

---

---

# *The Heritage of Lincoln*

**James Seaton**

*Michigan State University*

In “The Problem of Lincoln in Babbitt’s Thought,”<sup>1</sup> his scholarly rejoinder to my “Irving Babbitt on Lincoln and Unionism,”<sup>2</sup> Richard Gamble argues that Babbitt was wrong to uphold Lincoln “as an exemplary figure in the best American tradition.” In my view, on the contrary, Babbitt was justified in taking Lincoln as an upholder of “our great unionist tradition,” and followers of Babbitt today are right to claim Lincoln as an invaluable ally in their efforts to reconstitute American culture and society. Gamble, on the other hand, advises participants in “any Babbitt-inspired effort to rebuild American culture” to reject the heritage of Lincoln.

Despite these fundamental differences, there are several points on which Richard Gamble and I can agree. Both of us find that Babbitt’s conception of Lincoln is not always accurate. We both note that Lincoln’s admiration for Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence seems at odds with Babbitt’s own conception of the “unionist” tradition—which Babbitt defined in large part by contrast to the “Jeffersonian” impulse. Gamble suggests that the Progressive cult of Lincoln led to a “Lincoln myth” presenting the sixteenth president as the “ideal of the humanitarian crusader.” Like Gamble and Babbitt himself, I think that the Progressives distorted the historical Lincoln to serve their own political purposes. In my view, however, a careful study of the words and deeds of Lincoln

*Points of  
agreement.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard M. Gamble, “The Problem of Lincoln in Babbitt’s Thought,” *Humanitas*, XV, no. 1 (2002), 69-80.

<sup>2</sup> James Seaton, “Irving Babbitt on Lincoln and Unionism,” *Humanitas*, XV, no. 1 (2002), 59-68.

---

---

reconfirms Lincoln's moral and intellectual stature and validates Babbitt's view of Lincoln as an exemplar of the unionist tradition of "sane moral realism." Gamble, on the other hand, believes that the historical record reveals an unprincipled seeker of power, a "Lincoln advocating all sorts of innovations and irregularities if it suited his purposes." Whether Lincoln was the former or the latter will continue to be debated by "conservatives, neo-conservatives, libertarians, and liberals . . . as long as they have life and breath," as Gamble says about a related matter. There is no space here to debate the historical record; I will note only that James G. Randall, the historian whom Gamble cites for evidence of Lincoln's transgressions, drew a different conclusion from the same evidence—as Gamble himself acknowledges with true scholarly integrity. The following observations are not intended to settle the issues between us but to provide some perspective on their significance.

*Lincoln  
attacked  
by leftists.*

Richard Gamble demonstrates persuasively that Lincoln was made into a patron saint by Progressives "in the decades surrounding the First World War." Even while conceding and even emphasizing that the Progressive version of Lincoln was clearly a "myth" at odds with the historical Lincoln, Gamble warns that Lincoln's popularity among "the very people Babbitt most despised" poses a "difficulty for students of Babbitt." Fair enough. In the decades since the Progressive Era, however, it has been conservatives who have defended Lincoln most often and most effectively, while attacks on Lincoln have emanated most frequently from leftists attempting to justify their radicalism by denigrating Lincoln and thus the United States. Gamble thus finds himself with some strange allies. His comparison of Lincoln to Bismarck and Mazzini, for example, was anticipated by Edmund Wilson, a great literary critic but a man capable of monumentally flawed political judgments (for example, he urged voting for the Communist ticket in 1932). In the preface to *Patriotic Gore*, his great work on the literature of the Civil War, Wilson argues that Lincoln's determination to preserve the union had no moral basis but "was simply the form that the power drive now took"<sup>3</sup> and goes on to associate Lincoln with Bismarck and then Lenin on much the same

---

<sup>3</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), xvi.

---

---

grounds that Gamble uses to compare Lincoln to Bismarck and Mazzini. Gamble argues that his trio were leaders of “successful wars of national consolidation,” while Wilson observes that Lincoln, Bismarck and Lenin “presided over the unifications of the three great new modern powers.”<sup>4</sup> Once the post-Civil War United States is equated to Bismarck’s Germany, the way is open to deny any moral standing at all to the United States today. Edmund Wilson in 1962 made use of his debunking of Lincoln to smooth the way for his claim that the confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States had no moral dimension. In opposing the Soviet Union the United States was merely “an active power organism in the presence of another such organism,” “a sea slug of vigorous voracity in the presence of another such sea slug.”<sup>5</sup> No doubt Gamble would reject such reductionism, but one wonders exactly what political stance is implied by his own characterization of the United States after 1865 as “a unitary nation-state held together by an act of externally imposed force and the ongoing threat of violence.” It is easier to imagine followers of Michel Foucault, Edward Said or Noam Chomsky rallying to that claim than those who have learned from Irving Babbitt.

Conservatives, meanwhile, have turned to Lincoln to demonstrate the possibility of a politics based on moral principle. No less a champion of the South than Richard Weaver found in Lincoln’s words and deeds the essence of true conservatism, preferring him even to Edmund Burke.<sup>6</sup> Lincoln, Weaver notes approvingly, “saw that conservatism to be effective cannot be Whiggism. . . . It must have some ideal objective. He [Lincoln] found objectives in the moral idea of freedom and the political idea of union” (80). Today many assume the superiority of moral and cultural relativism to the affirmation of moral principles; Weaver points out that Lincoln affirmed the reality of moral principles in contrast to Stephen Douglas’s claim that freedom of choice (of the white electorate) trumped questions of right and wrong. Lincoln, Weaver emphasizes, “came to repudiate, as firmly as anyone in practical politics may do, those people who try by relativistic interpretations and

*Lincoln’s  
abstract  
morality  
endorsed by  
Richard  
Weaver.*

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxii.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953), 83-84. All quotations from Richard Weaver are from this work; page numbers are indicated in the text.

---

---

other sophistries to evade the force of some basic principles" (105). Untroubled by Lincoln's references to "the expansive abstractions" of the Declaration of Independence that are so distasteful to Gamble, Weaver praises Lincoln's attention to the precise meaning of the "paradigm" established by the Declaration:

*Reform  
"according to  
definition"  
rather than  
seeking the  
mean.*

This paradigm acts both as an inspiration to action and as a constraint upon over-action, since there is always a possibility of going beyond the schemata into an excess. Lincoln opposed both slavery and the Abolitionists (the Abolitionists constituted a kind of 'action' party); yet he was not a middle-of-the-roader. . . . The truth lay where intellect and logic found it, and he was not abashed by clearness of outline. . . . The essence of Lincoln's doctrine was not the seeking of a middle, but reform according to definition. True conservatism can be intellectual in the same way as true classicism" (113).

Hadley Arkes in his *First Things: An Inquiry into the First Principles of Morals and Justice* likewise notes approvingly Lincoln's affirmation of the reality of moral principles while noting that the arguments of his adversary Stephen Douglas anticipate "the perspective of 'cultural relativism,' the view that there are no moral truths which hold their validity across cultures."<sup>7</sup> Arkes takes Lincoln's principled rebuttal of Douglas's "don't care" position in their debate in Quincy, Illinois, as a model worth following today: "What Lincoln expressed . . . was the connection between the logic of morals and the logic of law. It is hard to find many places in the canons of political philosophy where this connection—which is so critical to the understanding of political life—is made with the same explicitness."<sup>8</sup> For Arkes it was the "partisans of slavery" who rejected the connection on which Lincoln insisted:

The defenders of slavery were moved to armed rebellion as a result of the election of 1860, in which they were as free as any other faction in national politics to persuade their fellow citizens and gain assent for their position. . . . The act of taking up arms expressed eloquently—far more eloquently than anything the Southerners could merely say—their refusal to offer reasons and seek the consent of others, who were joined with them in a common polity. . . . Rightness would be measured by success alone; the flexing of raw power would stand as its own justification. In short, Might—once again—would make Right.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Hadley Arkes, *First Things: An Inquiry into the First Principles of Morals and Justice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 39.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

---

---

Richard Gamble is right to remind us that the Progressives of the first quarter of the twentieth century created a mythical Lincoln to serve their own political agenda. For at least the last fifty years, however, conservatives have followed Irving Babbitt in reclaiming the Lincoln who based his politics on universal moral principles but avoided demonizing his opponents or claiming supreme virtue for himself or his side. The arguments of Lincoln's opponents, many conservatives have observed, have a strange affinity with postmodernist cultural and political radicalism. Harry Jaffa notes that "Lincoln's acceptance of the idiom of natural rights and natural law—above all his acceptance of the idea of nature not merely as a record of cause and effect but as a source of moral principles"—seems out of date to contemporary postmodernists, while "the premises underlying the thought of [Stephen] Douglas and [John C.] Calhoun are the premises of historicism, positivism, relativism, and nihilism—premises that have become the conventional wisdom of our time."<sup>10</sup> Irving Babbitt's portrait of Lincoln may have its flaws, but he was right to counter the sophistries of his own time by an appeal to the moral and political heritage of Lincoln, and Babbitt's heirs are right to make the same appeal today.

---

<sup>10</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), xiii.