

Abraham Lincoln: The Man and the Myth

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Lincoln in American Memory, by Merrill D. Peterson. *New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. 482 pp. + x. \$30.00.*

The inscription above Daniel C. French's statue of Abraham Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial in Washington states that "IN THIS TEMPLE As In The Hearts Of The People For Whom He Saved The Union The Memory of Abraham Lincoln Is Enshrined Forever." Merrill D. Peterson's chronicle of that memory, replete with the various tributes that have been rendered it, as well as the vicious attempts to suppress dissenters from the chorus of praise, is a fascinating look at the hold that Lincoln has upon American culture.

In tracing the various uses to which the memory of Lincoln has been put in American political culture, Merrill Peterson has taken a critically important step towards establishing the contrast, denied by his plethora of admirers, between the Lincoln of history and the Lincoln of memory. And by the latter I mean the Lincoln that has shaped our national consciousness,

the symbol of the pietistic pursuit of equality. It should come as no surprise that, in politics, such present-day admirers of Lincoln as Jack Kemp press ever more unrealistic plans for achieving racial and ethnic harmony, or that, in academia, Straussian would-be philosopher kings extolling Lincoln should be willing to join the chorus of equality at home and to expend American blood to advance this abstract ideal around the world. This spreading equalitarian fervor necessitates a more careful examination of the chief American inspiration behind these deeds of domestic and international derring-do. We might otherwise suffer another reign of questionable "virtue" in tune with that self-righteous millenarian anthem "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." *Lincoln in American Memory* is a step in the right direction for this kind of urgently needed scholarship, albeit not a step to the tune of "Dixie."

It behooves us to be wary of those who seek to engage us in grand causes beyond the daily, and therefore real, demands of humdrum virtue. Peterson has rendered a great service by tracing the development of the Lincoln symbol from the night that the President lay dying in a lodging house in Washington to such events as the attempt by the United States Congress to bar Edgar Lee Master's devastating *Lincoln the Man* from the mails and the storm created by Gore Vidal when he decided to treat the legend as it had seldom been treated—in a non-adulatory manner. Vidal wrote perhaps the best single volume on Lincoln, telling deeper truths than had been told in many years. And, of course, he touched a rather tender nerve among adherents to the modern cult of a martyred President. Peterson recounts all of this, with a decided pro-Lincoln bias that is not grounded in any real assessment of the man himself. His book illustrates his own thesis that the "public remembrance of the past, as differentiated from the historical scholars', is concerned less with establishing its truth than with appropriating it for the present. . . . The magnitude of Lincoln's achievement combined with the drama of his death made his memory especially important to the American people. He was a masterpiece, a national treasure to be preserved, loved, revered, and emulated." Peterson's book is, with such exceptions as noted here, the history of a hagiography.

One of the dissenters from the canonization of Lincoln among the historians was, of course, the late M. E.

Bradford. Peterson touches upon his work in a brief paragraph, but he does not approach a just evaluation of its significance. This is a great failing, for Bradford's insights into Lincoln's career are those of a learned student of rhetoric and political philosophy. Bradford shed light upon one of the great mysteries of our history: how the musings of a skillful Illinois politician became our national orthodoxy. Bradford studied Lincoln as a product of his time. He did not underestimate Lincoln's gifts nor overestimate his saintly qualities. Peterson's book lacks this critical balance in dealing with Lincoln and perhaps also with American history.

The uncritical view of our sixteenth President as a pious statesman has been extraordinarily influential. It has affected the most incisive minds. In *Democracy and Leadership*, Irving Babbitt praises Abraham Lincoln for possessing a proper regard for the institutional constraints upon popular government; Lincoln, Babbitt writes, had at his "very center . . . an element of judicial control [and] a profound conception of the role of the courts in maintaining free institutions." This is, Babbitt contends, in sharp contrast with Thomas Jefferson, whose rhetoric about democracy Lincoln seems, upon first glance, to share. The difference between the two is even deeper in Babbitt's view; he regards Jefferson as the soul of vindictiveness, Lincoln as a model of "benignity and unselfishness."

There is no denying that there is something about the Abraham Lincoln that has come down to us that

resonates with the best of our nature as human beings and partially explains his having become perhaps the foremost figure in the national pantheon. Babbitt's brief portrait captures a dimension of ethical restraint that has made Lincoln a hero to many. And yet the portrait leaves out important aspects of his personality. Most significantly, it does not explain how and why Lincoln continues to be a detrimental influence on American life. Peterson's book provides material for answering such questions, although it does not itself provide much guidance regarding the questions we should ask in the first place.

Peterson focuses not so much on Lincoln as on our collective memory of him. In so doing he considers his role in what the sociologist Robert Bellah calls America's civil religion. Bellah's claim, Peterson writes, was that the "origins of this civil religion traced back to the nation's founding, then took definite form during the Civil War in the life and death of President Lincoln, which conformed to the Christian archetype. The Gettysburg Address was the prophetic text." Other scholars, he notes, have seen in Lincoln's civil religion a sharpening and enhancement of the "American sense of mission, the original Puritan sense of being a 'city on a hill,' which Lincoln caught up in his guarded 'almost chosen people.'" These scholars, some of whom preceded Bellah, suggest that Lincoln tempered theological politics with what Reinhold Niebuhr called "a religious awareness of another dimension of meaning and judgment." The

invocation of a transcendent dimension, Niebuhr claims, prevented Lincoln's theology from drifting into self-righteousness. Lincoln did not equate the will of the nation with the will of God. A problem with Peterson's book is that he does not examine Lincoln's own words and actions closely enough to arrive at a reasoned conclusion as to whether the praise that he claims is due the Great Emancipator and Savior of the Union is really merited. He simply asserts that it is.

The preeminent source for this myth of a "humble Abraham Lincoln" shrouded in piety is the Second Inaugural Address. It is to this speech more than any other that we owe the dominant, theological interpretation of Lincoln. And it is to Bradford's scholarship that we are in large measure indebted for showing just how much Lincoln manipulates his audience in this, his last major address. Here Lincoln is the statesman who invokes the judgment of God upon the South, while claiming not to be doing so and while giving the victor's account of those four bloody years and all that preceded them: "It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged." It is here that Lincoln washes his hands of any direct responsibility for plunging the nation into its bloodiest war, and lays the blame at the feet of God. ("If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but

which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him?") And it is here that God's servant, humble Abraham Lincoln, calls for a benevolent denouement to the bloodbath in that famous peroration "with malice toward none; with charity for all."

This is the Lincoln of myth, seen through honeyed memory as the nation's messiah, soon to be sacrificed on Good Friday, calling for the lion and the lamb to lie down side by side in what will assuredly be a blessed peace, imposed by the triumphant Northern armies.

But besides the phrases in the Second Inaugural Address that have so shaped our memory of Lincoln there is another revealing section. That section offers, not just a judgment upon a people who claimed that fighting for their homes and their way of life was a just cause, but a theological interpretation of the waning conflict. Taken together with his other words, it constitutes one of the most arrogant statements ever uttered by a statesman. Having spoken of the war as a punishment to both North and South for permitting the institution of slavery to take root in American soil, Lincoln adds:

Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled up by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall

be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

This imagery is familiar to Lincoln's audience. It conjures up the passage from Hebrews 9:22 that "without shedding of blood there is no remission" of sin. This is true for the old covenant, as well as for the new one established through Christ's death on the cross. It becomes clear, then, that during his presidency Lincoln has, through rhetoric and his "terrible swift sword," established a new covenant for America—indeed, the world, for he has fought this war in part because he is convinced that upon its outcome rests the cause of popular government the world over.

Lincoln's covenant is sealed with the shedding of blood as a sacrificial offering as were its predecessors, but it differs from the covenants of the Old and New Testaments in that, while borrowing the *language* of the Western religious heritage, many of the actions of Father Abraham belie a transcendent inspiration. One would expect, for example, that someone believing himself to be in some sense bound by the ethical constraints arising within Christendom in regard to the conduct of war would also attempt to adhere to them in practice. One might expect a person truly governed by a transcendent moral norm to behave with the moral restraint of the likes of Robert E. Lee and Jeffer-

son Davis. Instead, Lincoln unleashed the armies of John Pope, William Tecumseh Sherman, and Ulysses S. Grant. These acts are suggestive of a modern element of unrestraint in Lincoln's mind and soul. The record is replete with instances of impious ruthlessness, such as Lincoln's canceling the verdict of a court martial regarding a Federal officer whose troops had raped and pillaged their way through Athens, Alabama. Lincoln rewarded the officer, an Illinois politician, with a promotion instead. There is in fact little in Lincoln's career to suggest that his religious rhetoric was more than a mask, part of a skillful attempt to fulfill a life-long ambition.

Lincoln's Second Inaugural was not the first time that a hero of abolitionism invoked the sacrificial imagery of Hebrews. On December 2, 1859, a man on his way to his execution handed a slip of paper to someone standing near: "Charleston, Va, 2d, December, 1859. I John Brown am now quite *certain* that the crime of this *guilty, land*: will never be purged *away*; but with Blood." The captain of the Harper's Ferry raid, Osawatomie Brown of Bleeding Kansas, then goes on to state that *he* had hoped that this bloodshed could have been minimized.

Brown's slip of paper and Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address have in common the invocation of blood, as well as the authors' express need to remove themselves from immediate responsibility for their actions. Implicit in Brown's legacy, and explicit in Lincoln's, is the argument that it is God Who is to be held accountable for

exacting the punishment due His errant children. It is not the men who stirred up sectional hatred and uttered phrases about a house dividing; not the men who butchered Kansas and plotted the same fate for the white South: these men are vindicated by the "coming of the Lord," the triumphant Federal armies trampling out the grapes of wrath as they loot their way through Dixie. The Second Inaugural Address is not so much an appeal to a transcendent Power beyond politics as it is a rhetorical exercise in removing political responsibility from the one who bears it, while at the same time aligning Lincoln's cause with the will of God, and in the process taking as much credit as possible. "Humble Abraham Lincoln" is in fact possessed of a towering ambition. He invokes God, not as a source of virtues of restraint and humility, but as a sanction for the existence of that abstract "nation, under God," that "shall not perish from the earth." Lincoln's moralism was on behalf of government of, by, and for the people, dedicated to equality, and was heated with the ideological fervor of nationalism.

But will that nationalistic mission of re-making the world in the image of a mythical America—Lincoln's America—ever be complete? One must ask what Lincoln himself was thinking when at Springfield on June 26, 1857, he spoke of the authors of the Declaration of Independence. They set up, he asserts, "a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained,

constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere." The reference to a constant "spreading and deepening" and to promoting the happiness of people "everywhere" indicates an imperial mission. To our detriment and to the detriment of liberty, we are still in the thrall of the man who once warned us about people such as himself.

Also missing from Peterson's account of the Lincoln symbol, as it has come down to us, is an account of how much it owes to the man who created it in the first place. The Lincoln-as-legend story begins, not with the smoke wafting out of the box at Ford's Theater, but in the heart and mind of the callow youth who spoke before the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois, in 1838, leaving no doubt in the minds of those who attended to his words that he, for one, was a man of rather uncommon ambition:

Many great and good men sufficiently qualified for any task they should undertake, may ever be found, whose ambition would as-

pire to nothing beyond a seat in Congress, a gubernatorial or a presidential chair; *but such belong not to the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle.* What! think you these places would satisfy an Alexander, a Caesar, or a Napoleon? Never! Towering genius disdains a beaten path. It seeks regions hitherto unexplored. It sees *no distinction* in adding story to story, upon the monuments of fame, erected to the memory of others. It *denies* that it is glory enough to serve under any chief. It *scorns* to tread in the footsteps of *any* predecessor, however illustrious. It thirsts and burns for distinction; and, if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves, or enslaving freemen.

Such a man as this does not leave it to others to think of him what they will. Lincoln crafted his own image carefully, cultivating a patina of humility that masked a core of ambition. Always, he kept his eye on the main chance, ready to grasp it, even if it should set a house divided on fire. Peterson's book is a chronicle of how the self-made pillar of fire in the night has guided us these many years.