

Look at Lincoln: Becoming Lincoln

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Review

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Freehling, William W. *Becoming Lincoln*. University of Virginia Press, 2018
\$29.95 ISBN 9781476795928

Becoming Lincoln is a study of Abraham Lincoln's life before his presidency, which focuses not on his successes, but on his failures. Beginning with his youth, the volume addresses Lincoln's early political setbacks from defeats at the ballot box to his time in the Illinois state legislature, a length of four terms that the author considers less than successful. This captivating book focuses on Lincoln's journey to the presidency, alongside the recently released Sydney Blumenthal's series *The Political Life of Abraham Lincoln* and David Herbert Donald's *Lincoln*.

All the while, Professor Freehling, Emeritus, University of Kentucky, avoids David Donald's interpretation of Lincoln as both reflexive and passive. The author of *The Road to Disunion*, Freehling considers Lincoln's thoughts of and his relationship with his father and his failures. This relationship, Professor Freehling argues, is the driving force behind Lincoln's constant effort to excel in his work.

To Professor Freehling, Lincoln is a self-made man who used failure as a learning tool and a way to take two steps forward with every one step back. From an early age, Lincoln worked his father's land in both Indiana and Illinois. By focusing more on working the land, his father perhaps drove his son to reading aloud and memorization. But Abraham's anecdotes and stories, are a direct result of listening to his father.

Lincoln's charm was an important aspect to his political success. But his melancholy and dedication also helped attract individuals who would support him in both good times and bad, through both successes and setbacks.

Professor Freehling addresses Lincoln's service during the Black Hawk War. Despite its short duration, merely three months, Lincoln became close with men who supported Lincoln

both in his immediate needs, but also in selecting a career in which he could flourish—from surveying to law and politics. His early experience in politics, in the Illinois state legislature and single term in the United States House of Representatives, allowed Lincoln to understand how to manipulate the mechanisms of government and the need to seek common ground to avoid political extremism. Though personally despising the institution of slavery, he remained nearly silent on the issue, knowing that extremists on both sides would likely lead the country to war. The future president always understood that the United States needed to stay just that, united.

Professor Freehling analyzes and interprets the pre-Civil War era and Lincoln's place in it, and shows how he became the leader we remember today as the nation's guide through its most trying hour. The author's unbound study and knowledge of the pre-Civil War era clearly informs this book and shows what truly made Lincoln. The book is a "must have" for any Civil War library.

Frank J. Williams is the founding Chair of the Lincoln Forum, President of The Ulysses S. Grant Association and Presidential Library, and regular *Civil War Book Review* columnist for Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War, and Reconstruction.