

TAH Lincoln David Herbert Donald

Thesis:

On the first page of the preface, Donald articulates his focus clearly, "It (the biography) seeks to explain rather than to judge." (Donald 14) The author then goes on to describe the book as Lincoln-centered drawn from the President's own words and a vast array of reliable contemporary sources. Professor Donald describes the book as grappling with Lincoln's "essential passivity" (Donald 14), but frames and emphasizes it in terms of "his enormous capacity for growth." (Donald 15) The qualities that made Lincoln fatalistic, "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me," (Donald 15) are translated in this book into his most "lovable traits" as well as his ability to be flexible, adaptive and ultimately successful in the most trying period in American history. In effect, Donald paints a picture of Lincoln as a human being, imperfect, striving for growth, riddled with inconsistencies and punished by the trials of life, yet it is exactly this humanity and Lincoln's own awareness of his abilities and shortcomings that makes him so admired, quoted and revered.

Quality of evidence:

I am certainly in no position to challenge the scholarly quality of Lincoln. Frequently, Donald provided the structure and literary ligaments that told the President's story in Lincoln's language and the descriptions of those around him. The range of sources that detailed Lincoln's own words was startling, and the supporting evidence was equally stunning, "At one stop a beautiful little girl lifted a bouquet of rosebuds to the open window in the President's car, saying with her childish lisp, "Flowrth for the President!" Stepping to the window, Lincoln bent down and kissed the child, saying: "You're a sweet little rose-bud yourself. I hope your life will open into perpetual beauty and goodness." (Donald 463) One could challenge the veracity of the anecdote except that the book is so detailed, yet so effectively narrated that one can

overlook apparent rhetorical flourishes as accurate since so much evidence has been provided elsewhere. However in one case, Donald suggests psychological interpretations of Lincoln's behavior just prior to leaving for Washington as an Illinois Representative. "That visit broke an emotional barrier that for years had kept him from mentioning the death of his mother or the loss of his sister. He could now complete the unfinished process of grieving over his mother." (Donald 116) While I don't feel the author's reading is adequately supported, it is one small case in almost 600 pages of text. In effect, the author's care and thoroughness impart an air of accuracy and a cushion of evidence that overwhelms areas where one might tend towards disbelief or question his interpretations.

My disagreement with the author is one of minor interpretation, and again I am on thin ice challenging the definitive Lincoln biographer. Yet in a variety of places, such as his description of his legal practice (Donald 157), Donald suggests Lincoln is not exceptional but responsive, not original in his formulations but reactionary and ultimately not brilliant but practical. Perhaps those are my misinterpretations, but the sum total of this book is one of a man uniquely placed to solve the problems posed by the Civil War. So I see genius differently, if this is in fact Donald's belief. Abraham Lincoln was a man whose exceptional brilliance was his ability to achieve the possible rather than force a vision or ideology on the nation, and ultimately I think Donald argues this point persuasively. Lincoln's genius was not comparable to the originality of Jefferson for example, but his ability to move gradually and adapt to successive crises is paralleled by only Washington or FDR in our history. His was the genius of humanity not a genius that transcends humanity

What I learned:

The complexity of Lincoln is self-evident, but he is so celebrated in American history that I did not understand the nuances before I read the book. Lincoln is also the first detailed biography that I have read of Lincoln so there was much to learn. I was struck by the number of close relations including his mother, sister, fiancée and son who died while he was still relatively young. However in a near-frontier society, deaths were not unusual, but no less

trying? The deep depressions and melancholy that attacked Lincoln also seemed to forge his character and make him better able to withstand the stresses and challenges he faced later as President.

I had mistakenly believed that Abraham Lincoln had been almost unknown before the Lincoln-Douglas debates. During his earlier and largely unsuccessful term as a Representative in Washington, Lincoln became known as a leading Whig and worked hard for the nomination of Zachary Taylor (Donald 126-27). Although the Lincoln-Douglas debates propelled him to national prominence for the first time, I hadn't known the depth of his political involvement in Illinois as a state representative or the fact that he was widely known nationally in Whig circles and an early leader in the new Republican Party, during the lead-in to the 1856 Presidential election (Donald 192-93). Although Lincoln did effectively explode onto the national scene in 1860 he had worked steadily and effectively in Illinois, and he had developed a clear understanding of political necessity as he built party structures and organization (Donald 202).

The book challenged my prior understanding of Lincoln as a one dimensional figure – honest and unsullied by the practicalities of political office. Instead, I learned that Lincoln was a master politician deeply practical and flexible in his pursuit of solutions to the problems that he faced throughout his career. In fact the book begins with the idea that for Lincoln, “My policy is to have no policy.” (Donald 15) However, I think this is a typically self-effacing comment by a politician who knew the effects his words would have and the images they would convey. Instead, his considerations were lengthy and fluid, and when he arrived at a belief he held it as long as the evidence supported it. As a lawyer he had taken both sides of issues including slavery and the railroads, “In 1857, Lincoln appeared on the opposite side of a quite similar case.” (Donald 157), and his ability to apply the appropriate principles to the various elements of a situation allowed him a fluidity a more ideological thinker could not develop.

The Civil War's challenges demanded that Lincoln demonstrate his political mastery. From the outset of the war, Lincoln showed extraordinary flexibility in shaping his policies to keep the various interests within the Union united. The selection of his cabinet ministers showed an extensive awareness of the need to balance the varied interests within the

Republican Party and the geographic interests of the now embattled Union. He stretched the powers of the Executive Branch by calling for enlistments and expenditures without the explicit consent of Congress, and most significantly suspended the writ of habeas corpus. When he was challenged by Justice Taney he ignored him or spun his typical frontier tales to redirect and obfuscate. Yet when he addressed Congress in July 1865 to explain his actions, he was clear, penetrating and incisive in establishing his rationale (Donald 302). In the vital diplomatic work with border Kentucky, Lincoln wove a course between the Border States' tenuous loyalty to the Union and the Northern States' cries against slavery with regards to Fremont's poorly considered proclamation (Donald 316). Lincoln could decisively strike against internal disputes, as in the court martial of Major John J. Key (Donald 386) while still demonstrating enormous patience with the dithering McClellan. The nuance with which Lincoln developed the Gettysburg Address took the contemporary political climate, the fissures within his own party and the anticipated tenor of the speaker directly before him into account while still providing an expansive view of war aims and a forceful definition of the likely peace to come as he reminded Americans "that theirs was a nation pledged not merely to constitutional liberty but to human equality." (Donald 462) Despite the ringing morality, Lincoln mastered the messy unpleasantness of politics.

As the war continued into 1864, Lincoln was concerned about the renomination and election season he faced. He carefully balanced his reelection plans and the need for a decisive end to the war before Grant was recalled from the West to lead the Army of the Potomac (Donald 491). In a series of 1864 maneuvers around a peace negotiation at Niagara, Lincoln was the consummate tactician. A drafted letter "reflected Lincoln's careful balancing of political considerations against military needs." (Donald 522) He avoided a political trap while reinforcing his interests in the North. As the outcome of the war became clearer and Lincoln formulated plans for Reconstruction, he kept an eye on the varied interests within his party and yet, "he was thinking less of the status of the South after the war than of means to stop the fighting." (Donald 561) In places Lincoln was insistent on a plan (Donald 561) while in others he equivocated because he had a final goal was in mind and in many ways the means he employed justified the end of the war.

Perhaps the ideas that best reflect Lincoln's ability to change and adapt as situations shifted was seen in his views on slavery. In 1836, he "did not think African-Americans were entitled to the ballot." (Donald 59), and Lincoln was a colonizer in regards to the former slaves. Yet, at the end of a bloody war on April 11th 1865 Abraham Lincoln made a public move which no American President had "that he was in favor of Negro suffrage." (Donald 585)

How I will use this text in class:

First and foremost, Lincoln has given me a broader and deeper understanding of the pre-Civil War and Civil War period. Donald only briefly discusses the military components of the war, which offered an excellent foil to the lectures and writing of James McPherson. In terms of direct application to the classroom, as I read I marked key paragraphs that illustrated turning points in the growing tension prior to the war from the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and Harper's Ferry to Lincoln's election. I will copy a variety of these one paragraph excerpts to use in class as we discuss and investigate the causes of the Civil War. In effect the paragraphs act as a timeline of key events and conflicts that precipitated the Civil War, and I will fill in the gaps, answer questions, and develop responses for the students' work. The only multi-page selection I will use is around the Gettysburg Address on pages 459-466. I will choose a series of those pages as a take home reading assignment before we dissect and discuss the Gettysburg Address in class.

I like using brief excerpts from detailed books I have read because I think it gives the students a taste of what history can provide in terms of richness, nuance and excitement. In addition, the excerpts often force the students to expand their comfort zone in regards to reading level. The vocabulary and syntax can be challenging, but the brevity and intensity of the readings encourage students to work at a higher level than that to which they are accustomed.

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