

A Look at Lincoln

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Achorn, Edward. *The Lincoln Miracle: Inside the Republican Convention that Changed History*. Atlantic Monthly Press, 2023. PAPER. \$30.00. ISBN 9780802160621 pp. 528.

Edward Achorn duly earned the 2023 Lincoln Forum Book Prize for his commendable work, *The Lincoln Miracle*. While the prize may bear Abraham Lincoln's name, the book's focus lies not on the iconic president but on the sophisticated tactics leading to his nomination at the Wigwam in Chicago over those fateful days. Amid today's political environment, where the Republican party—at least regarding its higher ideals—appears dormant, Achorn takes his readers back to that fateful moment in the Civil War era, when the Republican party stood for progressive principles. A recent president's audacious claim that his achievements may surpass Lincoln's raises at least this reviewer's concerns about the state of our nation and lends relevancy to such a book.

Achorn, a skilled journalist, presents a compelling narrative in his second book on Lincoln, following *Every Drop of Blood*, which explored the Second Inaugural Address of 1865. *The Lincoln Miracle* reveals the tale of Lincoln's successful bid for the Republican presidential nomination in 1860 with both eloquence and insight.

The author skillfully investigates the diverse personalities, demographics, and rivalries that shaped the contest and the subsequent 1860 election. In a divided nation, where anti-Catholicism and anti-German sentiment prevailed, Lincoln, a former Whig, appeared to be the underdog. The conflicting forces of abolitionism and the preservation of the Union further fragmented the Republicans, while the Democrats found themselves in disarray. The impending war and the

infamous 1857 *Dred Scott* decision added complexity to the political landscape Lincoln was forced to navigate. Chief Justice Roger Taney gave us one of the most horrific declarations from the decision, that African Americans “had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”

Achorn highlights Lincoln’s conviction that a nation divided against itself cannot endure. The prospect of a house, either one of freedom or of servitude, compelled Lincoln to envision a united and free future. What adds excitement to Achorn’s enthralling narrative is the night preceding the decisive balloting, where Judge Davis secured support for Lincoln by promising cabinet positions to delegates from Indiana and Pennsylvania, against Lincoln’s directive not to bind him in any deals.

Lincoln initially trailed William Seward by more than 70 votes during the convention. But the convention’s dynamics shifted dramatically as ballots were cast. Lincoln’s eventual victory in the third round was not just the result of shrewd operatives but also showcased his political mastery. The strategic placement of Lincoln’s rivals—Seward, Cameron, Chase, and Bates—in key cabinet positions reflected a wise diplomatic strategy that solidified Lincoln’s nomination. President Lincoln kept the bargain and gave us what Doris Kearns Goodwin called in her great book, *A Team of Rivals*.

As Achorn vividly recounts the raucous and thrilling convention, he provides an intimate look at 19th-century politics. The meticulous day-by-day exploration of the convention, particularly the collapse of the former New York Governor Seward’s presumed “inevitable” nomination, sets Achorn’s account apart as the most comprehensive and engaging retelling of those pivotal days. He masterfully recaptures the suspense of the setting, breathing life into examples not only of Lincoln’s political acumen, but also the tumultuous nature of 19th-century political conventions.

One the whole, the book transports readers to a bygone era of political battles, shedding light on a transformative period in American history as relevant today as it was on the day of Lincoln's nomination. Published in a time when the Constitution faces challenges from a former president nominally affiliated with Lincoln's party, the book serves as a stark reminder that the echoes of the Civil War have always reverberated in America and continue to do so to this day.

The Lincoln Miracle not only contributes significantly to American political history but adds depth and color to the vivid portrait of the man who, but for that crucial convention, may very well have faded into obscurity in Springfield, Illinois. It stands as a noteworthy addition to the legacy of America's greatest president, offering a lively and insightful narrative that captivates readers with its historical significance and relevance to the present day. Achorn's work is undoubtedly a deserving recipient of the 2023 Lincoln Forum Book Prize.

Frank J. Williams is the founding Chair of The Lincoln Forum and retired Chief Justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court.

*****Disclosure from the reviewer: I have read parts of this book in manuscript and made suggestions, but the manuscript is in the author's hand and opinions and conclusions are his.*****

