

# Look At Lincoln: Lincoln And Liberalism

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## Feature Essay

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**Burt, John** *Look at Lincoln: Lincoln and Liberalism*. Harvard University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9780674050181

During our Abraham Lincoln spring, one cannot fail to notice the attention fixed on the 16th president who continues to preoccupy us through a wide variety of interpretations—both popular and scholarly—that pervade so many aspects of modern culture. This new and weighty book by John Burt, a Professor of English at Brandeis University, examines anew the meaning of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates—how to resolve fundamental conflict in an open society.

In June 1858, when he accepted his nomination for a seat in the United States Senate, Lincoln directly, in one of his greatest and most controversial speeches, challenged Stephen A. Douglas and the Democratic Party's beliefs. His House-Divided speech proclaimed, "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure permanently half *slave* and half *free*." Although Lincoln emphasized that he did not expect the House to fall or the Union to dissolve, he did expect that it would cease to be divided. Two months later, the debate series began.

There have been other respected books written about the Lincoln-Douglas Debates during the election in Illinois. For example, Harry V. Jaffa, Harold Holzer, Allen C. Guelzo, Rodney O. Davis and Douglas L. Wilson have each made useful contributions to one of the most important events in United States political history. Is there anything new to add?

Burt examines the debates from the perspective of "liberalism." But what is meant by this term? Classical liberalism or modern liberalism? Liberal democracy? Liberal political parties? He transforms Lincoln and Douglas into the embodiments of liberal thinkers such as John Rawls, Immanuel Kant and Alexis de Tocqueville. The author argues that the "hope of liberal politics is that it can establish a tradition of fair dealing among people of different interests and

views.” (10) To him, Lincoln and Douglas, “sought, in different ways, to work out the relationship between principle and consent in liberal politics, and neither was fully successful in enabling liberal politics to mediate the conflict over slavery.” (15)

According to Burt, Abraham Lincoln’s approach to slavery is depicted in three main themes: “the implicitness of concepts,” “reverse Burkeanism,” and “tragic pragmatism.” (4-5) “Tragic pragmatism” is “characteristic of Lincoln’s analysis of the political conflicts of his own era.” (5) It is the overriding wish “to keep the promises the Founders committed their nation to,” but “one always discovers that the exigencies of history unfold new demands out of these concepts, demands our generation has almost inevitably failed.” So, this historic moral conflict and the Lincoln-Douglas confrontation about the legitimacy of slavery had a long-lasting and profound effect on Americans.

The author’s balanced analysis of Stephen A. Douglas, who wound up losing, marks the book as a judicious one. Burt insists that Douglas “is not the villain of this book, although I hope I see his flaws, especially his virulent and passionate racism, with sufficient clarity.” (20) While examining Lincoln’s claim against Douglas in the House-Divided Speech that the incumbent senator was part of a conspiracy to force slavery everywhere, Burt suggests it was done “only for strategic reasons.” (94)

Burt challenges Harry Jaffa by viewing Lincoln, and Douglas, “within the liberal tradition, and connect(s) them with Kant, Madison and Tocqueville rather than Plato and Aristotle.” (10) “[U]nlike Jaffa,” Burt does “not think Lincoln overpowers Douglas on every point...” (10)

For Burt, Lincoln’s reading of the Declaration of Independence as antislavery was transformative for Lincoln. Burt believes that Abraham Lincoln understood that the Declaration was not fixed in 1776 but fluid and awaiting a move to the basic ideals of the Founders and their documents as history permits. The core question raised here is how can a liberal (which is to say politically pluralistic) society justly engage in a non-negotiable moral position (in this case, that slavery is evil)?

Despite its bulk—some 800 pages—this is a worthwhile book since the Lincoln-Douglas Debates brought the issue of slavery and race to the forefront before the Civil War began and tragic pragmatism and moral conflict would

shape American history.

*Frank J. Williams is the Chair of The Lincoln Forum, author of Lincoln as Hero, and contributing columnist for the Civil War Sesquicentennial.*