

Lincoln

By

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I am a great fan of non-fiction work, and have always enjoyed the writing of David McCullough especially. While reading Lincoln by David Donald I was reminded of McCullough's meticulous and exhaustive research. One of the many qualities that made this book so interesting was that, unlike many non-fiction historical writers, Donald expressly stated that his work would be non judgmental; therefore, it is difficult to articulate a particular thesis that Donald sought to present. There were some core characteristics of Lincoln that are central to his story which I will describe below, but Lincoln is essentially just that – a story of how a relatively unknown man of very limited qualifications and experience could become President of the United States at unquestionably its most defining moment. Written almost exclusively from primary sources and with extensive references, Donald simply presents the facts of Lincoln's life experiences and leaves conclusions to the reader. Even at the end, with Lincoln dead on a bed in William Petersen's house, when judgments on Lincoln's presidency might be expected, Donald simply quotes Edwin Stanton's famous observation that "Now, he belongs to the ages."

The book begins with Lincoln's ancestry and outlines experiences that influenced the kind of person he became, especially his relationship with his father and stepmother. Interestingly, his father was the negative influence in his life and his step mother the most positive. Donald goes on to chronicle Lincoln's indecisiveness about his career path and his self-education in everything, "trying to put together the fragmented pieces of his personality into a coherent pattern." He illustrates Lincoln's unquenchable ambition and determination to make something out of his life as he drifted from working on riverboats to investing as a store proprietor. Most of his early endeavors ended in failure, but Donald

documents Lincoln's persistence and his honesty. Though it often took him years, he always settled his debts. Settling on the law, Lincoln gradually educated himself, often via failure and frustration, and through various contacts found himself a favorite for political office first in Sangamon County, then in the Illinois state legislature, followed by a brief stint in the US House of Representatives and a failed attempt to unseat Senator Stephen Douglas in 1858. Donald tells the story of how Lincoln gained the attention of the emerging Republican Party – a conglomeration of various political groups at odds with one another but united in the desire to keep slavery out of the territories – and his unlikely rise to be the Republican nominee in 1860.

In exacting detail, because the resources are abundant, Donald paints the picture of Lincoln as President. The litany of failures that President Lincoln faced as the Civil War unfolded are described in excruciating detail making the reader wonder how a person of Lincoln's periodically frail psychological stature could possibly endure. It is no wonder that the pictures of Lincoln over the four years of the Civil War reveal a rapidly aging person subjected to unrelenting pressure. As Donald continues the story, it becomes apparent that the inexperienced and unlikely Republican Party candidate of 1860 did what he did in the other years of his life: he learned on the job. Donald accentuates the character strengths that seemed to alternate with Lincoln's personality issues – including withdrawal and depression. These strengths ultimately allowed Lincoln to persevere under circumstances unimaginable. One is left wondering what might have happened to the Union had another person become President.

It is the characteristics of the man that stood out for me as I read the book. Lincoln's ambition and persistence were juxtaposed against his inherent passivity. While he exhibited great political ambition - "The taste is in my mouth" - he professed and acted upon the conviction that events controlled him rather than the other way around. His belief that there was a higher authority controlling the outcome of human events animated his actions. Thus, "the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power over which the mind itself has no control." This belief was not born of long association with organized religion; he resisted the religious revivalism of his time. Instead, he developed his own religious fatalism: he and others were fated to act not by will but by the "doctrine of necessity." Remarkably, it was this quality that gave him the wherewithal to withstand the ferocious and unrelenting criticism that was directed at him as President. Much of the criticism seemed to be of his own making in the appointment and management of his cabinet, yet he seemed able to absorb an amazing amount of criticism with tolerance and even compassion. The history of his relationship with Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase tested all his qualities of tolerance and compassion and illustrated his learned political acumen. Donald's description of Lincoln's vacillation between grounded pragmatism and bouts of depression and despair was poignant. I was left wondering why anyone who experienced what Lincoln experienced in his first term, including the death of a second son and marriage to an unstable, unpredictable wife, would ever seek re-election.

While he possessed the qualities to see the Civil War to its conclusion and while it was clear that he gained in capability over time, I was struck by Lincoln's initial ineptitude as a chief executive. In retrospect, this should not be surprising considering his lack of experience. Donald's description of Lincoln's actions upon taking office - managing the

Fort Sumter crisis among other examples – illustrated his “doctrine of necessity.” On the other hand, it created an atmosphere of confusion, ambiguity and lack of direction. While the tendencies abated in time, he initially was a poor delegator and micromanaged affairs that were best left to others. I thought it was interesting how Lincoln learned to manage public opinion over time and thus neutralize political pressures from the myriad factions of the political spectrum. If he was resistant to one of the great social movements of his time – religious revivalism – he eventually came to embrace the great communication inventions of the century: the newspaper and the telegraph (What Hath God Wrought). Once Lincoln learned to use the newspapers to communicate more clearly to constituencies and thus put pressure on critics in Congress, he was more able to advance an agenda. He discovered this power almost by accident. Unable to attend James Conkling’s convention in Springfield to defend his actions to date, Lincoln wrote a lengthy piece to be read to the assembly. Though not his plan, the letter found its way into all major newspapers and cleared the political air. Papers usually critical of Lincoln’s every move published strongly supportive commentary. Lincoln learned his lesson well and continued to use the newsprint media to his advantage, perhaps ushering in the age of media management!

The Civil War was the first conflict in which the President could communicate with generals at the front more or less in real time using the telegraph. Lincoln devoted hours to the telegraph office. Some might argue that this allowed him to micro manage affairs when he ought not, but the technology and the history of the communications from Lincoln to his litany of commanders raised questions at the time about the proper Constitutional role of the Commander in Chief in the execution of war strategy. Lincoln’s indecision, his use of suggestions rather than orders, seemed to reflect this confusion and may have contributed

to the extension of the conflict. On the other hand, there was little confusion in Lincoln's mind with regard to his powers as CIC in other areas. He articulated these thoughts in the letter to Conkling including his decision to suspend the writ of habeus corpus and to use the emancipation of slaves in rebellious states as a war strategy granted by virtue of his CIC powers. He took advantage of another opportunity to defend the habeus corpus suspension through the newspapers following the receipt of the resolutions of a pro-Vallandigham convention in New York in the summer of 1863. In a letter to Erastus Corning he ably explained his reasoning and refuted the charge that he was abusing his powers in time of war. To the argument that he would continue to deny individual rights following the conclusion of the war, Lincoln answered that this would be to akin saying "that a man could contract an appetite for emetics during temporary illness, as to persist in feeding upon them through the remainder of his healthful life." Lincoln's folksy way of explaining complex issues was effective. This time he sent a copy directly to the *New York Tribune*.

If a reader is interested in a judgmental account of the Lincoln administration, I could not recommend this book. However, for a factual presentation of the remarkable life of Abraham Lincoln, it would be hard to do better than David Donald's Lincoln. The reader can draw his or her own conclusions about the effectiveness of this President by examining in detail his writings, his speeches, his individual decisions, and the management of his administration. There is evidence of waffling and decisiveness, strength and weakness, vitality and despair, success and failure. I think Donald's reference to something John Kennedy said about some scholars' efforts to rank Presidents sums up the purpose of this book: "No one has a right to grade a President who has not sat in his chair,

examined the mail and information that came across his desk, and learned why he made his decisions.” While it is not possible to sit in Lincoln’s chair in his time, Donald’s book allows us to get as close as possible.

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