

Lincoln and the American Founding

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Review

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Morel, Lucas E. *Lincoln and the American Founding*. Concise Lincoln Library Series, Southern Illinois University Press, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$24.95 ISBN: 9780809337859 pp. 162.

In a symbolic tableau, Abraham Lincoln stood in Philadelphia's Independence Hall on Washington's Birthday in 1861 and proclaimed "all the political sentiments I entertain . . . were given to the world from this hall. I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence." Such expressions were not just nationalistic paternoster. Lincoln throughout his life, whether on the public hustings or in private, declared he was guided by the prescient wisdom of America's revolutionary leaders whom he reverently called the 'founders,' 'framers,' 'noble fathers,' and 'our fathers.' Lincoln's relationship with the Founding Fathers is therefore worth pondering since he repeatedly vowed that it was their ideas and documents that anchored his political ideology. But exactly how deep did that connection truly run? Was Lincoln such an undisputed intellectual heir to the Revolutionary generation that a recent biographer titled the work *Founders' Son*?

Seeking to answer that important question is Lucas E. Morel's book *Lincoln and the American Founding*. Morel, the John K. Boardman, Jr. Professor of Politics at Washington and Lee University, is well suited to his task whose earlier publications include *Lincoln and Liberty: Wisdom for the Ages* and *Lincoln's Sacred Effort: Defining Religion's Role in American Self-Government*. He is a trustee of the Supreme Court Historical Society, a former president of the Abraham Lincoln Institute, and a member of the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission. Morel's intellectual history is another installment in the Concise Lincoln Library series published by Southern Illinois University Press designed to appeal both to Lincoln aficionados and advanced scholars. Each condensed volume, authored by noted scholars, deals with a different aspect of Abraham Lincoln's life and times exploring topics that have not previously received book-length treatment. The book's five chapters, each labeled 'an appeal,' are divided along thematic lines,

each tracing a particular founding influence on Lincoln in chronological order thus demonstrating how his thoughts and opinions matured over time.

Morel's premise is that Lincoln can only be truly understood when his beliefs, words, and actions are viewed through the prism of America's founding documents. Although Lincoln extolled George Washington as "the mightiest name of earth," historians like James G. Randall rightly point out that Lincoln's basic ideals were more akin to Thomas Jefferson. Morel adds weight to that judgment and posits that Lincoln viewed the Declaration as the wellspring of all American liberties whose author had espoused universally ordained truths applicable to all men at all times. The Declaration of Independence for Lincoln was his lodestar for understanding government by the consent of the governed, individual rights, and human equality based on freedom for all and not merely select groups. Moreover, the Declaration was to be considered a national birthright that conveyed a kinship lineage to each succeeding generation of Americans binding them to the founders as their political "descendants."

Lincoln's most cogent interpretive views on the founders' intentions stem from his clashes with Stephen A. Douglas and his Cooper Union Address. The Constitution to Lincoln was the mechanism by which a more perfect union would be realized undergirded by equality and the individual's "right to rise." It was the nation's structural buttress and "safeguard of our liberties" not to be lightly altered without overwhelming justification. In Morel's estimation this explains Lincoln's firm conviction that he was treading on the same path as the founders in seeking slavery's gradual extinction. As Lincoln repeatedly pointed out, slavery had not been enshrined in the Constitution, Congress had banned the international slave trade, and the Northwest Ordinance had barred the practice from the bulk of the territorial frontier. These were clear indicators to Lincoln that the founders intended to fulfill the Declaration's words with deeds and it explains his reluctance to identify as an abolitionist as their radical remedies violated the founder-established rule of law.

Morel claims that it was the apparent creeping national degeneracy manifested in the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, the Dred Scott decision, and the fraudulent Lecompton Constitution that propelled Lincoln back into politics. Lincoln roundly condemned both southern pro-slavery advocates and northern doughfaces for refusing to take the framers' text literally and he feared that Americans were being tempted into giving up the old faith of the Founders for new "lullaby arguments" encapsulated in Stephen Douglas's philosophy of Popular Sovereignty (Basler,

Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, vol. 2, Oct. 16, 1854, p. 264). In Lincoln's mind, such notions were "the same old serpent" of self interest; if exceptions were carved to the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln told a close Kentucky friend, there was no predicting where exclusions might end (Basler, *Collected Works*, Vol. 2, July 10, 1858, p. 501). A nation birthed on the idea that "all men are created equal" might soon have that principle reduced to "all men are created equal, except negroes," to be followed by "all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and catholics," with further qualifiers added *ad libitum* (Basler, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 2, August 24, 1855, p. 324).

Although *Lincoln and the American Founding's* text runs scarcely more than one hundred pages, it is densely packed with astute observations beneficial to general readers and Lincoln scholars alike. Morel's cogent writing style makes the book eminently readable and he wisely employs a policy that other historians should emulate which is to let Lincoln himself do most of the talking. While no radically new interpretations are advanced, Morel does challenge past intellectual historians' claims that Lincoln actively desired to raze the Founders' flawed national structure so that he could win acclaim by rebuilding it. The bibliography draws upon many valuable recent works on Lincoln with primary sources coming largely from Roy P. Basler's *Collected Works* as well as selected online resources. What seemingly is missing is any use of the new Lincoln materials collected and digitally curated by the Papers of Abraham Lincoln which might have added a fresh source perspective.

Readers may find some of the questions provoked by this book addressed in other series volumes. For example, Morel observes that Lincoln's speeches often contain odes to the founders gleaned from reading their speeches, works by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, and even Parson Weems. A worthwhile evaluation would be to see how well Lincoln's deductions about the motives of the founders taken from readings available to him at the time compare with modern scholarship on the subject. Were Lincoln's judgments balanced or were they skewed by too much hagiography? Similarly, Lincoln readily acknowledged many of the Founding Fathers had been slaveholders, yet he still claimed that they had only accepted it "by necessity." Such sentiments seemly cast the framers as captives themselves absolving them of any willing complicity with slavery. Does Lincoln give the founders too much credit by portraying them as consistently anti-slavery? Then too there are Lincoln's broad executive actions during the Civil War which were at odds with what his prewar self would have argued as compatible with the Founders' wishes and

certainly few of the Framers would have welcomed the constitutional changes he set in motion that were enacted after the conflict ended.

Morel concludes by reminding us that Lincoln placed responsibility for bequeathing to posterity the freedoms secured by the Founders upon a vigilant citizenry and never taking for granted that American liberty would remain endlessly secure. Instead, he warned that “the deep rooted principle of hate, and the powerful motive of revenge” compounded by the “jealousy, envy, and avarice, incident to our nature” remained lurking menaces (Basler, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 1, January 27, 1838, p. 115). Today, with the country’s political and societal fabric at its most frayed since the 1850s, Lincoln’s prognostication that America’s greatest danger would likely arise from inside and not outside its borders necessitates reiteration. “If destruction be our lot,” he cautioned, “we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen we must live through all time or die by suicide.” Can the “better angels of our nature” that Lincoln once summoned be called upon to again to defend the Founders’ achievements? *Lincoln and the American Founding* makes it seem possible.

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