Look At Lincoln: Lincoln's Political Reawakening

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Feature Essay

Spring 2017

Look at Lincoln: Lincoln's Political Reawakening.

Wrestling With His Angel: The Political Life of Abraham Lincoln Vol. II, 1849-1856 By Sidney Blumenthal **Publisher:** Simon & Schuster **Retail Price:** \$35.00 **ISBN:**1501153781

Talented journalist and historian (as well as a political advisor) Sidney Blumenthal, has undertaken the challenging task of writing a multi-volume biography of America's greatest president. *Wrestling with his Angel: The Political Life of Abraham Lincoln*, his second volume, shows the evolution of Lincoln into one of the most astute and Machiavellian politicians of his era. It more than matches the breadth and depth of the first volume. Lincoln returns home to his law practice rather than run for re-election to the House of Representatives. He finally emerges from political exile after the decrepit and demonizing Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed by Congress. It abrogated the Missouri Compromise which had kept peace – albeit fragile – for over 30 years. Lincoln is incensed and fired up to battle his longtime political nemesis, Senator Stephen A. Douglas, primarily responsible for the 1854 Act. In the process, Lincoln sees the demise of the Whig Party and helps found the Republican Party in Illinois.

The author provides the deep and often lurid background of the age in which Lincoln lived, operated, practiced law, raised a family, and became a political genius. Even more than in the first volume, Blumenthal provides a contextual examination of American politics – to understand Lincoln's "presence in the transforming events that would eventually carry him to the presidency and their profound influence upon him." This was a significant period of American history with the election of "old rough and ready" Zachary Taylor as President who was anti-slavery, the Compromise of 1850, the odious *Dred Scott* decision and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. It provoked Lincoln "from his political slumber." The Civil War did not just happen. We were doomed to have it for many reasons, from the first boatload of slaves in 1619, and especially during the decade prior

to the beginning of the war.

Blumenthal provides a stunning description of how Lincoln and his like-minded fellows maneuvered to destroy the anti-immigrant party in Illinois in order to create a new Republican Party. Lincoln writes the new party's first platform and jumps onto the national stage as the leader of that party as a result of his faceoff with Douglas in the 1858 debates. The race ended in a pyrrhic victory for Douglas, while Lincoln's performance helped launch him to the presidency.

The author portrays Lincoln in this period (1849-56) searching for a purpose and place in American politics. One question that Blumenthal attempts to answer is whether Lincoln made himself the moral agent in the 1850s. Did his use of metaphors like the "house divided" in speeches and thoughts from the 1850s suggest more than to "do no more than oppose the *extension* of slavery..." and to preserve the Union?

Lincoln saw bad faith with the pro-slavery invasion of Kansas, but knew that Kansas was only part of the sepsis infecting the entire country. Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska bill was not just unprincipled and amoral, but also the product of coercion, if not bribery. It was political in the worst sense of the word, but Lincoln believed that it was only through politics that the Act's corrosive effects could be countered.

A fellow Whig lawyer traveling the Eighth Judicial Circuit in Central Illinois with Lincoln recalled a long discussion with Lincoln who believed that slavery at some point in the future would become extinct. The argument went on for a long time and early in the morning when Dickey woke up he saw Lincoln sitting up in bed. "Dickey," said Lincoln, "I tell you this nation cannot exist half slave and half free." "Oh, Lincoln," replied Dickey, "go to sleep."

This soon to be four-volume biography of Lincoln is the most readable to date and promises to be a modern classic in understanding Lincoln's life.

Frank J. Williams is the Chair of the Lincoln Forum and author of Lincoln as Hero, and is a contributing columnist for Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War and Reconstruction.