

Jefferson, Lincoln, And The Unfinished Work Of The Nation

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Review

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Hatzenbuehler, Ronald L. *Jefferson, Lincoln, and the Unfinished Work of the Nation*. Southern Illinois Press, \$19.50 ISBN 9780809334902

Finding the Nation: Jefferson, Lincoln, and the Development of American Constitutionalism

At first glance, a direct comparative analysis of two famous individuals like Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln would seem to be a fairly straightforward endeavor. Both men sit in the same pantheon of rarified air of “Great Americans” and former presidents. Both left copious primary source collections, and each is the subject of his own massive historical literature; there are in fact considerable numbers of historians who identify as “Jefferson scholars” and “Lincoln scholars.” Both were serious thinkers with much to say about the American experiment, and their ideas often intersected in the same broad areas of the nation’s intellectual life: freedom, liberty, the ongoing strengths and weaknesses of American democracy.

But such a project poses serious challenges, as well. Their ideas may have overlapped, but Lincoln and Jefferson came from very different backgrounds in different time periods, and were in many ways different in their personalities and temperaments. Another question also presents itself: what exactly are we comparing? Their respective biographies? Personalities? Psychological backgrounds? Ideologies? Without a careful delineation of some third thing—“Lincoln, Jefferson, and.....?”—the narrative risks turning itself into a sort of historical tennis match, bouncing back and forth between the two men with no real narrative coherence.

Jefferson, Lincoln, and the Unfinished Work of the Nation happily avoids this difficulty, making clear from the outset that Hatzenbuehler is primarily interested in how these two men understood and articulated a sense of the American nation as a community. He places particular emphasis on the “unfinished” part (a phrase Hatzenbuehler derives from Lincoln’s Gettysburg

Address), arguing that “neither [Lincoln nor Jefferson] reached closure on many of the important topics of his day (p. 5).” This especially included matters related to race and slavery, which in different ways bedeviled both men, but more generally also includes an examination of the ongoing and contentious debates, in both Jefferson’s and Lincoln’s era, about politics and American constitutionalism.

These debates garner the bulk of Hatzenbeuhler’s attention; his book is fundamentally a political and constitutional work of scholarship. He takes a topical approach to these issues, centering his chapters around each man’s perspective on the nature of partisan politics in the American republic, the debates regarding federalism and the relationship between state and federal authority, government power and economic growth, and the role God and religion played in American public life. His comparative analysis of each issue is solid, accurate, and firmly rooted in the requisite sources. When analyzing their respective ideas about political economy, for example, Hatzenbeuhler observes that “Jefferson encouraged government leaders to pass laws that favored agriculture over commerce or industry,” while Lincoln tended to favor government-sponsored programs of internal improvements that benefited not just farmers but the nation’s burgeoning industrial and market sectors as well (p. 95). “Both Jefferson and Lincoln saw labor, not capital, as the basis of wealth and formed their ideas regarding the proper role of government in promoting economic growth as encouraging people to engage in what Lincoln termed “useful labour (p. 113).”

These are useful insights, but they will not come as any particular surprise to Lincoln or Jefferson scholars. Where Hatzenbeuhler is more original is his extended discussion in the latter chapters of his book of each man’s “sense of place,” their ideas regarding community and how they related to the nation as a whole. “Both men tried to foster change, Jefferson in his “country” and Lincoln in his nation,” Hatzenbeuhler observes, “Ultimately, Lincoln was more successful in his goal than Jefferson, because they understood place differently. Put succinctly, for Jefferson *place* defined a *people*. For Lincoln, *people* defined a *place* (p. 115).”

By this Hatzenbeuhler means that Jefferson habitually used Virginia as his lodestone to use as a way of assessing other people and places; and he was, to his credit, able to see that Virginia had its shortcomings, particularly in its dependence on slave labor. But at the end of the day, Jefferson could not really

transcend the values and norms of the Virginia gentry; he could not really mount an effective critique of Virginia's racial caste system and its oppressive slave system. "He did not follow through with what he knew needed to be done," Hatzenbuehler writes, "he accommodated to the way things were and contented himself with the personal satisfaction that he had done all he could for Virginia (p. 125)."

Lincoln, on the other hand, was not so inflexibly wedded to the places in which he grew up and practiced law and politics (Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois) or even the nation which he led that he could not transcend their limitations and provide real political and social change via the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment. More concerned with people than places, Lincoln "moved beyond local attachments," according to Hatzenbeuhler, and "in doing so, was able to redefine himself (p. 126)." More to the point, Lincoln was able to redefine the nation. Jefferson was big; Lincoln was just a bit bigger.

This is an interesting and original insight. One wishes Hatzenbeuhler had gone further, however, and explained more fully just why this matters—not just in our understanding of Lincoln and Jefferson as individuals, but American community and nationalism overall. He rightly observes that these two men's ideas are still vitally important to civic debates today, but he does not devote enough attention to explaining exactly how or why this is so. What does this Lincolnian approach's relative success *vis* Jefferson tell us about the nature of American nationalism and the role of reform in a democracy? What could it tell us about the breakdown of the Union before the Civil War, or the failures of Reconstruction afterwards? Hatzenbeuhler does not really delve very deeply into these questions, which are the natural outgrowth of his own fascinating insights.

These are not the complaints of a reviewer criticizing a bad book; rather, they are the complaints of a reviewer who has read a good, intriguing book and wishes for more. In some ways, this exploration of Lincoln and Jefferson's ideas about an unfinished nation feels a bit like an unfinished book. More could be done here, and one hopes that perhaps someday the author will produce another work which builds upon a promising beginning.

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