

Becoming Lincoln

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Review

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Freehling, William W. *Becoming Lincoln*. University of Virginia Press, \$29.95
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Politics “always came first” for Abraham Lincoln, writes William W. Freehling (128). The future “Great Emancipator” hesitated, however, to make America’s original sin part of his political agenda. Only after “twenty years of antislavery silence” did he start to find a new voice (100).

Freehling insists that Lincoln, all along, was driven “to save the Founders’ flawed republic” (106). He wanted to resuscitate the spirit of the Declaration of Independence and give all men “an unfettered start, and a fair chance” (307). But his sensitive political antenna constrained him. Most Illinois whites were unmoved by the wrongs inflicted on Southern slaves and unwilling to see black people enjoy equal rights.

From a young age Lincoln made his mark as a deft partisan organizer. He labored to build up the Whig Party in a Democratic-dominated state. He nevertheless regretted, Freehling contends, that antislavery remained politically off-limits. Few shared his wish to “fan the feeble sparks” of white Southern antislavery (272). The current generation had so regressed from the ideals of the Founders, Lincoln feared, as to preclude any “peaceful, voluntary emancipation” (155).

In the mid-1850s Lincoln seized the opportunity to direct his organizing skills toward something more promising than the disintegrating Whigs. He made himself the “supreme architect” of the Illinois Republican Party (96). He reached out both to German immigrants and nativists, as well as to heretofore-antagonistic Democrats, Free Soilers, and Whigs. The way to build a “moderate antislavery party” in Illinois was to emphasize that slavery expansion threatened free white Northerners (172). Republicans also promised not to attack slavery in states where it already existed. Lincoln rejected hardline Republicans demands—to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, to overturn the Fugitive Slave Act, and to bar the admission

of new slave states. Yet he had to convince radical Republicans led by Owen Lovejoy “to remain in the moderate-dominated party,” and Lovejoy had to believe that Lincoln too hated slavery (191). There could be no Republican Party in Illinois unless the many voters in northern Illinois who saw slavery as a moral problem were willing to join with those in the central part of the state who would reserve western territories for free white settlers.

Building a 51% majority of the electorate was an entirely different matter than hurling abolitionist thunderbolts. Freehling recognizes that “many latter-day Americans, if transported back to the nineteenth century with twenty-first-century mentalities intact, would have joined abolitionist extremists, crusading for faster progress from the 1830s onward” (107). But an “ocean,” he quips, separates the sixteenth president from posterity (148). Lincoln saw antislavery as a gradual, long-run venture. He often suggested that African-Americans might best be colonized elsewhere in the world, an idea that “inspires modern shudders” (148). He thought the slave system might continue for another century. In the heat of partisan combat he made far-fetched accusations—that Stephen A. Douglas concealed a “*real zeal*” to legalize slavery nationwide, North and South (161).

Becoming Lincoln reveals a principled politician who tried to reconcile short-term partisan needs with consequential long-term national goals. He demonstrated that “a mainstream leader who dominates the great middle and keeps in touch with one extreme can become a historic reformer” (321). He always understood the imperative of holding together “a largely moderate majority” in a “largely conservative Union” (306). Freehling adroitly charts his own course through a minefield of contradictory evidence. He largely disdains historiographical one-upmanship, but insiders will see how his multidimensional Lincoln harmonizes disparate interpretations. Freehling’s Lincoln always was morally purposeful, even though a skeptic might complain that his antislavery commitment only became manifest once it offered partisan advantage.

During Lincoln’s first month in office, he was bedeviled by the ticking time bomb at Fort Sumter, offshore from Charleston, South Carolina. Freehling shows that a second endangered Union outpost—Fort Pickens, offshore from Pensacola, Florida—seemed for several key weeks to offer the new president a way to wriggle out of his excruciating Sumter dilemma. But his subordinates fumbled Pickens’ reinforcement—and the war followed. By then, Lincoln judged

that forcible means alone could preserve the legacy of the Founders. That juncture also marked the knell of his long-cherished objective—peaceful, voluntary emancipation.

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