endorsement of colonization. Lincoln remained committed to colonization until January 1, 1863, when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

The third part of the volume looks at Lincoln's life within changes in 19th century American society. Catherine Clinton contributes an essay in which she examines Lincoln and his family relationships; she contends that understanding Lincoln's families remain central to understanding the man. Death and despair in his household helps define Lincoln the man. Clinton writes that Lincoln seemed to brood over questions of legitimacy and illegitimacy, inheritance and privilege. From his mother Lincoln learned lessons of charity and forgiveness, characteristics evident throughout his administration, especially in the Second Inaugural. The author describes his relationship with his wife as a "warm, intellectually compatible relationship" (261).

While the first ten essays place Lincoln in the context of 19th century America, the final essay examines the memory of Lincoln and how his words have been used and misused. David Blight addresses the theft of Lincoln in scholarship, politics, and memory. Blight suggests that there have been a myriad of "appropriations, uses, inventions, and reinventions—thefts—of the sixteenth president's meaning and memory" (269). It is somewhat ironic that modern Republicans seem to misuse Lincoln's words and use them out of context more than others. The author points out that President Reagan badly misused Lincoln's words at the 1992 Republican National Convention, crediting Lincoln with aphorisms that had been fabricated. More recently, in 2006 Newt Gingrich somehow connected the Civil War with the current conflict in Iraq. The conclusions one draws is that Lincoln's image has never been more popular, he is a malleable figure, and is often badly misused and misquoted.

Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and his World is a terrific collection of essays that has something for everyone interested in Abraham Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln the man is placed in the context of 19th century America and we learn a great deal about the sixteenth president.

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