

### A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Orations of a Serious Political Thinker

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#### Recommended Citation

Williams, Frank (2013) "A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Orations of a Serious Political Thinker," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 15 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.4.03

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss4/3>

## Feature Essay

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Fall 2013

**Ball, Terence** *A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Orations of a Serious Political Thinker*.  
Cambridge University Press, \$27.99 ISBN 978-0-521-72226-1

### Orations of a Serious Political Thinker

As a part of *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought*, the writings and speeches contained in this annotated edition demonstrate that Abraham Lincoln was a serious political thinker—not only in the context of his own time and circumstances—but for today, too. The introduction is comprehensive and the selections are carefully edited with useful extensive annotation and footnotes. They provide a better insight into Lincoln than many similar collections. Readers see him as a man, a politician, and a political theorist.

As a lawyer for 24 years, Lincoln represented thousands of people and many corporations in his hundreds of cases before judges and juries. In the process, he became familiar with public sentiment as a political speaker and considered himself one of the common people. His sarcasm, self-mockery, and humor were often pitched in the rhythm of the Bible. His speeches and letters combined the political philosophy of Henry Clay, his mentor and “beau ideal of a statesman,” with the rhetoric of Daniel Webster. As a resolute politician, Lincoln hoped to be and succeeded in being “truly esteemed by my fellow men.”

These public writings reveal his abilities as a party spokesman and orator—first as a Whig and then as a Republican. Adept at articulating the positions of his opponents—a trade he learned as a lawyer, he would first state an opponent’s position and then, often, criticized it with his own logical reasoning.

The collection includes a letter to William H. Herndon (February 15, 1848) describing his opposition against the war with Mexico and President Polk’s expansion of presidential power—which Lincoln, himself, would do during the

Civil War. A decade earlier, on January 27, 1838, Lincoln, at the Springfield Lyceum, called for obedience to the law and in his well-researched speech at New York's Cooper Institute, he used the voting records of Constitutional framers to demonstrate Republican consistency against the extension of slavery in the territories. By attaching himself to founding principles, he projected himself to early prominence in a crowded field of presidential contenders.

These writings illuminate Lincoln's political career and how his two careers—law and politics—were inextricably entwined. He became the nation's lawyer-in-chief in the Executive Mansion.

The material testifies to the complexities of Lincoln's character. The threat of slavery's expansion into the territories changed his political life in 1854. The book includes several speeches on the subject, notably those attacking the Kansas-Nebraska Act (October 16, 1854) and the Dred Scott decision (June 26, 1857), as well as his reply to Senator Stephen A. Douglas during one of their 1858 debates (October 15, 1858). His views on race and slavery, and the contradiction between the Declaration of Independence, "All men are created equal," and the Constitution condoning slavery, are laid out in Lincoln's own well-crafted words.

This is one of the best selections of Lincoln's writings available today and, timely too, with its publication during the sesquicentennial of the Civil War.

*Frank J. Williams, the Chair of The Lincoln Forum, author of Lincoln as Hero, and contributing columnist for the Civil War Sesquicentennial.*