Founders' Son: A Life of Abraham Lincoln

Review Number:
1739
Publish date:
Thursday, 5 March, 2015
Author:
Richard Brookhiser
ISBN:
9780465032945
Date of Publication:
2014
Price:
£20.00
Pages:
376pp.
Publisher:
Basic Books
Publisher url:
http://www.basicbooks.com/full-details?isbn=9780465032945
Place of Publication:
New York, NY
Reviewer:
Sean Ledwith

The title of Richard Brookhiser's biography of the 16th President indicates the innovative nature of its perspective. Brookhiser contends that new light can be shed on Lincoln's personal and political evolution by tracing his regular reflections and adaptations of the ideas of the Founding Fathers of the United States. The author proposes that Lincoln's often turbulent engagement with the great issues of his age, above all the schismatic question of slavery, can be understood as part of a hypothetical dialogue conducted by Lincoln with the key 18th-century architects of the American political system: 'As a lawmaker and a lawyer, he worked within the systems they had left behind. As a politician, he wanted to wrap himself in their aura. As a poet and a visionary, he drew on them for rhetoric and inspiration' (p. 5). Brookhiser seeks to justify the value of this approach by close textual analysis of a number of Lincoln's pivotal speeches and writings throughout his career and exposing the traces contained within them of the philosophies of figures such as Washington, Jefferson and Madison. Furthermore, the author argues these authoritative models served as surrogate father-figures for a man who was always keenly aware of the limited horizons of his actual father, Thomas Lincoln. Brookhiser suggests the President’s famously illiterate father was a constant source of embarrassment to the son and that the mutual incomprehension of the two men provided the initial ballast for Abraham’s desire to seek a career in politics: ‘Thomas Lincoln was the man who provided for him, exploited him, and shaped him, through repulsion and attraction both. Abraham Lincoln served his father, rejected him, and never acknowledged the ways – few but crucial – in which he took after him' (p. 17). There is indubitably some element of insight to be gained with this highlighting of the contrasting character of father and son, but at times Brookhiser takes this line of reasoning too far and strays into sub-Freudian territory that diminishes Lincoln’s stature as a politician and reduces his intellectual evolution to the
unravelling of a domestic psychodrama.

The author is on more solid ground when he analyses the nature of the President’s relationship with the iconic figures from a previous generation of American political leaders. Brookhiser underlines the obvious—but-still-important fact that Lincoln was much closer in time to figures such as Washington and Jefferson than ourselves and consequently they loomed much larger in his political imagination. In fact, Lincoln was in his twenties when James Madison, last of the framers of the US Constitution, died. Although the future President never physically met any of the founders, they dominated his psychological and political trajectory, according to Brookhiser. The closest Lincoln came to a direct encounter with one of the giants of the revolution was in 1825 when a steamboat carrying General Lafayette, French military adviser to Washington, ran aground on the Ohio River, only 15 miles from the legendary log cabin in which young Abraham spent his youth (p. 26). Aside from this near miss, it was primarily through books that Lincoln drew his inspiration from the Founding Fathers. One of those books, Brookhiser recounts, was a 19th-century bestseller called *The Life of Washington* by Parson Weems, an Episcopal minister. This homespun account of the first President is the source of some of the best-known but least-authenticated stories of Washington’s life, such as the thoughtless chopping down of a cherry tree that led the future revolutionary leader to confess to his father: ‘I can’t tell a lie, Pa; you know I can’t tell a lie’ (quoted on p. 29). According to Brookhiser, Lincoln also drew consolation from the first President’s minimal early education as a young boy as it mirrored his own. More significantly, the author notes that in 1861, as President-elect, Lincoln visited the scene of one of Washington’s decisive victories in the revolutionary war, the battle of Trenton in 1776. In a speech to local politicians, Lincoln cited the chapter from Weems of the famous night-time crossing of the ice-bound Delaware River, the prelude to the battle. The new President reflected that the account forced him to consider why that generation of Americans had endured such extreme hardship in order to fight in the face of seemingly impossible odds: ‘I recollect thinking ... there must have been something even more [important] than national independence ... something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come’ (quoted on p. 32). Brookhiser implies the parallel with Lincoln was that the 16th President similarly perceived the Civil War as more than a contest within the United States but also as one that would have ramifications for the whole world. The author is surely justified in perceiving this as one of the key components of Lincoln’s political genius; a keen awareness on his part of what was at stake once the conflict was underway and of the historical necessity of a Northern victory.

A more problematic aspect of the Washington’s politics that the author explores in relation to Lincoln is the first President’s ambiguous attitude to slavery. Like the rest of the founders, Washington had chosen not to confront the issue head on in order to avoid the rupture of the United States at the point of its inception. Lincoln was willing to defend this policy as one based on necessity, rather than approval on the part of the framers. In a seminal address from 1854, known as the Peoria speech, Lincoln had compared the attitude of Washington and others to that of an afflicted man who is aware of a cancerous growth but fears the consequences of treatment. As Brookhiser puts it: ‘Those old-time men left a congenital illness, as well as an ancient faith. At least they had been ashamed of it’ (p. 118).

Regarding Lincoln’s own attitude to slavery and racism, Brookhiser charts its often contradictory and uneven development. On a flatboat trip to New Orleans in 1828, the young Lincoln was reportedly distressed by the spectacle of the city’s extensive slave auctions, but Brookhiser notes the evidence for that reaction is scanty (p. 39). More substantive, is a public condemnation of the institution from the future President in 1837 in the Illinois state legislature, a not inconsiderable political risk in view of the prevailing desire to avoid the issue from most politicians, even Northern ones.

Thomas Jefferson’s ambivalence towards slavery also played a role in shaping Lincoln’s thinking on the subject, according to Brookhiser. The author suggests Jefferson’s increasingly conservative attitude throughout the course of his political career actually provoked Lincoln to adopt a more radical perspective in revulsion at the compromises practised by the third President. Lincoln looked to the young Jefferson whose lofty rhetoric had inspired the Declaration of Independence rather than the later incarnation who had suggested emancipation would have to wait for a later generation to pursue it. The two Presidents, although
separated by decades, at a certain point shared views about the solution to the issue. As Brookhiser puts it, 'Jefferson, it is true, did not want free black men to live in America ... a view Lincoln shared. But Jefferson – and Lincoln – did not believe that black men, or any men, could justly be held as slaves' (p. 165).

Brookhiser notes that at various stages in his life, Lincoln held conservative views about the potential end date of slavery, including not until the 20th century (p. 6), but on the key question of the legitimacy of the institution, Lincoln was an unwavering opponent throughout his entire life.

Brookhiser speculates one of the reasons for the comparative radicalism of Lincoln’s view, compared to the founding fathers, might have been his engagement with the ideas of the most militant member of the group, Tom Paine. The English-born revolutionary has always been the most problematic figure among the framers for mainstream American historiography, with many authors preferring not to include him as part of that elite category. Brookhiser explains this reluctance as being based on an aversion to Paine’s stridently anti-religious philosophy that did not sit well with the piety of his contemporaries. In contrast, the author argues, Lincoln was highly impressed by the relentless logic of Paine’s arguments against religion and while the President never publicly sided with this founder on the content of his ideas, he was influenced by his style of argumentation. When Lincoln’s critics in the 1850s accused him of wanting a black woman as a wife because he wanted to free her, he coolly retorted with Paine-like rigour: 'I need not have her for either. I can just leave her alone' (p. 58).

Brookhiser further argues Paine’s comprehensive demolition of theism in 'Age of Reason' played a major role in shaping Lincoln’s less than fulsome embrace of religion. The author notes that one of Lincoln’s lesser-known writings was a pamphlet from his New Salem days in which he argued the Bible was solely the work of human beings and that, whoever Jesus was, he was certainly not the son of God (p. 56). The necessity of constructing a political career in a nation that was founded on non-conformist Christian ideology, however, inclined Lincoln to downplay his religious scepticism, according to the author. The incendiary pamphlet was burnt by a friend who perceived its potential to terminate its author’s career before it had barely begun.

Lincoln's ruminations on religious matters did not end there, however. According to Brookhiser, Lincoln’s political trajectory can be tracked in line with these three inspirational patriarchs: Washington as the action hero of Lincoln the boy; Paine as the iconoclastic inspiration as he entered adulthood; and Jefferson as the rhetorical genius who inspired the great speeches of his Presidency: 'He bought the founding fathers back to life; he labored to have their principles recognised by political rivals and crowds of listening voters. He enlisted them in the fights of his time, from prairie elections to multi thousand men battles' (p. 268).

As the Civil War proceeded to its final stages, however, both in the scale of bloodshed and the intensity of acrimony on both sides, Brookhiser argues Lincoln turned to one final father-figure; not a member of the first generation of American leaders this time, but the entity that Paine had led him to disparage decades earlier – the God of the scriptures. The author posits that a little-known Quaker evangelist named Eliza Kirkbride played a decisive role in restoring the President's religious convictions during her numerous visits to the White House starting in the autumn of 1862. Unfortunately, Brookhiser reverts to over-speculative psychoanalysis again at this point by suggesting this woman's appeal to Lincoln was partly based on his longing for a maternal figure to replace the mother who had died prematurely in his youth (p. 273).

Nevertheless, Brookhiser sees a revived religious perspective as a contributory factor in the genesis of what the author regards as Lincoln's greatest speech, the second inaugural address in 1865. In this remarkable speech, the President invokes an Old Testament-style deity who has ordained the conflict as a means of purging the United States of the dark stain of slavery. Lincoln toys with the idea that the phenomenal death toll of the war is on balance justified, as both parts of the Union have been complicit in the oppressive institution since independence in the previous century: 'If God now wills the removal of a great wrong, and wills also that we of the North as well as you of the South, shall pay fairly for our complicity in that impartial history will find therein new cause to attest and revere the justice and goodness of God' (quoted on p. 276). Brookhiser speculates that Lincoln’s remarkable transition from the atheist firebrand of New Salem to the patriarchal prophet in the White House can be explained by the unprecedented rupture in the collective American psyche caused by the Civil War, and to a lesser extent, the President’s exposure to the ruminations
of Eliza Kirkbride.

There is clearly much to be gained by the author’s distinctive approach to the familiar story of Lincoln’s progress from railsplitter to commander-in-chief as an ongoing dialogue with the spirits of the Founding Fathers. Brookhiser also manages to include colourful asides which humanise Lincoln and provide light relief from the weighty constitutional discussions which form the bulk of its narrative thrust. These include Lincoln's little-known predilection for fart jokes (p. 9) and his failed attempt to write poetry, vividly described by Brookhiser as sounding 'like rolling barrels down a staircase' (p. 60). However, the crucial lacuna in Brookhiser’s narrative is an understanding of how the conditions of United States politics and society had been transformed almost out of recognition in the decades separating Lincoln from the first generation of American leaders. When Washington and his contemporaries broke free of colonial rule at the end of the 18th century, cotton exports based on slavery represented less than 10 per cent of total United States exports; by the outbreak of the Civil War they amounted to over half. In the former era, the Thirteen Colonies was a fragile alliance clinging onto the Eastern seaboard; in Lincoln’s time, the United States was grappling with westward expansion at breakneck speed and the unavoidable clash between the ideologies of the Southern plantocracy and Northern industrialists. The compromise that the Founding Fathers had reached to secure their fledging state was no longer an option by the time Lincoln set foot in the White House. Brookhiser occasionally breaks off his narrative concerning the framers to refer to Lincoln’s quest to locate suitable generals to win the conflict once it materialised. He recounts how the President commenced the conflict with an appeaser of the South in the form of George McClellan, and ended with Generals Grant and Sherman unleashing firestorms of destructions through Confederate territory in order to bring the enemy to surrender at Appomattox. The President’s four-year military dialogue with his General Staff throughout the course of the Civil War was ultimately more decisive in ending slavery than a putative hypothetical dialogue with the Founding Fathers across his lifetime.

Other reviews:

Source URL: https://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1739

Links
[1] https://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/123515