"A Look at Lincoln"

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In 1908 Israel Zangwill (remember him?) was author of the play *The Melting Pot*. While not a long-running play, it gave rise to our nation’s make-up. Even Abraham Lincoln’s ancestors had migrated from Hingham and Cohasset, Massachusetts to northern New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and eastern Kentucky. He did not know the origins of the family or that they had initially settled in Massachusetts – he suspected it but during his life he did not know for sure. “In regard to the Germans and [other] foreigners, I esteem them no better than other people, nor any worse,” said President-elect Abraham Lincoln in Cincinnati on February 13, 1861. His statement succinctly and candidly expressed his sentiments toward immigration. If anything, it underestimated the value that Lincoln placed on immigration to the United States, for he tended to look upon it favorably as a source of population growth and consequently of economic development and prosperity.

In the midst of our country’s current debates over immigration, Harold Holzer’s new exploration of Abraham Lincoln’s presidency, *Brought Forth on This Continent: Abraham Lincoln and American Immigration*, offers a timely reminder that such contentious issues are not unique to our time. Holzer’s new book delves into a pivotal subject during the Civil War and unveils Lincoln’s multifaceted stance on immigration and its profound impact on American society – both then and now.
In the 1860s, immigration was hotly contested throughout the states, with President Lincoln advocating for Congress to adopt measures to encourage immigration to bolster labor shortages exacerbated by the war. Despite Lincoln’s belief in immigration as a source of national wealth and strength, he faced opposition from nativist factions within his own Republican party, highlighting the complexity of antebellum politics. Holzer adeptly navigates this intricate political landscape, chronicling the rise of nativist movements like the Know-Nothing party and the formation of the Republic party from the ashes of the Whigs.

The flood of European immigrants, particularly those from Germany and Ireland, played a significant role in the Union’s war efforts, with hundreds of thousands enlisting to fight. Holzer paints a vivid picture of the “multiethnic crusade” that characterized the Civil War, illustrating how immigrants from various backgrounds rallied behind the Union cause. However, tensions simmered, with Irish Americans wary of Lincoln’s emancipation efforts and German Americans critical of his perceived sluggishness in ending slavery.

Holzer’s reverence for Lincoln shines through in his meticulously detailed work, particularly in his portrayal of the diverse array of foreign-born individuals who contributed to the Union cause. Yet, he does not shy away from highlighting Lincoln’s shortcomings, including his unsympathetic stance toward Native Americans and his exclusionary policies toward immigrants from Asia and Spanish America.

One of the book’s most compelling arguments in Holzer’s work is the author’s assertion that Lincoln’s views on immigration evolved over time, paralleling his shifting stance on the issues of Black freedom and rights. As Lincoln grappled with the complexities of immigration policy, he navigated a delicate balance between fostering national unity and addressing the concerns of diverse immigrant communities.
In light of contemporary debates concerning immigration to the United States, Holzer’s exploration of Lincoln’s legacy on the immigration issue is particularly poignant. By delving into the nuances of Lincoln’s approach to immigration, Holzer provides valuable insights for readers grappling with similar challenges in the present day.

*Brought Forth on This Continent: Abraham Lincoln and American Immigration* is a captivating exploration of a pivotal moment in American history, offering valuable lessons for understanding the complexities of immigration policy then and now. Whether you’re a Lincoln enthusiast or simply interested in the intersection of politics, immigration, and identity, this book is essential reading.

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