Albert J. Beveridge and
Demythologizing Lincoln

JOHN BRAEMAN

Albert J. Beveridge turned to the writing of history after the frustration of his ambitions to make history. Born in rural Ohio on October 6, 1862, he was an up-and-coming young lawyer of thirty-six in Indianapolis when he surprised the Indiana Republican establishment by winning election to the United States Senate. He first attracted attention as a champion of American overseas expansion. After his re-election in 1905 to a second term, he became identified with the reform-minded—or insurgent—wing of the GOP. He championed national child labor legislation, sponsored the federal meat inspection law adopted in the wake of the publication of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, and broke with President William Howard Taft over the Payne-Aldrich tariff. The Democratic capture of Indiana in the 1910 elections cost him his Senate seat. Two years later, he joined former president Theodore Roosevelt in leaving the Republican party and launching the Progressive party. He ran losing races as the Progressive nominee for governor in 1912 and United States senator in 1914. With the collapse of the Progressive party, he returned to the GOP, but his political future appeared dim. And his life-long ambition for the presidency had been irretrievably dashed.  

Even while publicly exuding optimism about the Progressive party, Beveridge directed his abundant energies to historical scholarship. From his law-study days, he had idolized Chief Justice John Marshall as a kindred spirit—“an American Nationalist with a big ‘A’ and a big ‘N.’” He saw Marshall as the man whose Supreme Court decisions had saved the fledgling republic from the divisive force of states’ rights and placed the new union on a solid founda-


© 2004 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois
tion. When still in the Senate, he approached the editors of *Century Magazine* about the possibility of writing a life of Marshall for serialization in their pages. After the 1912 campaign, he returned to that project. He appears to have envisaged a brief interpretive sketch focusing on Marshall’s years as chief justice, 1801 to 1835. But finding that almost no scholarly research had been done on Marshall before his appointment to the Supreme Court, he decided to write a full-scale biography that would place Marshall within the larger context of his time. Aware of his handicap as an amateur—and anxious to win the approval of the professionals—he sought out expert advice from the leading historians of the late colonial and early national periods. Perhaps to his own as much as to their surprise, he proved to be a compulsive researcher and painstaking writer who aspired to turn out a work that would stand as “the last word on the subject.”

The first two volumes of the Marshall biography were published in 1916 to near-universal acclaim. The first volume—covering up to the adoption of the Constitution—traced the forces and influences that made Marshall “the master-builder of American Nationality.” The second pictured the party battles of the 1790s as a struggle of “nationalism” against “localism.” Beveridge extolled Marshall’s “extraordinary ability,” “commanding will,” and “unyielding purpose.” The story’s archvillain was Thomas Jefferson, Marshall’s “great ultimate antagonist,” a shifty, devious, small-minded, vindictive, and hypocritical politician whose states’ rights doctrines sowed the seeds of secession and Civil War. The second two volumes—covering Marshall as chief justice—appeared in fall 1919. Beveridge’s pro-Marshall, anti-Jefferson bias was even sharper because of his feeling that the fight over United States entry into the League of Nations was as crucial a turning point in the country’s history as Marshall’s struggle to uphold nationalism against localism had been. He accordingly looked upon the work as a tract for his own times that would show “the fundamentals upon which our Nation rests and must continue to rest if it is to endure.” The most crucial was an exclusive and undivided Americanism. “Marshall gets more reactionary as he grows older,” he admitted to University of Chicago historian William E. Dodd. “But he had one GREAT

Library of Congress.

3. Beveridge to J. R. Blocher, September 11, 1913, Ibid.


5. Beveridge to Clarence W. Alvord, December 27, 1918; Beveridge to H. O. Fairchild, February 21, 1920, Beveridge Papers; Beveridge to William E. Dodd, July 7, 1918,
idea—holding the Nation together. . . . Nationalism is our one and only hope.”

After finishing the Marshall biography, Beveridge picked as his next project a multivolume life of Abraham Lincoln. Even a hasty examination convinced him that most of what had been written about Lincoln was “trash.” His publisher, Houghton Mifflin, was enthusiastic about the sales possibilities of a Lincoln biography. Most important, he had grown up the son of a Civil War veteran amid the glorification of Lincoln as the savior of the Union. He thus saw Lincoln as the man who had brought to a triumphant finish Marshall’s nation-building. If one wished to know what Marshall was like, he even suggested, “We must imagine a person very much Abraham Lincoln.” Their similarity was not limited to physical appearance; “both had the same social qualities. They enjoyed fun, jokes, laughter, in equal measure, and had the same deep appreciation of wit and humor. Their mental qualities were the same. Each man had the gift of going directly to the heart of any subject; while the same lucidity of statement marked each of them. . . . Each had a genius for managing men. . . .” Their major difference was that, whereas Marshall lost “faith in the people’s steadiness, moderation, and self-restraint,” Lincoln’s confidence “in the good sense, righteousness, and self-control of the people became greater as his life advanced.”

But he remained simultaneously tempted by the lure of a political comeback. After much soul-searching and testing of the political waters, he decided to make a bid for the Republican nomination for United States Senate in the 1922 primary against the incumbent Harry S. New. By that time, Beveridge had himself moved toward Marshall politically—attacking union “despotism,” investment-destroying soak-the-rich taxes, and “bureaucratic restrictions” on business. Although he won the GOP nomination, he went down to defeat in the election to Democrat Samuel P. Ralston. With this last hurrah played out, Beveridge devoted his remaining years to the Lincoln biography. He made repeated trips to Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois to track down sources. He was a familiar visitor to the

Dodd Papers, Library of Congress.
8. Indianapolis Star, November 18, 1921; April 7, 30, 1922.
9. The bulk of Beveridge’s correspondence regarding the research for and writing of the Lincoln biography is filed alphabetically, with separate folders for the more important correspondents, in boxes labeled “Lincoln Correspondence,” Boxes
Library of Congress and the American Antiquarian Society. He found the Lincoln biography a far more difficult undertaking than the Marshall. There was the problem of distinguishing fact from fancy in the mass of dubious and oft-times contradictory legends that had come to surround the martyred president. Aggravating the difficulty of separating the wheat from the chaff was the continuing force of Victorian prudery. “I am doubtful,” he lamented, “whether the Mid-Victorians will permit any truthful and scholarly life of Lincoln to be written.”

His reputation as Marshall’s biographer plus his political connections opened most doors. Local newspaper editors, lawyers, and Lincoln buffs gladly looked up and copied records for him. He had a Washington lawyer-friend examine the Post Office Department records about Lincoln’s time as postmaster in New Salem. He pulled strings to have the War Department records checked for Lincoln’s service in the Black Hawk War. Professor Theodore C. Pease, director of the Illinois Historical Survey, permitted him to take home thirty filing cases of materials copied from Lincoln-era newspapers. The daughter of Republican Senator Zachariah Chandler of Michigan made available to him her father’s papers; the grandsons of former Supreme Court Justice David Davis and Congressman Elihu B. Washburne did the same for their grandfathers’ papers. Lincolniana collector Oliver R. Barrett let him go through his collection, sent him copies of unpublished Lincoln letters, and assisted him in locating additional materials.

Beveridge thought that his most important coup was inducing Jesse W. Weik to lend him the collection of recollections about Lincoln that Lincoln’s former law partner William H. Herndon had gathered after his death. Herndon had drawn upon those materials for lectures in late 1865 and early 1866, in which he first broached the story about Lincoln’s love for Ann Rutledge. Mrs. Lincoln was furious at what she saw as a slur against Lincoln’s feelings for her, and Herndon became the target of the lasting hostility of her son,
Robert Todd Lincoln. Perhaps aware that he lacked the talent and discipline to write Lincoln’s biography himself—and badly needing money—Herndon sold a copy of his collection to Ward Hill Lamon. In his follow-up correspondence with Lamon and Lamon’s ghost writer, Chauncey F. Black, the son of President James Buchanan’s attorney general, Herndon broached his suspicions about Lincoln’s illegitimacy. Before the work’s publication in 1872, Lamon and Black were pressured—or paid off—to expunge the accusation of Lincoln’s illegitimacy. But Lamon’s *The Life of Abraham Lincoln from His Birth to His Inauguration* was sharply attacked for its vulgarization of Lincoln. Because Herndon’s materials were repeatedly cited, he suffered from the same backlash. And he stirred an even louder furor when, the following year, he announced that Lincoln had lived and died an “unbeliever.”

Thereafter Herndon retreated into silence until his unhappiness with the treatment of the prepresidential years in the massive biography by Lincoln’s former secretaries John G. Nicolay and John M. Hay led him to again pick up his pen. He found a collaborator in Jesse W. Weik, an 1875 graduate of Indiana Asbury University (later renamed DePauw University) at Greencastle, Indiana, and a Lincoln buff. After trying his hand as a lawyer and selling real estate, Weik had gained an appointment as a pension clerk in the Interior Department based at Springfield, Illinois. There he forged his friendship with Herndon. Herndon not only turned over his collection but wrote thirty-five detailed letters of reminiscence and opinion. Although Weik did the bulk of the writing, he was given second billing as coauthor when the work was published in 1889 as *Herndon’s Lincoln*. Herndon was sufficiently worried about the reaction that he fudged the question of Lincoln’s paternity. But he included in a footnote the Kentucky gossip about his illegitimacy, and he related how Lincoln had confessed to him his own doubts about Nancy Hank’s legitimacy. He embellished the story of the Ann Rutledge romance. He gave a similarly detailed account of Lincoln’s leaving Mary Todd at the altar on their scheduled wedding day.11

Beveridge was desperately anxious to examine the Herndon-Weik collection “to pass judgment on these sources themselves instead of relying on the printed page.” By that time, Weik had returned to Greencastle, where he was editor of the *DePauw Alumnal Register*. 12 Beveridge to Nathaniel W. Stephenson, April 28, 1923, Beveridge Papers. 13 Beveridge to Joseph C. Sibley, February 28, 1923; Beveridge to Ford, February 14, 1923, Ibid. A legend has grown up that Robert Todd Lincoln had Beveridge as his target when he closed the papers because he was angered when he learned that Beveridge was using the Herndon materials and that he even consulted an actuary.
Himself an Indiana Asbury graduate, Beveridge took advantage of his contacts with fellow alumni to smooth his way with Weik. He even interceded with Houghton Mifflin to publish Weik’s reworking of the Herndon materials for his *The Real Lincoln*. When Weik turned over to him the collection, Beveridge was exultant. “As I go over the letters in answer to Herndon’s inquiries and read the notes of interviews he took down at the time he had them,” he wrote enthusiastically to a fellow Lincoln student, “I am astonished and filled with admiration. I doubt if in all history there is another case where . . . a trained lawyer familiar with taking depositions and examining witnesses . . . immediately after the hero’s death made such a wide and minute examination of all the facts.”

Beveridge’s worst disappointment was the adamant refusal by Robert Todd Lincoln to allow him access to his father’s papers that he had deposited in the Library of Congress. Although the younger Lincoln had allowed Nicolay and Hay to examine the collection, he turned down Beveridge’s request on the ground that the papers contained material reflecting adversely upon the fathers of personal friends who were still living. On the same day that he wrote Beveridge his refusal, he signed a deed of gift to the Library stipulating that the collection remain closed until twenty-one years after his death. Although Beveridge had mutual friends intercede with the old man, Robert Todd Lincoln would not relent. Furious at the shortsighted descendants of famous men who “wished the world to think of their ancestors as little tin Gods on wheels,” Beveridge imagined that Robert Todd Lincoln was secreting dark family skeletons, such as evidence confirming Herndon’s hints about Lincoln’s illegitimacy. He was so “desolated,” he exclaimed to Worthington Ford, that he was tempted to give up the work. “I wish to make this book definitive and do not care to waste several years of my life writing something that will be merely a stopgap.”

The more research that Beveridge did the more disgusted he became with the “slush and rot” that had been—and was being—written about Lincoln. There were a few exceptions. Although marred by poor writing, insufficient research, and lack of impartiality, Nicolay and Hay’s ten-volume *Abraham Lincoln: A History* about Beveridge’s life expectancy before fixing the twenty-one year limit. Even David C. Mearns, ed., *The Lincoln Papers: The Story of the Collection with Selections to July 4, 1861*, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y., 1948), 1: 134, speculates that “it may have been more than a coincidence that [his letter of refusal to Beveridge] was written on the same day he signed the deed of gift, decreeing that the papers should be locked away for a generation.” But Robert Todd Lincoln’s biographer found “no evidence that Lincoln had anything in particular” against Beveridge. John Goff, *Robert Todd Lincoln: A Man in His Own Right* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), 191.
(1890) had much “invaluable material.” He respected the scholarship of the Reverend William E. Barton, the minister of the First Congregationalist Church of Oak Park, Illinois, in his *The Paternity of Abraham Lincoln* (1920) and *The Soul of Abraham Lincoln* (1920). And despite what he thought were flaws in Barton’s two-volume *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, he generously arranged for that work’s publication. He had words of praise for his friend Nathaniel W. Stephenson’s brief interpretive sketch, *Lincoln: An Account of His Personal Life* (1922). He was an admirer of Paul M. Angle, the young executive secretary of the Lincoln Centennial Association (later the Abraham Lincoln Association). But his highest praise went to the much-maligned William H. Herndon. Although Herndon’s fancy took flight when, under the influence of transcendentalism and mysticism, he undertook to explore “souls,” Beveridge found him a “truthful, honest and thorough man” who had “to an uncommon degree, the scholar’s mind and habit of thought” and who was “absolutely trustworthy where he makes a statement of fact as such.”

He dismissed the rest as largely “rubbish.” Lord Charnwood’s readable and popular *Abraham Lincoln* (1916) was “spotted with errors of fact so plain that they are glaring.” Ida Tarbell’s two-volume *Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1900) was a mid-Victorian attempt “to fumigate” Lincoln. Henry B. Rankin’s *Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln* (1916) and *Intimate Character Sketches of Abraham Lincoln* (1924) were “utterly untrustworthy” attempts to make Lincoln into “an impossible and unhuman angel who could not possibly make a mistake and who was without any human weakness whatever.”

---

15. Beveridge to James Ford Rhodes, January 6, 1923; Beveridge to W. C. Bobbs, November 15, 1924; Beveridge to Claude G. Bowers, March 24, 1925; Beveridge to Jesse W. Weik, May 10, 1923; Beveridge to C. H. Rammelkamp, April 27, 1923; Beveridge to Paul M. Angle, October 14, 1926, Ibid.
16. Beveridge to Irwin Kirkwood, February 7, 1923; Beveridge to Ford, January 30, 1923; Beveridge to Charles A. Beard, July 26, 1924; Beveridge to Stephenson, December 18, 1925; Beveridge to Edward Weeks, February 12, 1926; Beveridge to Clarence W. Alvord, March 14, 1925, Ibid.
He was so dubious about the soundness of the research on Thomas Lincoln’s Kentucky years by Disciples of Christ minister Louis A. Warren for his Lincoln’s Parentage and Childhood (1926) that he rechecked the sources himself. He was extremely disappointed with Carl Sandburg’s Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years (1926) because of its thin documentation, high-blown flowery style, and “incredible mistakes of fact.” Not only had the “last word” on Lincoln not been written, he complained, but “the first word has not been penned.”

After learning by trial and error with the Marshall biography, Beveridge had perfected his writing technique. He rose each day at six a.m.; he rarely went to bed before two or three in the morning. Working on one chapter at a time, he would arrange his notes, immerse himself in his materials, and write a rough draft “as fast as pen will go.” After his secretary typed this draft, he revised the manuscript “three or four” times to remove the obvious errors of proportion and “crudities of statement.” Next came the task of verifying his facts, correcting mistakes, and adding the supporting references. He was lavish in supplying documentation “to inspire in the readers a feeling of confidence.” His first twenty pages, for example, contained ninety-five footnotes, many occupying half a page. Last came “the hardest work of all”—condensing and more condensing. When finished, he had the chapter mimeographed to send out for suggestions and criticisms. Then would follow another round of revision, polishing, and condensation.

For scholarly advice and reading of the manuscript, he continued to rely upon a core of professional historians who had become personal friends during his work on the Marshall biography—Worthington C. Ford of the Massachusetts Historical Society; J. Franklin Jameson, director of the Division of Historical Research of the Carnegie Institution of Washington and managing editor of the American Historical Review; Edward Channing and Samuel Eliot Morison of Harvard; Clarence W. Alvord of the University of Illinois; and Charles A. Beard. Unhappy over Beveridge’s politics, William E. Dodd begged off reading the Lincoln manuscript because of the pressure of his own work. But his place was more than filled by new recruits—Ulrich B. Phillips of the University of


Michigan, the author of *American Negro Slavery*; Arthur C. Cole of Ohio State University, author of *The Whig Party in the South*; Theodore C. Pease of Illinois; Frank Owsley of Vanderbilt; C. S. Boucher of the University of Chicago and author of *The Nullification Controversy*; and Frank H. Hodder of the University of Kansas. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes read the entire manuscript with a sharp eye. Beveridge sent copies of his chapters on Lincoln’s legal career to such eminent lawyers as Felix Frankfurter and Dean Henry M. Bates of the University of Michigan Law School for their suggestions.

Beveridge’s reliance upon the Herndon-Weik collection as his major source for Lincoln’s early years had its drawbacks. Many of the accounts that Herndon had collected after Lincoln’s death were unreliable and contradictory. Beveridge’s solution was to present, in the text or footnotes, the conflicting evidence, “with,” as Carl Sandburg would snidely comment, “seldom a pause for appraisal of the goddam witness.” For example, he coupled Nathaniel Grigsby’s recollection that Lincoln read the Bible “a great deal” with the testimony of Dennis Hanks that he did not read it “half as much as [is] said.”

But his confidence in Herndon led him astray at times. He accepted Herndon’s account of the Ann Rutledge romance, even though he admitted that “the nature and course” of Lincoln’s courtship of Ann were “misty” and that [n]o positive and definite courtship resulted.” Later he came to have growing reservations about the “whole Ann Rutledge myth,” confessing to Paul M. Angle that “there was nothing in the story—at least very little.” And when he read the manuscript of Angle’s “Lincoln’s First Love?” he rejoiced that “at last this absurd myth . . . is to be exploded.”

Unfortunately, he died before he could revise his text accordingly.


Albert J. Beveridge and Demythologizing Lincoln

Lincoln’s life was too drab. His picture of Thomas Lincoln as an improvident, rather shiftless ne’er-do-well and rover was overdrawn. The result—as Don E. Fehrenbacher has observed—his young Lincoln “has a folkloric cast until his entry into politics.” Beveridge took from Herndon “the fatal first of January” legend: that Lincoln had run away from his scheduled marriage to Mary Todd on January 1, 1841, leaving her at the altar. He accepted the accuracy of the stories that Lincoln was so wrought up, even “crazy for a week or so,” that his friends worried about his committing suicide—although he did concede in a footnote, after consulting a leading psychiatrist, that there was “no proof that Lincoln was even temporarily insane.” Worse, he followed Herndon in exaggerating Mary Todd Lincoln’s ill temper and the unhappiness of Lincoln’s home life.

Although vowing to give “the facts, the exact facts and all the facts,” Beveridge was too much a man of his time fully to live up to that credo. He did face up boldly to the hotly controverted question of Lincoln’s religious beliefs with the blunt affirmation that the young Lincoln “rejected orthodox Christianity.” But he treaded more softly in dealing with the even more explosive matter of Lincoln’s ancestry. He followed William E. Barton in holding that Nancy Hanks had been illegitimate. He personally shared Herndon’s doubts about Lincoln’s own legitimacy. But—perhaps convinced by William E. Barton’s counter arguments or perhaps nervous about the public reaction—he skirted that touchy issue in the text. Nor was he immune to the legacy of Victorian prudery that rested so heavily on his generation. Soft-pedaling the more glaring examples of Lincoln’s youthful vulgarity, he described “some” of Lincoln’s youthful pranks as “unpleasing in the extreme.”

Memory, 236–43, holds that Adin Baber, Nancy Hanks, the Destined Mother of a President (Kansas, Ill.: n.p., 1963), “consigned to the junkheap of history” the stories about Nancy Hanks’s illegitimacy. On the other side, Donald, Lincoln, 603, takes the position that “most” scholars (including apparently himself) accept her illegitimacy. But Donald agrees with Barton that “the story of Lincoln’s bastardy is utterly groundless,” 605.

25. Beveridge, Lincoln, 1: 30; Beveridge to William H. Townsend, November 11, 1924, Beveridge Papers.
first written “nasty,” but then substituted the milder expression. And even “nasty,” he admitted did not adequately describe one “so-called joke,” which was “filthy in the extreme. I cannot write it; but it relates to defecation and Lincoln used the short word of four letters.” Several of the reminiscences in the Herndon-Weik collection, he confessed, contain material “which positively cannot be published or even so much as hinted at.”

Beveridge’s progress on the Lincoln biography was slowed by his continued involvement in public affairs via speech-making and article-writing. And his still lingering hopes of a political comeback led him to go on the campaign trail for the GOP in the 1924 elections. But he finished by that October the first three chapters carrying Lincoln up to his election to the state legislature in 1834. After the election, he returned to work on Lincoln in the legislature. He spent hours gathering background data on Vandalia and Springfield during those years—the condition of the streets, the appearance of the houses, how members of the legislature and townspeople dressed and talked—so that his readers could see those places and the people as Lincoln had. His major source was the bulky volumes of the *Illinois House Journal*. As he read with a magnifying glass the badly printed, fading pages, what he found was “not only vital but dramatic.” All the issues that would continue to face the country through the 1840s and 1850s—internal improvements, banking, temperance legislation, and slavery—had come before the legislature during Lincoln’s years there. Although he had expected to summarize the legislative years in a few pages, he ended up writing two lengthy chapters that constituted what a distinguished Lincoln scholar has called his “most original work.”

But the result was to heighten Beveridge’s perplexity over Lincoln’s “inexplicable character.” He showed that, while Lincoln was personally a nondrinker, he was not the temperance reformer of prohibitionist mythology. Nor did he find Lincoln to have been the antislavery champion of Republican legend. Although Lincoln protested against a resolution denouncing the abolitionists,
he agreed that their agitation was worsening the lot of the slaves. He affirmed the injustice of slavery but maintained that Congress could not and should not interfere with slavery in the South. The Lincoln of those years was a skillful and calculating politician who “subordinated everything” to moving the state capital from Vandalia to Springfield and keeping it there; a staunch defender “of vested interests and the conduct of business, unmolested as far as possible, by legislative or any kind of governmental interference”; a major architect of the ruinous internal improvements program that reduced the state to bankruptcy; and a highly partisan Whig.

Beveridge called the time between Lincoln’s leaving Mary Todd at the altar and his election to Congress in 1846 his “Years of Discipline.” The wedding fiasco gave him a needed lesson in humility, while his marriage to Mary provided a lifelong tutelage in patience. Beveridge thoroughly reexamined Lincoln’s near-duel with Democratic state auditor James Shields in 1842, even checking their respective heights and arm lengths to show how Lincoln had laid down conditions for the duel to gain the maximum advantage from his longer reach. He portrayed Shields more favorably than Herndon had done and concluded that the episode taught Lincoln the importance of consideration for others. Next to his marriage, the most important step that Lincoln took during those years was his law partnership with Herndon. The deeper he went into the Lincoln story, he told Jesse W. Weik, the larger Herndon loomed in his estimation as “the carburetor in the great man’s career.”

As with the legislative years, Beveridge had expected to summarize Lincoln’s term in Congress in a few paragraphs. When he found, to his surprise, that no previous biographer had even looked at the Congressional Globe, he felt impelled to devote another two lengthy chapters to those two years. He continued to find scant evidence foreshadowing Lincoln’s future greatness. He remained the supercautious, even shifty, politician. “If I could only run into one little thing which Lincoln did or said during this period which is perfectly clear and free from mystery,” he lamented. “But he managed to throw a cloud about nearly everything.” Even when Lincoln presented his bill for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, “he left everybody in the dark by three or four cryptic sentences which he made to the House after he finished reading the bill.”

What most annoyed Beveridge as a lifelong American expan-
sionist was Lincoln’s attack upon the Polk administration over the Mexican War—attacks that Beveridge thought came “perilously near pettifogging.” His readers protested that he had not dealt justly with the Mexican side in his account, that he had pictured Lincoln as simply a “cheap politician” who resorted “to sophistries” in order to find a political issue, and even that he appeared “hostile to Lincoln—as if you definitely disliked him.” Beveridge replied that Justin Smith’s The War with Mexico (1919) had demolished the “old Whig-Abolition-Republican” slave-power conspiracy theory of the war, that the United States had been justified “after years and years of pinching and biting by the Mexicans” in giving them “a good swift kick,” and that humanity would have been the beneficiary had the United States taken all of Mexico. As for Lincoln, there was no question, he reaffirmed, that he had been motivated “purely” by political expediency in his attacks upon the war.

Beveridge devoted the final two chapters of his planned first volume to Lincoln as a lawyer. Although admitting that none of Lincoln’s cases deserved more than a few lines, he spent long hours and many pages to clear away “for good and all” the “incredible quantity of sheer rot and imagination” that had been written about that phase of Lincoln’s life. Thus, for example, he disposed of the legend that Lincoln had substituted a false almanac in the “Duff” Armstrong murder trial, deflated the significance of the almanac in Armstrong’s acquittal, and showed how Lincoln’s brilliant appeal to the jury’s sympathies was the decisive factor in the outcome. And he took pains, perhaps to the extent of not giving Lincoln his due, to underline that Lincoln was “no knight-errant of the law” doing battle for the poor and afflicted, but that he took “what came to him,” “did his best for his client” whoever the client was, and charged “normal fees.”

Beveridge did not finish those chapters until fall 1925, and he estimated that he would require twelve to eighteen months more of full-time labor to carry the story up to Lincoln’s election to the
presidency, plus another year for the final revisions. Many times he was so discouraged by “the magnitude and complexity” of the task that he talked of “throwing up the sponge.” Although his “Scotch tenacity” kept him at his labor, he grew more and more troubled as he went more deeply into Lincoln’s career on how to reconcile the unsuccessful Illinois politician and middling lawyer—secretive, reserved, infinitely cautious, sloppy, and lazy—with the Lincoln of the 1860s. “The Lincoln of Illinois,” he told his publisher, “could not by any possibility, have been the Lincoln of the Second Inaugural or the Gettysburg speech. They can exalt him all they like, but the cold fact is that not one faint glimmer appears in his whole life at least before his Cooper Union speech, which so much suggests the glorious radiance of his last two years.”

Beveridge was briefly tempted to run in the 1926 Republican primary against his long-time political rival, Senator James E. Watson. But he decided against the race. The reason, he explained to his supporters, was the problem of what to do about the Lincoln biography. The first volume could not be published alone. If he returned to the political wars, he would at a minimum delay, possibly doom permanently, completion of the work. As he proceeded to push forward on the second volume, he painted upon a broad canvass that placed Lincoln against the backdrop of his times. He included a chapter on the Compromise of 1850, even though Lincoln was no more than a distant onlooker. He devoted some fifty pages to the adoption of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, and followed with a detailed account of the struggle that followed on the plains of Kansas. Another chapter dealt with the Dred Scott case. When reviewers of the manuscript complained that Lincoln tended to become lost in the mass of historical detail, Beveridge replied that the average reader could not understand what Lincoln did or why without this background. If not for the turmoil in Kansas, for example, there would have no Republican party, and if no Republican party, no Lincoln as president. “To tell nothing except what Lincoln looked like, what he did, and what he said,” he explained to Samuel Eliot Morison, “is as if Hamlet were to be playing without his mother, the King, Ophelia, Laertes, Polonius or even the ghost—just Mr. Hamlet suddenly strutting out before the footlights and delivering soliloquies.”

When filling in this background, Beveridge displayed sympathies strange for a long-time Republican partisan. His opening chapter, and Asheville, North Carolina, newspaper editor David Rankin Barbee in William T. Alderson and Kenneth K. Bailey, eds., “Correspondence between Albert J. Beveridge and Jacob M. Dickinson on the Writing of Beveridge’s Life of Lincoln,” Journal of Southern History 20 (May 1954): 210–37, and [Barbee], An Excursion in Southern Hist-
“Seeds of War: Abolition Attack and Southern Defence,” presented a highly favorable picture of Southern society in the years before the Civil War and placed the blame for that conflict upon the abolitionists. If not for the “fear and anger” their “violence” and “vituperation” aroused in the South, he wrote, “it is not altogether impossible that there would have been no war and that slavery would in time have given way to the pressure of economic forces.”

Privately, he was even more hostile to the abolitionists—“fanatical reformers,” he termed them, so filled with self-righteousness that they were “past reasoning with.” “The deeper I get into this thing,” he told Charles A. Beard, “the clearer it becomes to me that the whole wretched mess would have been straightened out without the white race killing itself off, if the abolitionists had let matters alone.”

The Southerners among his readers were enthusiastic. Many of the Northerners, however, protested his pro-Southern bias. Arthur C. Cole thought that he had leaned over backward “toward a rather pro-slavery position.” J. Franklin Jameson expostulated that he had exaggerated “the agreeable side of slavery” and the “merits of Southern society,” and declared that the evidence gave “no support” for Beveridge’s argument that the South would have eliminated slavery on its own if not for the abolitionists. Samuel Eliot Morison similarly challenged Beveridge’s assumption of the inevitable natural death of slavery. “Granted that the abolitionists made the war, slavery made the abolitionists. Softer methods had been tried previously . . .; but every attempt to end slavery by peaceful means was thwarted by the cotton States.”

Beveridge denied that he was taking sides, intruding his own preconceptions, or presenting an “interpretation.” His credo was that the historian must avoid propagandizing—“must watch his step all the time” so that he does not fall into the trap of “champi-

41. Arthur C. Cole to Beveridge, April 5, 1926; J. Franklin Jameson to Beveridge, May 24, 1926; Morison to Beveridge, February 23, 1926, Beveridge Papers.
42. Beveridge to Theodore C. Pease, May 7, 1925; Beveridge to Owsley, April 30, 1926; Beveridge to James A. Woodburn, July 26, 1926; Beveridge to Eckenrode, November 10, 1926, Ibid.
43. Beveridge to John Rutherford, January 31, 1925, Ibid.
44. Beveridge to Frank H. Hodder, February 27, 1927, Ibid.
46. Beveridge to Dodd, January 31, 1925, Dodd Papers.
47. For “The Repressible Conflict” school, see Thomas J. Pressly, Americans Inter-
oning what he thinks is a good cause, and opposing what he thinks
is a bad cause.” The “facts . . . interpret themselves” provided “all
the facts” have been presented. The historian’s duty was “to state
exactly what happened,” and he was not to blame if the facts put
the South in more favorable light. “The heart of my troubles in this
hard and heavy task,” he complained to a sympathetic correspon-
dent, “is the question as to whether the actual facts shall be told…
or whether one must compromise with legends that grew out of
sheer propaganda.”

Notwithstanding his professed impartiality, Beveridge did start
out believing that previous historians had not treated the South
“fairly or adequately.” The more difficult question is, why this
pro-Southern bias? A complex of factors was involved. His nation-
ist sensibilities were affronted by the disunionist preachments of
the more extreme abolitionists. His irritation at the mid-Victorians
who had deified and distorted Lincoln extended to their pro-abo-
litionist sympathies. When he discovered evidence that called into
question the legends propagated by Republican bloody-shirt ora-
tors of his youth, he overreacted. “It is,” he exclaimed in disgust,
“enough to make a man sick at heart and at his stomach too, to find
out that everything he was taught was, in fact, just the other way
around.”

At the same time, he was influenced by the new school of his-
torians who were revising the existing stereotypes about Southern
society and the causes of the Civil War—works such as Ulrich B.
Phillips on slavery, Justin Smith’s *The War with Mexico*, and Mary
Scrugham’s *The Peaceable Americans of 1860–1861* (1921). He was
first impressed with Charles A. Beard’s position that the clash of
economic interests lay behind the slavery issue. But fuller research
convinced him that economic considerations could not explain
why the mass of nonslaveholders in the South had rallied to the
Confederacy. “I have reluctantly come to the conclusion which
Professor Phillips insists upon so powerfully,” he concluded, “that
the ultimate roots of the war on the part of the South—not all the
roots, but the deepest roots—were racial.”

pret Their Civil War (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1954), 255–92; and
David M. Potter, “The Literature on the Background of the Civil War,” in his The
South and the Sectional Conflict (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968),
87–150.

48. Beveridge, *Lincoln*, 2: 127–28, 185; Beveridge to Owsley, April 30, 1926; Bev-
eridge to John C. Shaffer, July 4, 1926, Beveridge Papers.
As an Anglo-Saxon supremacist, Beveridge could not but sympathize with the Southerners’ determination to keep the South a white man’s country. As a Republican, he deplored the solidly Democratic South. As an American nationalist, he had long denounced sectional—no less than class—divisions in the United States and lamented the continuance into the twentieth-century of the North-South split. He, therefore, looked upon the Civil War with mixed emotions. On the one hand, the conflict had saved the Union. On the other, he regretted that the situation had been allowed to come to that pass. “The idea of brothers cutting one another’s throats,” he told William E. Dodd, “is repellent to me.”

Beveridge thus became a pioneer exponent of “The Repressible Conflict” school of Civil War historiography. He made Daniel Webster the hero of his chapter on the Compromise of 1850. By saving the Compromise, Webster “had saved the Union.” And he likened the abolitionist attacks upon Webster to “strokes of adders.” By contrast, the villains of the Kansas-Nebraska story were the antislavery firebrands Salmon P. Chase and Charles Sumner. Their charges of a Southern plot to extend slavery were “wholly false.” Nor was the uprising in the North that followed the bill’s adoption motivated “exclusively” by hostility to slavery expansion. Know-nothingism, prohibition, hard times, the demand for river and harbor improvements, and “practical politics” were “almost as potent.”

He went on to deflate abolitionist legends about “bleeding Kansas.” He showed that many of the free-state men were animated more by anti-Negro bias and hopes for financial gain than by antislavery feelings; he blamed much of the turmoil upon rival land and town-site speculations; and he accused the Republicans in Congress of distorting what was happening. He even sympathized with “Bully” Brooks in his attack upon Sumner. He dismissed the
Dred Scott case as a fictitious suit arranged to further antislavery propaganda; he exonerated President James Buchanan and the members of the Supreme Court from involvement in any slave-power plot; blamed the dissents filed by Justices Benjamin R. Curtis and John McLean upholding the constitutionality of the Missouri Compromise restriction for forcing the majority to deal with that issue; and found scant evidence of popular excitement over the decision until the Republicans for political advantage took up the cry of a proslavery conspiracy.

Emerging as the hero of his account was not Lincoln but Stephen A. Douglas. Beveridge painted a startling new picture of the Little Giant. He was no longer the self-seeking politician whose ambitions for the presidency led him to repeal the Missouri Compromise and thereby brought on the Civil War. He followed University of Kansas historian Frank H. Hodder in emphasizing Douglas’s interest in the construction of a transcontinental railroad across the Plains as “a dominant motive” in his introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska bill.49

Personally convinced—as Douglas had been—that as “a practical matter” slavery could not flourish in the new territories, Beveridge defended Douglas as “one of the greatest patriots the country ever produced—and not only that but one of the very, very few statesmen we have had”—who wished to avert a bloody conflict by removing the slavery issue from the national political arena.50

Throughout Beveridge’s account of the 1850s, Douglas continued to hold the center of the stage. “How tremendously Douglas looms up in the period on which I am now at work!” he exclaimed. “What a mighty man he was!” His admiration went out to Douglas for his valiant fight to stem the tide against the Democrats in Illinois after the Kansas-Nebraska bill. He affirmed that Douglas’s attack upon the Emigrant Aid Company for formenting trouble in Kansas “stated the facts.” He thought Douglas’s doctrine of “local friendly legislation” in reply to the Dred Scott decision “right” as “a matter of law, as well as a matter of fact.” Remembering his own insur- gency over the Payne-Aldrich tariff, he identified with Douglas in his break with Buchanan over the Lecompton Constitution and his battle for reelection in the face of administration knifing. “The more I read the ‘facts’ concerning this amazing man,” he confessed, the more I admire him, and the stronger becomes my feeling that he

has been shamefully used by sentimental writers calling themselves ‘historians’ who, in order to write Lincoln up, felt that it was necessary to write everybody else down.”

What about Lincoln? He remained a hesitant and calculating politician who “neither led nor retarded mass movements, but accurately registered . . . dominant popular thought and feeling.” He refused to leave the Whig party or speak out on the Kansas troubles until Brooks’s assault on Sumner “and the increasing disturbances beyond the Missouri border had aroused the North and made possible the success of the Republican Party.” He repeatedly reassured voters that he did not favor Negro equality. He did not accuse the Supreme Court of complicity in a plot to nationalize slavery until Republican leaders in the Senate took up that cry “as a matter of party strategy.” Ambitious for the presidency after the support given him for the vice-presidential nomination at the 1856 Republican national convention, he geared his “every word and act” during the next four years to attaining that ambition.

At the same time, Beveridge did find growing signs of Lincoln’s future greatness. In his “First Great Speech” at Springfield in October 1854, attacking the Kansas-Nebraska bill, he displayed that “exalted yet restrained eloquence,” that “breadth, sympathy, and tolerance,” and that “generosity of spirit which is to be fully realized in the Second Inaugural.” His efforts to solidify the unstable coalition that would become the Republican party by avoiding such divisive issues as prohibition and Know-nothingism showed “the wisdom of the statesman as well as the astuteness of the politician.” In the 1856 campaign, he wisely “stuck to two great issues—slavery must not be extended, the Union must be preserved.” And in his speeches, he stated “that purpose which he was to carry out as President, the purpose to put down secession by force—if the South should go out of the Union, the North would bring it back at the point of the bayonet.”

Despite his ambition to achieve definitiveness, Beveridge made his mistakes. He, for example, accepted without reservations and quoted at length from the later “discredited” Henry Clay Whitney version of Lincoln’s “Lost Speech” at Bloomington on May 29, 1856. In his reaction against past biographers’ excessive glorification of Lincoln, he exaggerated Lincoln’s slowness in coming over to the

57. Chicago Tribune, September 29, 1928: The Nation, October 10, 1928, 368, 370;
new Republican party. And, to quote a later scholar, he “simply misread the evidence” in picturing Lincoln’s nomination for the senatorship by the Republican state convention in June 1858 as purely and simply a move to block the ambitions of “Long John” Wentworth rather than a rebuke by angry Illinois Republicans to those eastern Republicans calling for a partnership with Douglas. Nor has more recent scholarship found “the slightest evidence” that Lincoln by 1858 had his eye upon the White House and that his famous House Divided speech was, as Beveridge held, “his most important move in the game for the Presidency” even at the risk of losing the Senate race.\(^{54}\)

Beveridge planned to follow up his chapter on the Dred Scott decision with three chapters on the Lincoln-Douglas duel in 1858 for the United States Senate. The first traced the events leading up to the showdown—the financial crisis of 1857, the split between Douglas and the Buchanan administration over the Lecompton Constitution, and Lincoln’s nomination by the Illinois GOP. The second detailed the first phase of the battle. The third would treat the Lincoln-Douglas debates. But the strains of overwork brought worsening physical ailments. On April 9, 1927, Beveridge was stricken by a severe heart attack. Although he appeared to be recovering, he died early in the morning of April 27 from another attack. He had finished only the first draft of the first half of the chapter on the Lincoln-Douglas debates, but his widow decided to publish the work as far as he had gone. Worthington C. Ford worked with Beveridge’s secretary to prepare the manuscript for publication and wrote, on the basis of Beveridge’s research notes, a concluding summary taking Lincoln up to his election as president. Houghton Mifflin published the two volumes in fall 1928.

The volumes received a mixed reaction from the then dean of Lincoln scholars, William E. Barton. Although calling the work “A Noble Fragment,” Barton found that Beveridge had “added nothing of great value on Lincoln’s ancestry, his family, or his childhood.”

---

\(^{58}\) Barbee, _Excursion in Southern History_, 53.

\(^{59}\) New York Herald Tribune, September 9, 1928. For Masters’s reliance on Beveridge for his _Lincoln the Man_, see Peterson, _Lincoln in American Memory_, 286–87.


\(^{61}\) For Beveridge’s role in the professionalization of Lincoln studies, see Fehren-
Not simply had Beveridge retrod thoroughly plowed ground, but he had too readily accepted at face value the recollections in the Herndon manuscripts. Barton even suggested that “One could almost wish that he had not had them.” He went on to detail an extended list of factual errors of interest only to the antiquarian. Barton was more positive about Beveridge’s treatment of Lincoln the politician. “This is Beveridge’s real contribution,” since his own political experience gave him special insight into that side of Lincoln. Barton similarly praised Beveridge’s success in relating “the Lincoln story more fully to the life of the nation . . . than other biographers have been able to do.” And he strained to soften Beveridge’s demythologizing of Lincoln. “The Lincoln who stands, still in the making, at the end of the second volume,” he assured would-be readers, “is not the Lincoln who would have emerged at the end of the fourth volume had Beveridge lived to complete his book.”

Another—and more surprising—mixed response came from Beveridge’s friend Nathaniel W. Stephenson. Stephenson was troubled partly by Beveridge’s tendency to let the details of the historical background “get away with him,” and still more by his failure to be aware of the extent to which his personal biases had shaped his presentation. But such discordant notes were exceptions among a chorus of praise. Beveridge’s disposal of the “sentimental myths” that had grown around Lincoln appears to have contributed to the work’s appeal, given the debunking attitude toward the American past popular among 1920s intellectuals. The reviewer for the Chicago Tribune extolled the volumes as “a stupendous piece of work.” The Nation added the adjectives “learned,” “masterly,” and “mercilessly dispassionate.” The Springfield (Mass.) Union and Republican called the work “the most exact and authoritative narrative of Lincoln’s early life now available.” The Times Literary Supplement of London praised its “vivid picture, full of stir and life,” of the world in which Lincoln lived and moved. Harvard’s Samuel Eliot Morison declared Beveridge’s account “incomparably the greatest story of Lincoln’s life before his presidency.” Yale’s Ralph Henry Gabriel of Yale mourned the author’s premature death as “a real


loss to historical scholarship.”

Beveridge’s knocking Lincoln from his pedestal had its strongest attraction to die-hard celebrants of the Lost Cause and latter-day doctrinaire Jeffersonians. Asheville, North Carolina, newspaper editor David Rankin Barbee appended to his publication of excerpts from his correspondence with Beveridge his “hope . . . that the terrible admissions on the part of Senator Beveridge will sink deep into the hearts of the Southern people. Lincoln was no demi-god. . . . His ambition and vanity were no less causes of the war than the militant hatred of the Northern parsons against the South.” Poet Edgar Lee Masters—who hailed the work as a landmark in Lincoln studies that “would supplant all previous performances”—relied heavily upon Beveridge for his Jeffersonian-inspired attack upon the Lincoln myth in his Lincoln the Man (1931). Claude G. Bowers, another Jefferson devotee and a Democratic party stalwart, applauded Beveridge for showing that Lincoln was not the anti-slavery crusader of Republican legend, for treating the South more sympathetically than any other northern writer had done, and for recognizing “the power and genius” of Stephen A. Douglas. In so doing, Bowers eulogized, Beveridge had redeemed “the single fault of the ‘Marshall’—the author’s surrender to the Federalist concept of Jefferson and the Democrats.”

From the perspective of its long-term scholarly contribution, the work represented a major advance in the professionalization of Lincoln studies. Paul M. Angle praised him for having “probably utilized more source material than any other student who has written on the subject,” for his sure touch in presenting “Lincoln the politician” while giving Stephen A. Douglas at last his due, and for his success in placing Lincoln “in the proper historical perspective.” Benjamin P. Thomas hailed the work as a “truly monumental” achievement that “had put the romanticists to rout.”

---

65. Ford to Oliver R. Barrett, March 20, 1939, Carl Sandburg Papers, University of Illinois Library.
67. Sandburg to Alfred Harcourt, September 30, 1923; Sandburg to Beveridge, September 2, 1925; Beveridge to William Allen White, October 20, 1928, in Mitgang, Letters of Carl Sandburg, 221, 233, 262.
applauded his success in making Lincoln “a living, breathing man,” and rejoiced that his broad life-and-times approach had “brought Lincoln scholarship out of the sheltered eddy, where it had been circling, back into the full current of the historical stream.”

David M. Potter has reaffirmed that the work “still remains the best account of Lincoln’s political career up to the moment of his entry upon the national stage . . . the first biographical treatment which combined extensive original investigation with critical capacity of a high order.”

Yet Beveridge’s Lincoln failed to achieve the stature of his Marshall. While the Marshall biography has remained the standard life, the Lincoln has become no more than a reference source for later biographers. Beveridge’s death in midstream made that fate inevitable. But even if he had lived to finish the task, he would not have fulfilled his ambition of writing the last word on Lincoln. Not simply was the dream of historical finality illusory from the start, but the problems with the first two volumes would have been exacerbated as he proceeded. His friend and adviser Worthington C. Ford doubted if Beveridge would have been “the proper person to deal with Lincoln as President.” His broad life-and-times approach applied to Lincoln’s last five years would have run to volumes. “His asides would have been endless—good but too embracing.”

More important, Beveridge made no secret of his puzzlement over Lincoln’s elusive and complex personality. “He was not a little discouraged,” Ford confided to Oliver R. Barrett, “in approaching the war period by the difficulty of making his Lincoln of the earlier years into the Lincoln of martyrdom.”

Despite his praise for the work, Samuel Eliot Morison found in Beveridge “some want of spiritual insight”—“he deals only with things seen.” Carl Sandburg made the same point more strongly. Sandburg was not Beveridge’s equal as a researcher. And he harbored a feeling of resentment over the negative comments that Beveridge had made about his work. But he had an empathy with
Lincoln that Beveridge lacked. Even before publication of Beveridge’s manuscript, Sandburg anticipated that “he will give us an Arrow Collar biography.” His reading of the work confirmed that suspicion. “Beveridge’s Lincoln,” Sandburg wrote William Allen White, “is in an extensive though not particularly essential way what we have gleaned hitherto from the Herndon and Weik books. . . Beveridge should have done Douglas who was handsome, fluent and born under a star like Beveridge. He could have gotten inside of Douglas and given the breath of a man. He rattles the dry bones of Lincoln.”67