



President Lincoln: The Duty of a Statesman

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The American president has come to be the most powerful figure in the world—and back in the nineteenth century a great man held that office. William Lee Miller's new book closely examines that great man in that hugely important office: Abraham Lincoln as president.

Wars waged by American presidents have come to be pivotal historical events. Here Miller analyzes the commander in chief who coped with the profound moral dilemmas of America's bloodiest war.

In his acclaimed book *Lincoln's Virtues* ("A fascinating account, sensitively written, rich in insight"—Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.), Miller explored Abraham Lincoln's intellectual and moral development. Now he completes his "ethical biography," showing the amiable and inexperienced backcountry politician transformed by constitutional alchemy into an oath-bound head of state, slapped in the face from the first minute of his presidency by decisions of the utmost gravity and confronted by the radical moral contradiction left by the nation's Founders: universal ideals of Equality and Liberty and the monstrous injustice of human slavery.

With wit and penetrating sensitivity, Miller shows us a Lincoln with unusual intellectual power, as he brings together the great themes that will be his legend—preserving the United States of America while ending the odious institution that corrupted the nation's meaning. Miller finds in this superb politician a remarkable presidential combination: an indomitable resolve, combined with the judgment that keeps it from being mindless stubbornness; and a supreme magnanimity, combined with the discriminating judgment that keeps it from being sentimentality. Here is the realistic war leader persisting after multiple defeats, pressing his generals to take the battle to the enemy, insisting that the objective was the destruction of Lee's army and not the capture of territory, saying that breath alone kills no rebels, remarking that he regretted war does not admit of holy days, asking whether one could believe that he would strike lighter blows rather than heavier ones, or leave any card unplayed. And here is the pardoner, finding every excuse to keep from shooting the simple soldier boy who deserts. Here too is the eloquent leader who describes the national task in matchless prose, and who rises above vindictiveness and triumphalism as he guides the nation to a new birth of freedom.

President Lincoln: The Duty of a Statesman Details

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Guy Priel says

I really enjoyed this book. I read everything I can about Lincoln, so when I see a new title, regardless of the author, I snatch it up. This one was no different. I have read very little about Lincoln as President that didn't focus on the war. Yes, the War was the overriding problem throughout his presidency, but there is little written about Lincoln as a leader. This one certainly filled the gap and has found a place in my collection of Lincoln books. Miller did plenty of research and I look forward to reading more history books by him.

Steven Henderson says

This well researched book presented a powerful argument concerning Lincoln's respect for the Constitution, and his determination to follow its limitations.

Everton Patterson says

Good, well-written study of Lincoln's presidency. Lincoln was certainly an extraordinary human being, and the United States probably exists now only because he was president at that particular time. During the Civil War, he had the difficult task of prosecuting the war while not alienating the border slave states. Losing the border states could have led to the loss of the war and thus the perpetuation of slavery and the destruction of the United States. Due to his political mastery as well as his high ethical standards, the Union was saved. It is by no means certain that there was anyone else who, as president, could have achieved this at the time. His murder was, to quote Frederick Douglass, "an unspeakable calamity," which negatively affected the country for about 100 years. Miller's prose is almost poetic.

Nathan Albright says

I happened to check this book out from the library before realizing it was the second part of a two-part "ethical biography" of Abraham Lincoln, this volume covering Lincoln as president. Although there are many books, many of them quite good [1], about Abraham Lincoln, the worth of his life and writing and political/moral thought has led many to write about him, most of them in praise and a few in fierce and usually unmerited criticism. This particular book, as might be expected, largely praises Lincoln as it judges Lincoln both from the perspective of idealism and practicality. To be sure, the author does not sugarcoat the record, commenting on some of Lincoln's mistakes, including a long praise of colonization, but overall the author's astute grasp of primary and secondary sources, which seems nearly encyclopedic in nature, including an unerring instinct to seek the best authors and books to buttress his points, authors like Jaffa and Randall and Wilson and Fahrenbacher, to name a few, demonstrates considerable praise for Lincoln's action and morality, and his growth as a result of becoming more familiar with government and with the people of his nation.

In terms of its contents, the book looks both thematically and generally chronologically in over 400 pages of core material at the ethical aspects of Lincoln's presidency, as well as his focus on both prudence and idealism. In terms of its elegant tension between Lincoln's tying together of Union and emancipation, his desire to act in as restrained a manner as possible to avoid brutality and act in a constitutional manner while preserving central authority and overcoming the rebellion, the author demonstrates both Lincoln's skill and the immensity of his task. The author also makes it a point of talking about those times where Abraham Lincoln, normally a person inclined to give mercy, both gave it (to many of the Sioux warriors of Minnesota in 1863, for example) and did not give it (to captured slave traders and the murderer of an officer leading black soldiers in Norfolk) in striking ways. The author's friendship with Frederick Douglass comes in for exceptional praise for Lincoln's fairmindedness. Many of the chapters have title headings that come from Lincoln's writings, and the author pays close attention to material, like Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and annual addresses, that have seemed a bit dull and dry to many readers, pointing out the timing of various statements as a way of illuminating the silences and implications of his writings.

Above all, this book is unified by a few themes. One of them is the ironic deflation of the Southern view of honor that shows up time and time again as a malign force within the country, whether it is in the Confederates insulting the honor of "neutral" Kentucky by invading their territory first and pushing it further into the Union camp, or in Southern honor leading to the assassination of Lincoln as well as the aforementioned young lieutenant of a black regiment sent to patrol in Norfolk. Another unifying theme is the way that Lincoln's origin served to make him far more beloved among common people, and those who took the time to get to know him well, than the elites of either American or European society, many of whom were nonetheless horrified at his assassination. The author comments some on his diplomatically insincere notes to European leaders or monarchies and aristocracies, but not to one of his few notes to a fellow republican regime [2]. Likewise, the author comments on the fact that for Lincoln union and liberty were deeply united, in ways that were better understood by the rebels and the slaves than by many northerners whose racism and emotional distance from slavery despite their complicity in it economically and socially did not connect the two issues. For those who want to see a praiseworthy and largely positive portrayal of Lincoln as a practical statesmen committed to his duty despite its challenges, this is an excellent book on those grounds. A book that combines an appreciation of grace and charity and justice in dealing with others, as well as avoiding the trap of supporting the lie that being a leader means being a macho poseur is a book that deserves appreciation merely on moral grounds alone. The fact that it is written with skill, has elegant footnotes, and is full of gentle irony makes it even better.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.wordpress...>

[2] <https://edgeinducedcohesion.wordpress...>

Walter Herrick says

I gave this book 5 stars because I have had my eyes opened like never before about Lincoln in the Civil War. So the rating is mostly based on the experience of the book - and not how well it was written. I say this because like most nonfiction it is not easy to breeze-read through it. (I am also not disparaging the author. He does a great job and keeps it interesting and freely moving). I started this book back in 2008 and would put it aside for a time as I would take up whatever took my fancy at the moment.

Lately I've looked at my currently-reading list and it was 5 or more books at the same time. I would actually only be reading 1 or 2 books consistently - but I had started and just never finished some pretty big books. This was one that I really wanted to finish - and I'm extremely happy that I have finished this.

Now onto the book.

Lincoln really is one of the greatest men & presidents that we've been fortunate enough to have in America. Living in the west means that much of our local history doesn't start until settlers came here, or later. There isn't a local and immediate connection to things from then. We can't point to the next town over as the site of this historic civil war battleground, or where such and such president gave the great speech. So this book really opens your eyes to that time - even if you do happen to live back east where the action was.

It's amazing, but I never even realized how much Lincoln's Presidency (March 4, 1861 - April 14, 1961) and the Civil War (April 12, 1861 - April 9, 1861) overlap. Lincoln's presidency is basically the Civil War.

One of my last impressions of the book is that of seeing the Lord's purpose in the lives of everyone - whether or not they believe in, or are part of any religion at all. Chapter 20 is titled "The Almighty Has His Own Purposes." It is easy for me to see that Lincoln was put in place to guide our country through the Civil War, and that if he had been allowed to live and finish his presidency that things would have been a whole lot different & better now. From reading the book, and Lincoln's writings and sayings therein, Lincoln didn't join any particular church (although he did go to Presbyterian churches in Springfield & Washington with his wife), yet "he nevertheless grasped the moral core of the Christian religion." (pg 406) I would add that he exemplified Christ like no other president. His second inaugural address is practically scriptural.

Lincoln should be held in the high esteem that he is, along with the Founding Fathers & I would add JFK, Reagan and Bush jr. When push came to shove, they stood their ground with dignity, kindness and steel-like resolve, even when it looked like things would not turn out well. Though this book is huge (512 pages, 44 of which are just chapter notes) I would recommend it to any/everyone interested in Lincoln.

Nathan says

In precisely the same vein as it's prequel, a "ethical biography", at least purportedly. That's using "biography" loosely, as there is barely even a timeline of events. Opening with Lincoln's inauguration and closing with the most rudimentary treatment of his death that I've ever read, the narrative is propelled not by facts or chronology, but by vague notions of principle. Not that the principles themselves are vague-- Miller quite effectively conveys Lincoln's determination and will-- but the facts of history are used mostly as illustrations of a metaphysical quality. I don't like history done this way. I like facts, facts, facts, corralled by a clear timeline and then, maybe, if I've grown to like the author's style or respect his research or appreciate his insight, getting his learned opinion on the matter at hand. What I didn't like about this book is that it's mostly opinion.

Broadly, Miller thinks Lincoln was a moralist, through and through. His fight to save the Union was a moral struggle; his opposition (such as it was, though Miller lets him off easy) to it was a battle of good against evil.

It's the Lincoln of Christian private education: a Great American and a Good Man. It's a cardboard cutout, though Miller cuts his out of slightly thicker board, perhaps, and with slightly more detailed edges. Lincoln's moral decisions in this telling just are. They don't spring from any analysis of contemporary culture or society, and barely with any conflict within Lincoln himself. They appear as natural, independent manifestations of a unexplained, unaccounted moral brightness within the man that blots out any shadow of human nuance.

Miller, as in his first volume, harrumphs dryly and longwindedly through his subject matter, pausing every so often for weird levity or an anecdote that just emphasizes the Sunday school moralizing of his approach. Strangely, Lincoln's death, which actually might (and certainly has been) correctly called a martyrdom, is given the most laughably perfunctory treatment I've ever read .

Lincoln was a moral president, no doubt. But the most cursory examination of many shorter and far more interesting and better-written books will show that. This one was a drag.

Gordon Leidner says

Truly one of the best books I've read about Lincoln. Not a biography, but an analysis of his statesmanship during his presidency. Miller reviews a number of crucial decisions that Lincoln made during office, some of them are the usual subjects such as his decision to free the slaves, his skill as a war leader, etc. But others are less well known, especially his pardons or refusal to pardon various individuals (soldiers, a slave trader, an influential southerner who had shot a northern soldier and others). Miller's insightful comments on Lincoln, especially on subjects like Lincoln's powerful mind and communication skills are very impressive. Finally, Miller's interesting, eloquent writing style makes this book a very entertaining read. I wish it was twice as long!

bernadette says

Thoughtful study on how Lincoln approached the duties of his office and of how he allowed or did not allow his personal ethics to impact his decisions and actions in office. If only we had leaders today with the same moral integrity and political acumen.

Yassine El says

Lincoln was a good republican and hated president. Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809. He showed a good figure of America, Lincoln help america grow in many ways, he made America grow by making it a big continent. Lincoln assisted at many journeys like wars. Lincoln was the 16th president of the United States Of America, he was president from 1861 to 1865. Lincoln was a member of the house of representative. Lincoln was married with Mary Todd, Lincoln has four children's Edward, Robert, Willie and Tad. Lincoln profession was lawyer(politician). Lincoln assisted to the battle of Black Hawk War. Lincoln was dead by an assassination at the Ford's Theater, Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth.

The important fact about Lincoln is that he was a good person and he helped america during the black hawk war. Lincoln also is important because he made america improve in its growth and capacity of the environment. I know this book is nonfiction because it shows the reality and it is mainly talking about Lincoln while being president of America. It's also showing me that it's talking about a real history about the president Lincoln. Finally, This topic about lincoln is important to show how Lincoln was as president in the 18th century. It also important because the book is mainly about how president are and how they improve America and other places. As one can see, i learn many exciting things from this book.

I would recommend this book to all people who would like to learn about the president Lincoln because for me he was a creative man and a good lawyer. He also was very well known from others. The bad news is that he was assassinated.

Larry says

What? No pictures???

An excellent detailed, well documented study of Lincoln as a leader. Emphasis on Lincoln as a war president facing the ethical and moral dilemmas thrust at him trying to hold a nation together that didn't necessarily want to stay together.

For people that have read Civil War history, this book is a must-read. If you've always wanted to start reading some Lincoln history, this is a good start. It's not a quick, simple read and the author tends to write as if he's addressing a college level audience (good thing I'm smart!) but well worth the time.

Calvin says

I have read over 20 books on the life of Abraham Lincoln and I never tire of looking at his life and work from a different angle and although I was familiar with greater than 90% of the incidents and events discussed in this book I appreciated and enjoyed this author's perceptions from the perspective of statesmanship. Oh, for an Abraham Lincoln today!

Matthew Hines says

This book holds a prized place on my bookshelf. It is a monumental work on leadership and how Lincoln evolved as a leader while trying to hold the Union together.

One interesting chapter delves into the politics of the illegal slave trade in the years leading up to the war. In 1808, Congress declared the slave trade to be illegal, as allowed in the U.S. Constitution. However, that ban was frequently disobeyed, and in the 1840s the U.S. Navy had to create the African squadron to patrol west Africa for illegal slave ships bound for America. The penalty for trading slaves was death, although they were frequently pardoned by antebellum presidents. Lincoln was the first to refuse a pardon to a notorious slave trader, thus signaling his intent to enforce the ban. But with the African squadron recalled to help blockade the South during the Civil War, Lincoln and his Secretary of State took an unusual tack and contracted the British Navy to enforce the law for them.

The book also explores the evolution of a good speechmaker to an unsurpassed speechmaker. Lincoln mastered the art of rhetorical erudition. He hardly used adverbs and rarely used a word the common man would not understand, but he constructed those words into sentences that rang like perfectly balanced poetry, such as this one "By extending freedom to the slave, we ensure freedom to the free."

America has been fortunate to have had leaders rise at the right time and be the perfect person to lead us through those difficult days. Lincoln certainly did not seem like one of those leaders, but the passage of time has rendered him among the best we've ever had ruling over us.

Jay says

A compelling and thoughtful read. In my opinion, the best study of the moral dilemmas Lincoln faced during the war. My favorite chapter is entitled, "I Felt it my Duty to Refuse," and recounts the story of the famously soft-hearted Lincoln, upholding the death sentence of Nathaniel Gordon, the first, and only, American to be hung as a slave trader. Lincoln's only concession was a slight reprieve to allow the slaver to prepare "for the awful change that awaits him." No mercy this time.

Schawn schoepke says

The more I read about Lincoln the more impressed I am with him as an incredible leader and human being.

He was not perfect and very possibly many of the things he did were done for a reason yet he did them and that is the big difference. This is what is missing in todays climate a total focus and falling back on what you believe. His ability to adjust and meander through all the obstacles is incredible. The Duty of a Statesman was a decent look at some of the world Mr. Lincoln successfully tread. Save the union at all costs, free the slaves and stand behind the ones have helped him do this ultimately freeing them all. Never cut and dry decisions but made none the less with a solid moral belief behind them.

David Kent says

In this stellar follow up to his "Lincoln's Virtues," noted historian William Lee Miller examines the presidency of Abraham Lincoln through the lens of morality. He succeeds in developing the moral themes that drove Lincoln through the most trying days of our nation's history.

[NOTE: A more detailed review to follow shortly]

I read this book as part of an ongoing book discussion group by the Lincoln Group of DC. Over a dozen people with interest in Lincoln joined monthly to impart varied and invaluable insights into the meaning of this book and others. My thoughts above come from my own reading and biases, but are greatly influenced by the input from the Lincoln Group discussion group, for which I give my heartfelt thanks and appreciation.
