

What Lincoln Believed: The Values and Convictions of America's Greatest President

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Review

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Lind, Michael *What Lincoln Believed: The Values and Convictions of America's Greatest President*. Doubleday, \$27.95 hardcover ISBN 385507399

Presidential Values

The Inner Thoughts of Abraham Lincoln

Michl Lind presents an ambivalent picture of Lincoln in this book--it is almost schizophrenic. On the one hand he praises him as the Great Democrat who preserved America's experiment in self-government during an undemocratic age. He cites him as the champion of liberal democracy who continues to inspire people throughout the world. Yet he also views him as a white supremacist undeserving of the title as the Great Emancipator. Nonetheless, Lind believes Lincoln deserves his top ranking among American presidents. Unable to accept the reality of America's past, indeed of the world's past, the author undermines Lincoln's legacy by not appreciating the mid-19th century context in which America's 16th president operated.

As historian James McPherson has described the phenomenon, Lind views history through the wrong end of the telescope. Though some readers may conclude that Lincoln was a racist by today's standards, it tends to confuse Lincoln's role in moving the nation from a slave to a free society. Unfortunately, Lind's ahistorical analysis echoes Lerone Bennett, Jr.'s *Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* (2000), which most historians discredit.

Lincoln's racial ideas did not remain frozen as Lind argues but evolved over the years, especially during his presidency. The author ignores how the Lincolns personally treated African Americans in their household both in Springfield and Washington, D.C. Though Lincoln did favor voluntary colonization as previous presidents, by 1862 his statements on the issue were to defuse dangerous opposition to his war policies that now included emancipation. One searches in vain to find in this book Frederick Douglass's famous acknowledgment of

Lincoln's entire freedom from popular prejudice against the colored race.

The service of African Americans in the Union army and navy at Lincoln's behest reinforces the fact that Lind has a skewed view of Lincoln and history. By the end of his presidency Lincoln acknowledged a biracial future for the United States. He had modified his traditional Whig views to support the Homestead Act to settle farmers on Western lands and this was not just for whites contrary to what Lind insists. The author simply ignores too much data that would contradict his thesis. As early as 1858, Lincoln stated, Let us discard all this quibbling about this man and the other man, this race and the other race being inferior, and therefore they must be placed in an inferior position à Let us discard all these things, and . . . once more stand up declaring all men are equal.

In July 1862 Congress passed a bill that confiscated the property (slaves were chattel property) of Confederate states as punishment for treason. Lincoln threatened to veto the legislation because it violated the constitutional ban on bills of attainder. Lind mistakenly claims that the basis of Lincoln's objection was that the act permanently deprives slave owners of their property without compensation. In his veto message, Lincoln explicitly endorsed permanent freedom for confiscated slaves. His objection concerned permanent confiscation of real property, including heirs of the dispossessed, to whom the bill of attainder clause in the Constitution applied by prohibiting such dispossession.

Lincoln's wartime suspension of the writ of habeas corpus and the military trials of several civilians for treason are made to look like horrible violations of civil liberties. Lind regards them as unconstitutional, despite the Constitution allowing for the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus and that military tribunals are permitted under the law of war. And nowhere is it pointed out that President Lincoln, the master pragmatist, knew that for the sake of maintaining order in the Union, he needed to take tough measures for tough times. The tough times, Lincoln believed, would be of limited duration. The North, with its greater resources, would prevail in the end with an overwhelming victory against the Confederacy and its operatives in the North--perhaps more than a million believing in the justice of the Southern cause. The extraordinary measures were revoked at war's end and Lincoln began the effort before the war was over in places like Missouri which had undergone a guerilla war within a civil war. Lind overlooks the courage shown by Lincoln when he rejected the demands of Missouri Radicals that he remove Gen. John M. Schofield, whose competency and honesty he trusted, place the entire state back under martial law, decree

immediate emancipation and authorize the recruitment of Missouri blacks into the army. Informing the radicals that he understood the causes of the chaos in Missouri as well as they did, he observed that in time of war blood grows hot, and blood is filled . . . confidence dies, and universal suspicion reins. Each man feels an impulse to kill his neighbor, lest he be first killed by him. Revenge and retaliation follow . . . But this is not all. Every foul bird comes abroad, and every dirty reptile rises up. These add crime to confusion. The president understood the issues and the people.

Though this book is well-written and provocative, it is a flawed work that presents a misleading view of America's 16th president. Unfortunately, it will only serve to confuse most readers.

The author fails to truly describe Lincoln's character. Some politicians build their careers around compassion. Some build their careers around loyalty to a group or class. But there are others, like Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln who build their careers around courage. Courage politicians organize their energies by fighting evil foes. They locate some corrupt power that violates their sense of honor. For Roosevelt it was the trust; for Lincoln the Confederacy. Their leadership is clear. The courage politicians speak of character -- duty, honor, service, patriotism, loyalty, honesty and passion. The courage politicians are important as they have the guts most others lack. Lincoln had a political agenda and offered persuasive solutions to this Union and slavery. He was able to rise to power finding a political program that matched his logical disposition. Lincoln did not just take on seceded states and slavery, he offered a set of reforms and emphasized accountably, hard work, and upward mobility. He not only challenged the entrenched culture but had an alternative way to manage democracy.

One wonders if a politician, like Lincoln, in this mold can make it to the top. Yet the country, in Lincoln's case, turned to a courageous politician at a certain historical moment: when the nation was threatened by a particularly vicious foe; when the governing institution seemed inordinately corrupt and needed a cleaning; when intractable problems, like slavery and its support in the Constitution remained unaddressed and the country seemed ungovernable by conventional means. It might have been better if Michl Lind had concentrated on this aspect of Abraham Lincoln.

Frank J. Williams is Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Rhode Island and Founding Chair of The Lincoln Forum. His latest book The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views--Political, Social, and Pictorial, which he wrote with Harold Holzer and Edna Greene Medford, will be published by Louisiana State University Press in February 2006.