

Eric Foner, ed., *Our Lincoln: New Perspective on Lincoln and His World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008)

Reviewed by Jason Miller

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Divided into four parts, *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World* offers new insights into Abraham Lincoln's life. Divided between Lincoln as President, as the Great Emancipator, as Family Man, and in Memory, these essays span from revisionist efforts to wholly new contributions to the historiography of Lincoln and the world in which he lived. Contributors include such household names as James McPherson and Eric Foner as well as names recognizable to specialists of the Civil War Era such as David Blight, Mark Neely Jr., Lincoln specialist Harold Holzer, and up and comer Manisha Sinha. Acting in his role as editor, Foner excels illustrating coherent themes that run through the volume while allowing each essay to stand on their own.

The first two sections of this compilation, "The President" and "Great Emancipator," contained some of the most interesting, illuminating, and convincing articles. Leading off part one is James M. McPherson's "A. Lincoln, Commander in Chief." Using an interdisciplinary approach of studying politics, strategy, and tactics to explore wartime Presidential leadership, McPherson seeks to fill the gap left by Lincoln's biographers—Lincoln's relationship with his armies. McPherson argues that Lincoln "took a more active, hands-on part in shaping military strategy than presidents have done in most other wars."³⁶³ Through his well known correspondence pushing McClellan to take the initiative in spring 1862 to other lesser known examples of Lincoln's prodding his generals, McPherson portrays Lincoln as actively espousing his own strategic outlook. The hesitancy of his generals troubled Lincoln, especially the commanders of the Army of the Potomac, until he finally found his kindred spirit in U.S. Grant in 1864. Anyone who may have heard McPherson speak over the past year will recognize this article and recall specific passages if not entire pages from his speaking engagements. If one were to buy this solely for McPherson's article they would be better advised to purchase his recently released book length exposition on this topic: *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief*.

Anyone interested in Lincoln and his questionable actions in relation to the Constitution during the war would benefit from Mark Neely Jr.'s article. Neely argues that while it is widely known that Lincoln was

³⁶³James McPherson, "A. Lincoln, Commander in Chief," in *Our Lincoln: New Perspective on Lincoln and His World*, Eric Foner, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 28.

attempting to expand his Presidential powers through the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, what has remained unacknowledged is that Supreme Court Justice Taney's *Ex parte Merryman* decision was also an unconstitutional position aimed at increasing the Supreme Court's power. In his zeal Taney had not formulated his argument completely. His "overeager acceptance of the jurisdictional gift of Section 14 of the Judiciary Act of 1789" points to the "aggressive nature" of Taney's rulings and the willful expansion of his powers to protect Southern rights that began to turn reckless in his *Dred Scott* decision.³⁶⁴ Sean Wilentz's article portrays Lincoln as a Whig that "had always been more egalitarian than that of other Whigs" and had some Jacksonian tendencies. While an otherwise well argued article, Wilentz does not seem to take into account that Lincoln, as a western Whig, may have differed from eastern compatriots solely due to regional interests.

Part Two begins with an James Oakes' "Natural Rights, Citizenship Rights, States' Rights, and Black Rights: Another Look at Lincoln and Race." Historians have long struggled with the issue of Lincoln's racial views. As Oakes points out "The evidence for Lincoln's views on the equality of blacks and whites is hopelessly contradictory. String together one set of quotations, and Lincoln comes off as a dyed-in-the-wool white supremacist. Compile a different body of evidence, and Lincoln reads like the purest of racial egalitarians."³⁶⁵ Oakes divides Lincoln's views into three levels: constitutional natural rights, privileges and immunities of citizenship, and race relations at the local level. Only this third division pertained to matters such as voting, jury duty, and marriage that, according to Oakes, Lincoln made "every concession" to "racial prejudice".³⁶⁶ Conversely, according to Oakes, Lincoln consistently upheld the natural rights and privileges and immunities of citizenship guaranteed to all citizens in the Constitution.

In "Lincoln and Colonization," Foner points out that most historians believe Lincoln adhered to Colonization of freed blacks for reasons of political pragmatism. According to this view, he did not want to alienate the less radical antislavery members of the Republican Party's antislavery coalition. He, therefore, held up the promise of exporting the "problem" of freedmen outside of the boundaries of the United States as a way to keep potential detractors within his ranks. For Foner, Lincoln was a true believer in colonization. He demonstrates that the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation contained references to colonization and that

³⁶⁴ Mark E. Neely, Jr., "The Constitution and Civil Liberties Under Lincoln," in *Our Lincoln: New Perspective on Lincoln and His World*, Eric Foner, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 45.

³⁶⁵ James Oakes, "Natural Rights, Citizenship Rights, States' Rights, and Black Rights: Another Look at Lincoln and Race," in *Our Lincoln: New Perspective on Lincoln and His World*, Eric Foner, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 109-110.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 110-111.

Lincoln's embrace of colonization did not reconcile him to opponents of emancipation during the elections of 1862.³⁶⁷ Even on New Year's Eve 1862, the day before Emancipation Proclamation was to go into effect, Lincoln signed a contract with Bernard Kock to help settle freed blacks on Cow Island in the Caribbean and, even though he never spoke publicly of colonization after January 1 of 1863, Lincoln continued to look into schemes of colonization. For Foner, Lincoln's "long embrace of colonization suggests that recent historians may have been too quick to claim him as a supremely clever politician who secretly but steadfastly pursued the goal embodied in the Emancipation Proclamation or as a model of political pragmatism in contrast with the fanatical abolitionists. For what idea was more utopian and impractical than this fantastic scheme?"³⁶⁸ As Foner argues that, if Lincoln truly was a political pragmatist, he seriously misjudged the Border States' embrace of emancipation, the willingness of blacks to leave the country of their birth, and the "intractability of northern racism as an obstacle to ending slavery."³⁶⁹

Foner's provocative and convincing essay is followed by Manisha Sinha's equally provocative but less convincing "Allies for Emancipation?: Lincoln and Black Abolitionists." Like many historians, Sinha upholds the view that Lincoln's time in the Oval Office changed his perception of his role and the conflict's role in American history. Moving from a war of reunification to a war of emancipation, Lincoln came to see the conflict as part of a millennialist divine plan for the nation and the ending of slavery. Yet, from this basis she overstates the influence that black abolitionists, including Douglass, had upon the president. It is likely that black intellectual leaders of the abolitionist movement influenced Lincoln, but her argument does not show a causal link between their influence and Lincoln's views. In fact, if one was to accept the view of James Oakes's essay, Douglass and other black abolitionists were preaching to the choir. Her essay, like her book *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina*, seems to garner its main force from the restatement of her thesis throughout the work. That, however, does not make it convincing.

Part Three of the compilation investigates Lincoln "The Man." This section begins with Andrew Delbanco's exploration of what meanings may have been lost and wrongly attached to Lincoln's words over past 140 years. It is an intriguing read for anyone concerned with the meaning of Lincoln's words in Lincoln's world. For this reader, most impressive within this section is Richard Carwardine's "Lincoln's Religion" which traces Lincoln's religious beliefs from his days as an "'infidel' politician of the 1830s" to an evangelical Protestant during his stint in the White House in

³⁶⁷ Eric Foner, "Lincoln and Colonization," in *Our Lincoln: New Perspective on Lincoln and His World*, Eric Foner, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 159.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 166.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

which he looked for signs from God.³⁷⁰ In his early political days in Illinois, Lincoln was well aware that religion played a significant role in people's lives as well as their political motivations—different sects usually voted certain ways. Though Lincoln was an inconsistent attendee at Church, he garnered a reputation as an ethically earnest person that followed him from his early days and into the White House. Over the next four years, Lincoln would transform from that infidel of the 1830s into an intensely religious man and, finally, following his assassination, a Christian martyr.

Closing out Part III is Catherine Clinton's "Abraham Lincoln: The Family That Made Him, the Family He Made." As Clinton establishes that we still know very little about his family and those who shaped him, especially his mother. Her intervention, however, has very little to do with exploring and speculation on these unknowns. Instead, she offers the use of current scholarship on family honor in southern households to explore Lincoln's "complex personal character."³⁷¹ Her exploration holds promise, but relies heavily on theories of cause and effect especially in regards to Lincoln's relationship with his mother and his treatment of women throughout his life.³⁷²

The book closes with an article in the vein of recent scholarship exploring the memory of the war and its appropriation. David Blight's "The Theft of Lincoln in Scholarship, Politics, and Public Memory" should serve as the beginnings of new facets directed towards understanding the memory of the war and its leaders in modern society. For Blight the Lincoln myth is just as tenacious as that of the Lost Cause, but maybe a bit more malleable. As he points out, the Republican National Committee recently has been reminding the electorate that it "is" the "Party of Lincoln." Such claims, Blight points, misrepresent Lincoln's character and the Republican Party's beliefs of the time period that serve to create a direct, albeit fictitious, tie with the Republican Party of today.³⁷³ Other examples abound, Blight's work is an important reminder that it was not just the losers of the Civil War that created myths.

The strength of this compilation is its holistic approach towards Lincoln. While there are no direct disagreements between scholars within the volume, one can draw distinctions between the different approaches, interpretations, and uses of sources in the volume. Despite some shortcomings, this volume is a worthy edition to any Civil War scholar's

³⁷⁰ Richard Carwardine, "Lincoln's Religion," in *Our Lincoln: New Perspective on Lincoln and His World*, Eric Foner, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 248, 232.

³⁷¹ Catherine Clinton, "Abraham Lincoln: the Family That Made Him, the Family He Made," in *Our Lincoln: New Perspective on Lincoln and His World*, Eric Foner, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 251.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 253.

³⁷³ David W. Blight, "The Theft of Lincoln in Scholarship, Politics, and Public Memory," in *Our Lincoln: New Perspective on Lincoln and His World*, Eric Foner, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 270-275.

library and has the potential to reopen some old and create some new debates.