

### Lincoln President-Elect: Abraham Lincoln and the Great Secession Winter, 1860-1861

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## Review

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**Holzer, Harold** *Lincoln President-Elect: Abraham Lincoln and the Great Secession Winter, 1860-1861*. Simon & Schuster, \$30.00 hardcover ISBN 9780743289474

### Lincoln Before the Inauguration

Harold Holzer has authored or edited some thirty books on Abraham Lincoln, among them one previous monograph, *Lincoln at Cooper Union* (2004), a widely hailed account of the critical 1860 “speech that made Abraham Lincoln president.” His follow-up, *Lincoln: President-Elect*, is rich with discerning rhetorical analysis and a knack for personalizing Lincoln through revealing anecdotes. It is, however, limited by its narrow focus on Lincoln himself – from a failure to consider his words and actions within the context of the complex events of the secession crisis.

The great strength of this work is its portrayal – perhaps the most complete of any account written of any period in Lincoln’s life – of the daily flow of the President-elect’s life through the agonizing secession winter. Indeed, Holzer is at his best in those sections of the narrative that move literally day by day. If at times the detail appears gratuitous (Seven pages on Lincoln’s decision to grow a beard? Twenty pages on his preparations to leave Springfield for Washington?), at other times his vibrant descriptions of the daily grind make the pages fly, carrying the fascinated reader along almost breathlessly. No other writer has captured so vividly the pageantry and chaos, the grueling schedule and unrelenting strain of Lincoln’s long, roundabout journey to the capital. Nor has any other historian of the secession crisis presented a more authentic picture of the ubiquitous crush of office-seekers that dogged the President-elect’s every move. Such descriptions not only make Lincoln and his world more real but also provide a powerful portrait of some significant but often overlooked aspects of Lincoln’s efforts to deal with secession. Holzer also contributes outstanding rhetorical analyses of some of Lincoln’s less noticed speeches, including notes

and fragments of speeches never delivered. The author's discussion of the undated apple-of-gold-in-a-picture-of-silver fragment is particularly thoughtful, and thought-provoking. He also makes a strong case for the eloquence and significance of Lincoln's generally overlooked farewell speech of February 11, and uses the post-delivery improvements upon that address as an insightful model for the President-elect's facility in revision.

At times, though, Holzer's rhetorical analysis is frustratingly indistinct. This is particularly true of his descriptions of Lincoln's numerous little speeches along the route from Springfield to Washington. Although the author usefully points out an improvement in the speeches' smoothness and ideological sophistication as Lincoln moved east, his minimalist commentary leaves the reader uncertain of how he reads either their message or their importance. Exacerbating this are inconsistencies in his presentation. Regarding Lincoln's repeated dismissal of the crisis as artificial and his startling challenges to secessionists, Holzer variously blames the President-elect's weariness; attributes the "gaffe" to an "unfortunate" decision to speak extemporaneously (319); praises Lincoln's self-confidence; and describes him as "perhaps a bit out of touch" (329). Twice he quotes such passages with no comment whatever. To Lincoln's most vigorous anti-secession statement, his "iron-fisted" threat to put the foot down firmly against secession, Holzer notes with open admiration a refusal to recognize "that illegitimate event." Missing is any recognition that Lincoln's firm and very public antisecession message was consistent and clearly deliberate.

This might be nitpicking if not for the importance of the topic. Given Lincoln's public silence to that point in the crisis, the nation was closely observing his words, particularly about secession. Thus Holzer's off-handed treatment of Lincoln's hardline statements is significant. In fact, the contradictions among his analyses of these speeches stems from a much larger problem: the book's often conspicuous absence of historical context. One hesitates to criticize a book an author did not write, and Holzer's concern in this work is plainly with Lincoln, not the secession crisis. But at several points, some of them crucial, his assessments and even descriptions of Lincoln's words and decisions are weakened by a failure to consider the events that were shaping them. The inaugural-journey speeches are a case in point. As Lincoln was drafting his stern first inaugural draft and journeying to Washington, two major developments influenced his outlook: a reinvigorated spirit of compromise among Northerners, including several Republican congressmen, in the wake of a

near-conflict in Charleston harbor, and a series of antisecession votes in the Upper South. Alarmed by the one and emboldened by the other, Lincoln wished to boost the spirits of demoralized Republicans and now felt confident enough in Southern unionism to do so. By neglecting to discuss congressional compromise negotiations, the battle over secession in the Upper South, and Northern public opinion in general, Holzer isolates Lincoln from the events to which he was responding. It is perhaps inevitable that he is uncertain how to evaluate the secession-related speeches.

The inattention to compromise results in a misrepresentation of its basic issues. On page 252, for example, Holzer expresses surprise that in early February Lincoln grudgingly okayed the Republican proposal to admit New Mexico to statehood under popular sovereignty, a plan which Holzer claims “embraced nearly all of the key Southern demands,” so long as no further extension of slavery was permitted. In reality, this proposal came nowhere near meeting key Southern demands, which included acknowledgment of the *Dred Scott* doctrine that Congress could not ban slave from the territories, a federal slave code to protect slavery in the territories, and the very right to extend slavery into future territories that Lincoln rejected; its acknowledged purpose, in fact, was to divide Southern radicals and conservatives. Thus Lincoln’s acquiescence, reluctant though it was, was in keeping with his unfailing rebuff of substantive compromise. Nor, in the context of impending Upper South secession elections – virtually absent in Holzer’s discussion – was it very surprising.

Exacerbating this confusion, the author views the crisis from the perspective of the hardline Republicans. To those who favored compromise in 1860-61, the hardliners were war-mongering zealots blindly marching the country into destruction. To hardliners, on the other hand, compromise was a sell-out and conciliationists’ honor and courage suspect. Eschewing scholarly distance, Holzer rebukes the compromise movement as – per his closing analysis on page 458 – “unprincipled.” Thus on page 130 he find it “astonishing” that James Buchanan would offer the South concessions in his Annual Message, when in fact this attitude was perfectly reasonable given that Buchanan, like most Democrats, blamed the crisis on fanatical antislavery agitation. It is “inexplicable,” Holzer writes on page 275, that former Whig president Millard Fillmore would call for the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law in late January, when throughout the crisis even hardliners such as Salmon Chase and Gideon Welles – and Lincoln – agreed on the need for enforcement. As early as

mid-November old-line Whigs had gone beyond that and made repeal of Northern personal liberty laws a centerpiece of their procompromise campaign – at around the same time that it was first advocated by Republican moderates such as the *New York Times*' Henry Raymond. A final example: on page 217, Holzer characterizes as “rebellious” a December mass meeting of some two thousand New York businessmen, concerned for the future of their country, frightened about a severe and worsening financial panic (which the author never mentions, despite quoting several references to it), and calling on Southerners to remain calm and on Congress to find a diplomatic solution.

There are other problems as well. In explaining Lincoln's opposition to compromise, Holzer focuses almost entirely on the President-elect's antislavery principles despite the President-elect's few references to slavery during the crisis. Lincoln's preoccupation with the danger that a postelection compromise posed to constitutional government receives little attention and no substantive analysis even though it comprises most of the anticompromise sentiments actually quoted in the book. In addition, Holzer's remarkably comprehensive primary-source research appears to come at the expense of the secondary literature: his analysis shows few signs of either the influence of or argumentation against the classic works of David Potter, Kenneth Stampp, or William E. Baringer, and no indication at all of having read Daniel Crofts's seminal *Reluctant Confederates*, one of the most important works ever published on Lincoln during the crisis. Finally, the author's methodology frequently reflects the unfortunate recent trend in Lincoln studies of accepting uncritically the claims of long-after-the-fact reminiscences. Holzer makes regular use of recollections not published until the twentieth century, as well as such notoriously unreliable memoirists as Ward Hill Lamon, Lucius Chittenden, and even the anonymous Public Man, whose concocted “diary” the author on page 398 labels “incisive.”

Holzer's achievement in *Lincoln President-Elect* is most impressive. Current readers come away from his narrative with a profoundly immediate, almost palpable, sense of Lincoln, while future historians will mine the book's wealth of telling anecdotes and hard-to-find details. Had the author been more sensitive to the underlying context of the events he describes, his accomplishment would be formidable indeed.

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