

Look at Lincoln: All the Powers of Earth: The Political Life of Abraham Lincoln, Vol. III, 1856-1860

Frank J. Williams
fwilliams@courts.ri.gov

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Williams, Frank J. (2019) "Look at Lincoln: All the Powers of Earth: The Political Life of Abraham Lincoln, Vol. III, 1856-1860," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.21.4.02

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol21/iss4/2>

Review

Williams, Frank J.

Fall 2019

Blumenthal, Sidney. *All the Powers of Earth: The Political Life of Abraham Lincoln, Vol. III, 1856-1860.* Simon & Schuster, 2019. \$35.00 ISBN 9781476777283

All the Powers of Earth is the third volume by Sidney Blumenthal's biography of Lincoln and the history of the United States during that era. Covering Lincoln and the country as it marches towards civil war, it is the most riveting of Blumenthal's first three volumes and leaves this reviewer anticipating the final two volumes.

Blumenthal, writing brilliantly, deals with the Lincoln-Douglas debates and discusses the groundwork that eventually led to Lincoln's presidency. The most impressive aspect of Blumenthal's writing is his ability to weave in observations and history of the political scene from that era to lend context to Lincoln's political life.

With grace, Blumenthal discusses the life of Senator Stephen A. Douglas, a political rival of Lincoln throughout his adult life, and the life of Senator Charles Sumner. These passages could stand alone as independent biographies, but provide the reader with a deeper understanding of Lincoln's contemporaries. The United States itself during the 1850s becomes an important character, and Blumenthal communicates the excitement, the anxiety, and the fear of the time.

The book adroitly discusses the all-engulfing issue of slavery – its roots and expansion. Senator Douglas's work to repeal the Missouri Compromise of 1820, John Brown at Harper's Ferry, and Congressman Preston Brook's attack of Sumner on the floor of the United States Senate, are thoroughly discussed.

It was during the 1850s that Lincoln, along with many others throughout the nation, unified several divided and struggling political parties to form the Republican Party. Blumenthal enthralls readers with the accounts of Lincoln's importance in the formation of the Illinois Republican Party and its first convention in Bloomington. It was there that he delivered his "lost" speech. That speech addressed a tide of nativism brought on by the Know Nothing Party, and Lincoln's disapproval of such a policy.

It is also during this time that the United States Supreme Court issued its disastrous decision, *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, in which it declared African Americans were not citizens of the United States as they were from an “inferior class” and therefore had “no rights the white man was bound to respect.” That decision alone could have destroyed the fledgling Republican Party, but through the efforts of Lincoln and many others, it turned out differently.

After ten years outside the political arena, Lincoln reenters the fray with his famous “House Divided” antislavery speech in accepting the Republican Party’s nomination for the Illinois senate seat, held then by Douglas. In running for this seat, Lincoln challenged Douglas, often looked on as a demagogue. Despite losing to Douglas, Lincoln comes to national prominence and the debates are still studied by politicians and scholars.

When it is time for the presidential nomination, Lincoln is able to clinch the Republican Party’s nomination by beating the party’s frontrunner, New York Senator William H. Seward. His victory is attained through a combination of a surprising strategy and determination. Blumenthal uses his impressive journalistic style to recount these instances in a way that makes the reader feel like they are there.

Such a long tome may at first be intimidating, but once opened it becomes a fast-paced and enveloping account of Lincoln’s life. The author has made some errors. For example, Lincoln failed to run for a second term in Congress not because of his opposition to the Mexican War, but due to a prior agreement to serve a single term and then turn the seat over to another Whig. Nevertheless, these minor errors are not fatal, and the author has more than compensated for them through his conclusions and storytelling.

Students of Abraham Lincoln and his times will thoroughly enjoy this volume. It’s a page turner.

Frank J. Williams is the founding Chair of the Lincoln Forum, President of The Ulysses S. Grant Association and Presidential Library, and regular Civil War Book Review columnist for Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War, and Reconstruction.