

Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction 1
—Nicholas Buccola

PART ONE. LINCOLN AND DEMOCRACY

1. Prosperity and Tyranny in Lincoln's Lyceum Address 13
—John Burt
2. Providentialism and Politics: Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address and the Problem of Democracy 44
—Michael Zuckert

PART TWO. LINCOLN AND LIBERTY

3. Lincoln and the Ethics of Emancipation: Universalism, Nationalism, Exceptionalism 73
—Dorothy Ross
4. What If Honest Abe Was Telling the Truth? Natural Rights, Race, and Legalism in the Political Thought of Lincoln 110
—Nicholas Buccola

PART THREE. LINCOLN AND EQUALITY

5. "The Vital Element of the Republican Party": Antislavery, Nativism, and Lincoln 139
—Bruce Levine
6. Lincoln's Competing Political Loyalties: Antislavery, Union, and the Constitution 164
—Manisha Sinha

PART FOUR. LINCOLN AS A LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC STATESMAN

7. Four Roads to Emancipation: Lincoln, the Law, and
the Proclamation 195
—Allen Guelzo
8. Abraham Lincoln's Kantian Republic 216
—Steven B. Smith

Contributors 239

Index 241



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Nicholas Buccola



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INTRODUCTION

Nicholas Buccola

Abraham Lincoln was not a systematic political philosopher, but he did—through word and deed—grapple with several ultimate questions in politics. What is the moral basis of popular sovereignty? What are the proper limits on the will of the majority? When and why should we revere the law? How does our conception of God shape our political views? How is our devotion to a *particular* nation related to our commitment to *universal* ideals? What are we to do when the letter of the law is at odds with what we believe justice requires? What are the political consequences of the idea of natural equality? What do we do when our political loyalties are in conflict? What is the best way to protect the right to liberty for all people? The contributors to this volume have examined Lincoln’s responses to these and other ultimate questions in politics. What results is a fascinating portrait of not only Abraham Lincoln but also the promises and paradoxes of liberal democracy.

The basic liberal democratic idea is that individual liberty is best secured by a democratic political order that treats all citizens as equals before the law and is governed by the rule of law, which places limits on how citizens may treat one another and on how the state may treat its citizens. These ideas exhibit a wonderful coherence in theory, but the real world of politics never quite follows the best-laid plans of theoreticians. Lincoln was, in many ways, the embodiment of both the promises and the paradoxes at the heart of liberal democracy. He was “naturally antislavery” but unflinchingly committed to defending proslavery laws and clauses of the Constitution; he was a defender of the common man, yet he worried about the excesses of democracy; he was committed to the idea of equal natural rights yet could

not imagine a harmonious, interracial democracy in which all citizens had equal political rights. The fact that Lincoln embodies so many of these paradoxes makes it all the more edifying to take him seriously. He was, after all, attempting to work out the meaning and coherence of the liberal democratic project in practice. Lincoln cared deeply about “government of, by, and for the people,” the promise of individual liberty for all, and our “ancient faith” in human equality. And, of course, he revered the law. Over the course of his political career, though, he came to see the myriad ways in which the neatly interlocking facets of liberal democratic theory often fall apart in practice. What is a principled statesman to do when the letter of the law is at odds with the liberal promise of liberty for all? How should a liberal democratic statesman respond when a faction in his party insists on excluding members of new immigrant groups from equal citizenship? How can a principled leader use rhetoric to curb the excesses of democracy? The contributors to this volume show that Lincoln confronted these and many other big questions during his political career, and the aim of this book is to take his answers seriously.

The essays collected here are surely not the first attempts to come to grips with Lincoln’s status as a political thinker. Many of Lincoln’s biographers have appreciated the philosophical dimension of his statesmanship, and the nature of his political thought has been the subject of robust debate in the fields of political theory and intellectual history. In *Crisis of the House Divided* and *New Birth of Freedom*, for example, Harry Jaffa presents us with a portrait of Lincoln as a thinker who brilliantly combined classical natural law and modern natural rights doctrines. Intellectual historian John Patrick Diggins’s *The Lost Soul of American Politics* celebrates Lincoln’s infusion of liberalism with the conscience of Calvinism. According to political scientist J. David Greenstone, the “Lincoln persuasion” combines Kantian ethics, Protestant theology, and liberal politics. In *Lincoln’s Tragic Pragmatism*, John Burt argues that Lincoln’s reaction to moral conflict anticipates developments in contemporary liberal theory. And then, of course, there are interpreters on the Far Right and Far Left who have read Lincoln as the quintessential teacher and practitioner of political evil.¹

In the face of these many interpretations of Lincoln, how can we make sense of such a compelling and elusive figure in American political thought? It seems to me that if we want to catch a glimpse of the truth about Lincoln’s political thought, we must view it from a variety of perspectives and through multiple lenses. We need philosophical lenses to determine the coherence and normative appeal of Lincoln’s ideas, and lest we get seduced by the brilliance of his words, we need historical lenses to pull us back to the

ground so we can appreciate the intellectual and political contexts in which he wrote and spoke.

These multiple lenses are essential to understanding American political thought in general and Lincoln in particular. In the study of American political thought, we are confronted—more often than not—with subjects who conceived of themselves as political actors, not as expositors of philosophical systems. Lincoln exemplifies what might be called the problem of American political thought: in a political culture where “doers” have been far more prevalent than “thinkers,” where and how are we supposed to find political *thought* that is worthy of our attention?

The question of where to look is definitely easier to answer. Throughout the history of American political thought, we find reformers and statesmen who utilized their pens and their voices to justify their political “doings.” These justifications are, in their own way, responses to the ultimate questions presented at the beginning of this introduction. They are, in other words, responses to the sorts of questions that interest political theorists—questions about rights, the role of government, legitimacy, equality, and so forth. Although every era in American political history has produced many voices worthy of our attention, our search for these voices often pulls us to moments of great conflict and social change, such as the founding, the antebellum and Civil War era, the Progressive Era through the New Deal, and, more recently, the revolutions of the 1960s and the conservative backlash against those revolutions. Our tendency to be drawn to such eras is not surprising because, in the words of political theorist Sheldon Wolin, during periods of political turmoil, “the range of possibilities appears infinite,” and we are confronted with the opportunity to “reconstruct a shattered world of meanings and their accompanying institutional expressions” and “fashion a political cosmos out of political chaos.” In this passage, Wolin’s focus is on why great “political philosophers” tend to emerge when they do, but the idea applies just as well to the study of American political thought. In moments of political turmoil, we find reformers and statesmen grappling with big questions and offering answers rooted in both principle and the demands of pragmatic politics.²

The more difficult question presented by the problem of American political thought is *how* we should attempt to make sense of the political ideas of the reformers and statesmen we study. Here is where the approach to Lincoln taken in this volume can be helpful. Although there is much disagreement about Lincoln in this book, it is fair to say that all the contributors believe that Lincoln has something significant to say in response to ultimate political questions. Lincoln was, first and foremost, a politician who

was attempting to achieve particular aims. To understand precisely what those aims were, why he chose certain objectives and means, and the context in which he employed those means in pursuit of those objectives, the lens of the historian is essential. Whereas theorists are (hopefully) not insensitive to the concrete, historical context of Lincoln's life in politics, they attempt to make sense of him in a fundamentally different way. For the theorist, the task of coming to grips with a figure like Lincoln is both interpretive and normative. As an interpretive matter, the theorist (along with the intellectual historian) adds to our understanding by attempting to make sense of where someone like Lincoln fits within the many traditions of political thought. Contributors to this volume, for example, ask the following questions: How did Lincoln (knowingly and unknowingly) advance or challenge the various ways of thinking that preceded him and that dominated his own milieu? Does it make sense to see Lincoln as an important figure in the American Enlightenment? Was Lincoln a purveyor of the doctrine of American exceptionalism? Did Lincoln accept the exclusionary ideologies of nativism and racism, which constituted such powerful strands in the tapestry of American political thought? Where do Lincoln's actions and reflections on self-government fit within the tradition of democratic theory? These are just a few of the interpretive questions the theorist might ask about Lincoln. When these questions are paired with the attention to detail and analysis of causality provided by the historian, we can attain a much deeper understanding of why Lincoln said and did particular things and where those words and deeds fit within the complex traditions of thinking about morality and politics.

The second major branch of the theorist's enterprise is to consider the normative questions raised by the words and deeds of a figure like Lincoln. Was Lincoln's legalist "political religion" morally defensible? Did Lincoln's antebellum views of the slavery question respect the dignity of African Americans? Should statesmen use religion to curb the excesses of political zeal? How should political actors balance *universal* moral demands with the *particular* moral demands of history, culture, and community? These are contentious moral questions, and as we reflect on how to come to grips with Lincoln's responses, a brief word must be said about the ideological commitments we bring to the study of American political thought. One of the most striking things about the existing literature on Lincoln's political thought is its heavily rightward tilt.³ While conservative and libertarian scholars have contributed much to our understanding of Lincoln, there is a lot to be gained from normative judgments about his thought from other ideological perspectives. However much we strive to achieve "objectivity" in

our study of American political thought, we are inevitably influenced by our ideological commitments. Conscientious scholars are obligated, of course, to offer fair and honest interpretations of the reformers and the statesmen they study. But the questions they ask about these individuals will be shaped, at least in part, by their own normative commitments. The normative evaluations of the political thought they interpret will also be rooted in these normative commitments. A conservative scholar who holds up the rule of law as an essential safeguard of the social order, for example, will have an easier time accepting Lincoln's legalism. A libertarian scholar who laments the growth of the federal government throughout American history is likely to approach Lincoln's statesmanship with a great deal of skepticism. A liberal or radical scholar is less likely to find Lincoln's antiabolitionism morally acceptable. And so on.

In sum, we are most likely to understand Lincoln's significance in American political thought if we interpret him through multiple methodological lenses and if we judge him from a variety of normative perspectives. To my knowledge, this volume represents the first gathering of an ideologically and methodologically diverse group of scholars to assess the nature and value of his political thought.⁴ We hope it inspires additional collections on Lincoln and many of the other great voices of American political thought.⁵

The essays in this volume coalesce around a central question: what does Lincoln teach us about the theory and practice of liberal democracy? They could have been assembled in a variety of ways, since each essay addresses multiple aspects of Lincoln's thought and the liberal democratic project. I have chosen to divide the essays under four broad headings: Lincoln and Democracy, Lincoln and Liberty, Lincoln and Equality, and Lincoln as a Liberal Democratic Statesman. The essays in part I reveal that Lincoln had a complicated relationship with democracy. On the one hand, he was one of the great defenders of equality, which is undoubtedly the moral core of the democratic idea. On the other hand, Lincoln's attitude toward popular sovereignty, which is the political core of the democratic idea, was deeply ambivalent. The essays in part I examine Lincoln's complex relationship to democracy through close, contextually sensitive readings of two speeches that are virtual bookends in his remarkable oratorical career: "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," an address delivered at the Young Men's Lyceum in 1838, and his Second Inaugural address, delivered in 1865. In "Prosperity and Tyranny in Lincoln's Lyceum Address," John Burt examines the "cultural preconditions of democratic rule" by taking seriously Lincoln's call to "revere the law." By deepening our understanding of what it is "one has reverence for when one has reverence for the law," we are

able to discover, Burt shows, “the charisma of democracy,” which can serve not only as a check against tyranny but also as the basis for a reconception of democratic lawmaking as an invigorating and liberating task.

In “Providentialism and Politics: Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address and the Problem of Democracy,” Michael Zuckert presents this famous speech as a “political act” intended to achieve two goals: the immediate goal of bringing the Civil War to an end and “bind[ing] up the nation’s wounds,” and the more abstract—but no less important—goal of convincing his audience to rethink the nature of sovereignty. In place of the radically democratic idea that “God’s will makes itself known through the voice of the people,” Zuckert contends that Lincoln developed his complex conception of a “providential” God. In the face of democratic excess, whether in the form of mob violence or in Stephen A. Douglas’s doctrine of popular sovereignty, Lincoln defended “providentialism” as an ultimate check on the sovereignty of human will.

In part II we turn our attention to Lincoln’s reflections on the idea at the heart of liberalism: individual liberty. In “Lincoln and the Ethics of Emancipation,” intellectual historian Dorothy Ross examines the interplay of liberty, nation, and exceptionalism in Lincoln’s thought. What interests Ross is how Lincoln reconciled his particularist and often exceptionalist commitment to nation with the universalist idea of a natural right to liberty. Ross’s analysis reveals that nationalism both enhanced and undermined Lincoln’s commitment to universal emancipation. En route to this conclusion, Ross presents us with a systematic reconstruction of Lincoln’s understanding of liberty and provides a powerful explanation of how his commitment to this idea fit with other values.

In “What If Honest Abe Was Telling the Truth?” I explore the possibility that Lincoln genuinely believed in universal natural rights yet rejected an obligation to abolish slavery, and I provide an explanation of how he reconciled these seemingly irreconcilable views. I argue that the key can be found in his legalism, which allowed him to reconceive the moral requirements of natural rights–based political morality and keep the “public mind” at rest in the hope that slavery was on the road to “ultimate extinction.”

In part III we place Lincoln’s views side by side with two of the most important political movements of his time—nativism and abolitionism—to reveal his understanding of another central idea of liberal democracy: equality. In “The Vital Element of the Republican Party,” Bruce Levine shows that (contrary to some scholars who suggest otherwise) Lincoln thoroughly repudiated the nativist movement. To counter those who have argued that Lincoln was less than emphatic in his denunciation of the nativists, Levine

points out that he “identified antiforeign and anti-Catholic measures as fundamentally alien and opposed to his deepening commitment to the democratic tenets represented by the Declaration of Independence.” In both public and private statements, Lincoln rejected the nativist movement because it represented a betrayal of the idea of human equality at the heart of liberal democratic politics. The vital element of the Republican Party, Levine reminds us, was “anti-slavery sentiment,” not nativism.

But how far was Lincoln willing to take his commitment to equality? While he hated slavery and believed that the natural rights described in the Declaration of Independence applied to all men, he was no abolitionist. Why not? This is the animating question of Manisha Sinha’s contribution to this volume, “Lincoln’s Competing Political Loyalties.” Whereas some explain Lincoln’s reluctance to embrace abolitionism by downplaying his egalitarianism and antislavery credentials, Sinha shows that he tried to reconcile his “conflicting political loyalties” to antislavery, the Union, and the Constitution. Lincoln’s egalitarianism led him to a firm antislavery position prior to the Civil War, Sinha argues, but his commitment to the Union and the Constitution prevented him from taking the next step into the abolitionist camp. To illustrate the nature of the competition between Lincoln’s political loyalties, Sinha places his ideas side by side with those of several leading abolitionist constitutional theorists such as Gerrit Smith, Lysander Spooner, and Frederick Douglass. In the end, the war allowed Lincoln to resolve his conflicting loyalties by “decoupling slavery from the Union and the Constitution.” This decoupling allowed Lincoln and other moderate Republicans, Sinha concludes, to “become emancipationists, if not abolitionists.”

Lincoln’s role as a liberal democratic statesman is the focus of the two essays in part IV. Allen Guelzo’s “Four Roads to Emancipation” provides a careful explanation of the *how* of emancipation. Lest we think this is irrelevant to a book on Lincoln’s thought, Guelzo reminds us that Lincoln’s choice of which road to take reveals much about him as a man of ideas. Lincoln’s road to emancipation was marked by prudence and a continuing commitment to the rule of law, and it was, Guelzo argues, the road best suited to the achievement of lasting freedom. The principled and forward-looking nature of Lincoln’s emancipation policy leads Guelzo to conclude that it is a “hallmark” of liberal democratic statesmanship.

In contrast to Guelzo’s emphasis on Lincoln’s prudence, Steven Smith emphasizes the “egalitarian, universalist, and progressive character to his statecraft” in “Lincoln’s Kantian Republic.” Smith offers this interpretation as an explicit challenge to Guelzo and other scholars who focus on the cen-

trality of prudence in Lincoln's thought. While Guelzo provides us with a useful explanation of Lincoln's statesmanship from the "ground up" as he navigates his way to the Emancipation Proclamation, Smith reflects on Lincoln's statesmanship from the bird's-eye view of the political theorist as he helps us think through the theoretical framework that animated Lincoln both explicitly and implicitly.

In the world around us, citizens and statesmen continue to grapple with questions about liberal democracy that echo those asked in the age of Lincoln. What is the proper balance between the will of the majority and the rights of the individual? When does the law deserve our reverence, and when does it deserve our resistance? How does our understanding of God shape our politics? How does patriotism promote, and how does it undermine, universal freedom? How does our commitment to the rule of law enhance and at the same time inhibit our own emancipatory projects? How should new immigrants and religious minorities be treated? How can one balance competing political loyalties? What are the hallmarks of liberal democratic statesmanship? As we continue to confront these questions, we would do well to remember Lincoln, who provides us with many profound answers while at the same time reminding us why these questions are perennial.

NOTES

1. Harry Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Harry Jaffa, *New Birth of Freedom* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); John Patrick Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); J. David Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); John Burt, *Lincoln's Tragic Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012); Thomas DiLorenzo, *The Real Lincoln* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002); Lerone Bennett, *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1999).

2. Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (New York: Little, Brown, 1960), 8.

3. See Joseph Fornieri and Kenneth Deutsch, *Lincoln's American Dream* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005).

4. The only major collection of essays focused on Lincoln's political thought is Fornieri and Deutsch's *Lincoln's American Dream*. Although it is a valuable volume, it suffers from two major shortcomings. First, it is largely a compendium of essays published previously. Second, the volume consists almost entirely of essays from one side of the political spectrum. The volume contains opposing views of Lincoln, but it is focused almost exclusively on disagreements between Straussian conservatives and paleoconservatives. Two other volumes worth mentioning are *The Cambridge*

Companion to Abraham Lincoln (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) and *Our Lincoln* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008). A small fraction of the essays included therein addresses Lincoln's political thought, but that is not the overall focus of either volume. The most recent contribution to the Lincoln literature is Lucas Morel, ed., *Lincoln and Liberty: Wisdom for the Ages* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014). Morel's collection falls somewhere between *Lincoln's American Dream* and the *Cambridge Companion*. It focuses largely, though not exclusively, on Lincoln's thought, and it is largely, though not exclusively, a collection of essays by conservative scholars.

5. The essays collected here are by no means a comprehensive examination of Lincoln's political thought. There are many areas—such as his views on economic development, technology, and civil liberties in wartime—that we did not include due to space limitations. My hope is that the approach taken here—viewing Lincoln through multiple disciplinary lenses and from a variety of theoretical perspectives—will serve as a model for future studies.



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