How Great Was Lincoln? Two New Biographies

DAVID LOWENTHAL


At hand are two small biographies, both by giants of Lincoln scholarship, and from the same publisher in the bicentennial year of Lincoln’s birth. Allen Guelzo’s is subtitled “A Very Short Introduction,” yet it is more than twice the length of James McPherson’s, which could have used a subtitle like “Much Shorter than Guelzo’s.” McPherson, even more than Guelzo, had to grapple with the demon of compression. But for whom should they write? A small book for more advanced readers will differ from one for the beginner in both its inclusions and its exclusions. And it is important to know on what basis the exclusions are made.

McPherson’s book is closer to one intended for the beginner, and its genre is that of traditional political biography. Its narrative is clear, interesting, accurate and, in its judgments, replete with the wisdom of one who has pondered the issues over many years. Lincoln is often criticized for suspending the writ of habeas corpus during the Civil War, but McPherson cites the constitutional provision on which he relied and adds Lincoln’s own argument that in a time of rebellion or invasion—by armed force to put down one and repel the other—it is the commander in chief rather than Congress on whom the responsibility for saving the country must rest. In his letter of June 12, 1863, to Erastus Corning, Lincoln explored the issue as thoroughly as it has ever been, asking, “Must I shoot a simple-minded soldier boy who deserts, while I must not touch a hair of a wily agitator who induces him to desert?” Lincoln suspended the writ, detained the wily agitator, and saved the soldier boy for battle (42–44).

Perhaps McPherson’s best chapter deals with the Emancipation Proclamation (unfortunately, the chapters are not numbered) and
Lincoln’s strict adherence to the Constitution as he approached that momentous decision (45ff.). Even while declaring to Horace Greeley that everything he did was to save the Union and that the slavery issue was entirely subservient to that end, Lincoln had decided on emancipation as a military necessity and was already planning the Proclamation. For he did tell Greeley, rather pertly, that he would in fact free all the slaves, or some, or none if it would help save the Union. And from the letter to James C. Conkling afterward (August 26, 1863), where Lincoln takes to task those northern Unionists who opposed the Emancipation, McPherson cites the wonderful passage describing the black Unionist soldier, after victory, when “there will be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue, and clenched teeth, and steady eye, and well-poised bayonet, they have helped mankind on to this great consummation; while, I fear, there will be some white ones, unable to forget that, with malignant heart, and deceitful speech, they have strove to hinder it” (50). And this from Lincoln, the supposed racist!

In treating the Lincoln-Douglas debates, McPherson adds a passage from Lincoln waiving the whole question of racial superiority and inferiority as inconsequential, thereby suggesting that Lincoln’s seeming racism in the debates was in fact a defensive measure necessitated by the violence of Douglas’s demagoguery (20, 21). He is right. Here is the picture he had just painted: Douglas shouts one question after the other to the audience, asking whether they want Negro social equality, intermarriage, citizenship, etc.—views he attributed to Lincoln—and in unison the audience shouts back, No, never! Douglas’s “Black Republican” taunts continued, and only a strong denial of the charges could save Lincoln politically. So what would a politic man do? He must dissimulate. He had to pattern his expressed views on those of the audience. So Lincoln’s responses seem entirely racist and are usually taken that way. But if we read them with care and a modicum of political understanding, we can see that he usually tried to give some indication of his true views, using a little qualification here, a little qualification there, to indicate the possible equality of the races at the very moment that he most flagrantly proclaims their inequality. (A prominent example of this occurs in the first debate, right after Lincoln quotes from his own Peoria address of four years before. Note, among other things, the words “probably” and “perhaps.”) This is a point of some importance and will arise again in connection with Guelzo’s book. It shows how devious the politic Lincoln could be for the sake of ultimate justice, and it helps rebut the crude denigration of the Great Emancipator as a racist, a charge that has poisoned the
minds of so many Americans, not least those who once thought they owed their freedom to him.

Throughout, McPherson describes Lincoln’s political situation as he faces one issue after another, while keeping before us his never-changing bedrock principle that slavery is wrong. In his fine conclusion, McPherson credits Union victory with two great accomplishments (62–65): It proved our republican experiment could survive, and by abolishing slavery it brought the country into consistency with the equality of all men asserted and promised by the Declaration of Independence. The case of our republic, we might add, is a special one, since its innovation consisted in establishing a federal union over a very extensive territory, and such a union, combined with the republican spirit of liberty and equality, might readily fall into disunion. For there is a centrifugal force inherent in liberty and equality: Individuals and states want to go their own ways and cannot easily be curbed. It had occurred over the tariff question, and Lincoln saw it himself in the mob violence of his own day. It is what he had in mind at Gettysburg when he asked whether a nation “so conceived and so dedicated” could long endure. The issue of slavery wrecked it apart, and only the North’s superior force on the field of battle, together with the Emancipation, could make any future dissolution of the Union much less likely.

While McPherson might have given more attention to the abolitionists (quite surprisingly, neither volume mentions Frederick Douglass), his sympathetic portrayal of Lincoln’s approach to the problem of slavery suggests a criticism of those who, for the sake of abolishing slavery, were willing to defy the Constitution. Most abolitionists fervently supported John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, but in his Cooper Institute address of February 27, 1860, Lincoln had very harsh words for it. Dissociating himself and the Republican Party from Brown’s effort to “get up a revolt among slaves,” Lincoln said: “That affair, in its philosophy, corresponds with the many attempts, related in history, at the assassination of kings and emperors. An enthusiast broods over the oppression of a people till he fancies himself commissioned by Heaven to liberate them. He ventures the attempt, which ends in little else than his own execution.”

Lincoln insisted (27, 45) that the right way had to be constitutional, and that meant first stopping slavery’s expansion and then grimly putting up with it until its underpinnings weakened and were legally removed. Since the South would not accept the result of the 1860 election and defend its institutions politically within the Union, the great Civil War commenced. Nor could secession be tolerated, for
that would mortally weaken the Union, ensuring, at the same time, that slavery would persist indefinitely within the separated South. McPherson summarizes the First Inaugural address (30, 31), but oddly enough omits its beginning, where Lincoln presents the crucial arguments against secession. As for the conduct of the war, McPherson gives considerable attention to its ups and downs and to Grant’s victorious strategy—indeed, independently conceived by Lincoln as moving “at once upon the enemy’s whole line so as to bring into action our great superiority in numbers” (42).

A few quibbles: I wonder about omitting the quarrel in the Illinois legislature over banking that Lincoln, in his Sub-Treasury speech of December 26, 1839, shows he took very seriously. It ends with a peroration expressing a devotion to liberty on his part so limitless, and in words so strong, that many dismiss it as merely hyperbolical, yet this passage affords a priceless, never-to-be-repeated glimpse of his extraordinary soul. McPherson mentions the birth of Lincoln’s four sons (11) while omitting the premature deaths of Eddie and Willie that so afflicted their parents. And when the Reverend Peter Cartright, Lincoln’s rival for Congress, raised a cry against Lincoln in 1846, was it about his failure to join a church, or, much more seriously, about his supposed flat-out infidelity (13)? On the same page, in connection with the Mexican War, the reference to Lincoln’s opposition as a standard Whig stance falls short of conveying the daring vehemence of this freshman congressman’s January 12, 1848, attack on President Polk. Finally, the story of the ghastly assassination that left the country without its peerless pilot would be a bit more complete with some indication of how John Wilkes Booth was able to get so close to the president in the first place and what became of the assassin soon afterward.

Now we turn to a much larger issue. McPherson tells us at the outset (xi) that his object is to capture “the essential events and meaning of Lincoln’s life, without oversimplification or overgeneralization.” And this he does, with one notable exception: He leaves the reader almost completely ignorant of the depth and scope of Lincoln’s intellectual interests and accomplishments. Granted, he could not convey this in detail, but some indication was necessary to avoid the oversimplification he wanted to avoid. What other president, or American, for that matter, has given us such reflections on mob action (the Lyceum speech, 1838), drink (the Temperance speech, 1842), religion and the human mind (the Handbill on Infidelity, 1846), statesmanship (Eulogy of Henry Clay, 1852), human progress (Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions, 1859) and agriculture (Address to the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, 1859)?
Lincoln had a mind that probed into the nature of things, a philosophical temperament twin-born with the same rational faculty that made him a great statesman and politician. Testimonials to his intellectual interests and talents, as well as the details of his readings, abound and are presented at length by Guelzo. By all accounts, Lincoln was a most voracious reader. He was studious—McPherson mentions his lifelong love of Shakespeare and Burns (7). He was curious, analytical, and had a fantastic memory. He was a loner, given to solitude (as well as a most convivial companion, when he wanted to be). Much of the research that went into his most important political speeches is strikingly original to this day. His interests included literature, philosophy, mathematics, history, law, political economy, science, and religion, and he produced these extraordinary speeches on many subjects that still, in my judgment, have not lost their philosophical depth or the rhetorical power that was uniquely his. If you agree with this assessment—and not everybody does—if you think the same powers of thought and expression culminating in the Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural were already present in the Cooper Institute, Dred Scott, and Peoria speeches, then the same genius must have been present as well in these other addresses (some contemporaneous with these, some quite early), particularly since their composition was less hurried by political urgency. Join together the fullness of his thought with his deeds and one has to admit that we are talking not only about perhaps the greatest American but about human excellence of the highest order. From this excellence as their source came “the essential events and meaning of Lincoln’s life” that McPherson was intent on capturing.

Guelzo’s book is part of an Oxford University collection of more than two hundred similar volumes on diverse individuals and subjects. Its format makes it much easier to refer to than McPherson’s. It is divided into numerical chapters with titles. It has an index as well as a more extensive bibliography than others in the collection. While physically smaller, its print and page total make it considerably longer than McPherson’s. No one is more knowledgeable about Lincoln and nineteenth-century America than Allen Guelzo, and not many can add to this a comparable knowledge of England and continental Europe. And there is no aspect of life beyond his ken. He is equally at home in describing political, economic, military, and intellectual matters. He writes well, with vivid and memorable turns of phrase. Quite often, new facts are sprinkled in among old standbys. We begin by learning much about Lincoln’s family background and early years, and get a sweeping introduction to the great elements and issues of politics and the significant economic developments of the 1820s and 30s. We
meet the main figures and ideas. Like McPherson, Guelzo excels at indicating the difficulties Lincoln had to overcome and not only the principles but the political considerations that shaped his decisions. I particularly liked Guelzo’s treatment of Lincoln’s affiliation with the Whigs in the Illinois legislature (33–37), the details of his law practice (chapter 3), the ramifications of secession (99), and the steps leading up to the Emancipation Proclamation (101). With respect to this last point, Guelzo tells us, in a fine passage, that “. . . restoring the Union was the ultimate means of ending slavery. The Confederates had seceded precisely to avoid being coerced into emancipation, and bringing them back into the Union was the only way to restore the federal jurisdiction that could provide coercion. Without a restored Union, Lincoln had no more power to emancipate the South’s slaves than he had for emancipating Spanish Cuba’s.”

So, the book can serve well as a somewhat more advanced introduction to Lincoln. But it is especially notable for its emphasis on Lincoln’s ideas and the new importance of religion to him during the Civil War. We learn from the introduction that Guelzo’s object is to uncover the real Lincoln, “the man as he really was,” and the real Lincoln was a “man of ideas.” What shaped his “thinking and values?” His friends knew him to be “reticent,” “secretive,” “difficult to understand.” They said he had “intellectual curiosity, “a mind of a metaphysical and philosophical order.” They said he was “always studying into the nature of things” and was “a lover of many philosophical books.” But it is his love and mastery of political economy, Guelzo tells us, that point to “the intellectual and literary axis of English-speaking liberal democracy,” and it is this axis that supplies “a key to understanding Lincoln as he understood himself.” Guelzo mentions particularly works by John Stuart Mill, Henry Carey, Herbert Spencer, and Francis Wayland. The context, therefore, is liberalism, and “liberalism was the political application of the Enlightenment.” It was the philosophy of the rights of man and republican self-rule and begot a new confidence in human progress. It had great spokesmen not only in England but in France and Germany as well. Lincoln comes on the scene in this country to “defend the idea of liberal democracy from its own American despisers.” In short, this book will be “a biography of his ideas.”

Guelzo’s emphasis on Lincoln’s intellectual side certainly distinguishes his book from McPherson’s, as does his viewing of Lincoln as part of a trans-oceanic liberal tide. The intellectual emphasis is most welcome, and it is entirely fitting for an historian to link together movements in different countries that have a similar intellectual background, especially if they interact with each other. But it goes one
step beyond this to assert, or give the impression, that Lincoln was conscious of being part of this international movement, and not only thought of himself in terms of it but derived his ideas from nineteenth-century liberal sources, some English, some American, that were part of the “intellectual and literary axis of English-speaking liberal democracy.” In a biography of Lincoln and not just an intellectual history of the period, that additional connection must be established.

We need also to clarify what Guelzo means by calling Lincoln a “man of ideas”—a phrase he uses in the title to another book, *Abraham Lincoln as a Man of Ideas*. What is a man of ideas? Is he an intellectual—a term Guelzo does not apply to Lincoln here—though he does in that book (13)? Is he a philosopher? Despite all the testimony of contemporaries leaning in that direction, Guelzo never calls him a philosopher. In the same book Guelzo uses Lincoln’s friend, law partner, and biographer, William Herndon as an authority for a different assessment: “Lincoln, for all his intellectual hobbies, ‘was not a speculative man,’ admitted Herndon, and ‘never ran in advance of his age’” (23). In fact, later in the same work Guelzo explicitly denies Lincoln was a philosopher, saying, “He was, after all, a man of practical intellectual application” (83). This hardly seems decisive. We know that some great men—Cicero, Thomas More, Francis Bacon, and Edmund Burke, for example—have combined high-level political activity with philosophical activity. In addition, we know from Lincoln’s own Handbill of 1846 that, contrary to Herndon, he was in fact a speculative man. What other kind of man would have defended something called the “Doctrine of Necessity?” Herndon’s judgment in matters of this kind is hardly to be trusted. And Guelzo’s own reference to Lincoln’s “intellectual hobbies” gives the impression of a certain condescension, as if they are not to be taken seriously and don’t deserve much attention.

At any rate, if we can presume that Guelzo would agree in considering a philosopher someone who thinks deeply, systematically, and independently about the nature of things, he must have concluded that Lincoln fell short of the mark. In fact, Guelzo’s words suggest one way in which he did fall short. If Lincoln defended “the idea of liberal democracy from its own American despisers,” that idea preceeded him and was created by others. Those—liberalism’s great (unnamed) pioneers—must be the ones who merit the name philosophers, and Lincoln was not one of them. He inherited their ideas, argued for those ideas, fought for those ideas, but he did not originate them. He may have had the interest, and even the talent, of a philosopher in some respects, but in the American political system in which he
was called upon to act, his ideas were those of others. And this may be what Guelzo had in mind by the phrase “practical intellectual application.” He put those ideas into effect.

This may not be the only or best measure of Lincoln’s philosophical accomplishments. After all, he could not help but apply the political philosophy prevailing in his own country, since he thoroughly believed in its principles. But did he do so mechanically or with significant modifications? Was he aware of its shortcomings as well as its virtues? Were there other areas in which his philosophical genius could show itself? And there’s another complication: I have the impression that Lincoln, who Guelzo says defended “the idea of liberal democracy,” never used that term. I don’t remember seeing “liberal democracy” in McPherson’s book either. Lincoln did speak of democracy, republican government, popular government, free government, and constitutional republic, but not of liberal democracy. Through that term, Guelzo unites Lincoln with the European liberalism and Enlightenment to which he traces Lincoln’s ideas. But does Lincoln himself speak of liberalism and its importance to him? Is this the way to understand Lincoln “as he understood himself?” (5). Isn’t it possible that Lincoln understood—or thought it important to regard—American political ideas as American and home-grown? This seems to be the case with a man who once remarked that “he never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence” (Independence Hall speech, February 22, 1861), and who Guelzo himself tells us derived his fundamental political principles from Washington, the founding fathers, and Henry Clay (36).

Just how was Lincoln’s “liberalism” related to the liberalism of England and the continent? Guelzo makes numerous references to European liberalism, but in only a few does it figure as a source of Lincoln’s ideas (5, 48, 98). Nor do any of the references to liberalism come from Lincoln himself. Guelzo traces Lincoln’s vigorous support for the rule of law in his Lyceum speech (1838) to works stressing the need for law by two nineteenth-century thinkers—an Englishman, Herbert Spencer, and an American, Francis Wayland (48). I doubt Lincoln had to learn this from them. Guelzo himself tells us that, preparatory to entering the Illinois bar in 1836, Lincoln had studied the work of an eighteenth-century Englishman, Sir William Blackstone (39), and that work, despite dealing with the laws of England—with its aristocratic monarchy and an established church—had long remained an authority for American lawyers. But even before those studies, Lincoln probably imbibed his belief in the rule of law from
the founding fathers, the Constitution, and the republican civic spirit they encouraged. It was in the air Americans breathed. Nor should we forget that the immediate incentives for Lincoln’s Lyceum speech were widespread ravagings and lynchings, which all by themselves have a way of making anyone who isn’t doing them think of the need for law-abidingness. Unfortunately, Guelzo’s advertsing to Spencer and Wayland and their latter-day thoughts about law also has the effect of making the Lyceum speech seem much more ordinary than it is. Guelzo introduces the speech well (46–47) and quotes without comment its sensational prescription for promoting the rule of law (the passage is given below), but he stops there. The rest of Lincoln’s thought about the fading memory of the Revolution, the varying grounds for attachment to democracy, the nature of men of the greatest ambition, the demands of lawfulness, and the several things most needed by the republic are omitted. I should add that, so far as I can tell, this reference to Spencer and Wayland is the only one that builds on Guelzo’s initial reference to them, along with Mill and Carey, as parts of “the intellectual and literary axis of English-speaking liberal democracy” that he takes to be the key to “understanding Lincoln as he understood himself” (5). At that point Guelzo had led us to expect from them thoughts not so much about the rule of law as about political economy, which he said was their special link to Lincoln. Unfortunately, I cannot find this link explored further in the book.

A second example of liberalism’s influence on Lincoln occurs in connection with the Union loss at Bull Run (98). Guelzo reports that Lincoln remained calm partly because “he was possessed of liberalism’s secular confidence that the arc of history pointed toward liberty and democracy.” Unless it can be shown that Lincoln actually expressed such confidence, this is mere surmise. The same “secular confidence” might have led him to be sure the Union would win the war, but was he? Did he remain confident and calm as general after general failed him and things got so bad that an emboldened Lee invaded Pennsylvania? Even in the immediate aftermath of the Union victory at Gettysburg, Lincoln expressed no confidence that the war was won or would be won. He ended his great address by asking that “we here highly resolve” that government of, by, and for the people “shall not perish from the earth.” This means that it may in fact perish, perish utterly—that the Union might lose. Moreover, our motivation would be entirely different if we did not think our own efforts were needed to keep it from perishing, and that motivation is crucial to winning. Go into battle thinking you cannot lose and you end up with the French at Agincourt—as Lincoln knew from his Shakespeare.
But the clinchers about whether Lincoln shared the liberal belief in a necessary progress toward liberty and democracy can be found in two other of his speeches. In one of his two lectures on Discoveries and Inventions, just before the Civil War, Lincoln actually makes a study of human inventiveness and human progress in general, culminating in democracy, and shows that his own optimism is qualified and hardly limitless. There are reasons for pessimism, starting with the picture he paints of “Young America,” at the height of technological achievement, as a spoiled selfish adolescent with a penchant for acquiring territory, and including his quaint reference to black slavery as an invention stuck in among other inventions. Much technological and political progress, yes. Inevitable progress, no.

And Lincoln raises the general question of progress more directly in the conclusion to his speech at the Wisconsin State Fair. To encourage the losers in the competitions, he cites the Eastern monarch’s wise men who, asked for a sentiment that was always true, said, “And this too, shall pass away.” After a few reflections in support of this sentiment, Lincoln adds the hope that it isn’t “quite true” and that “by the best cultivation of the physical world, beneath and around us, and the intellectual and moral worlds within us,” we shall secure a happiness “whose course shall be onward and upward, and which, while the earth endures, shall not pass away.” Note that the vaulting optimism with which he concludes is at best a hopeful qualifier to the pessimism of the wise men, not a sure thing, that it depends on our cultivating the intellectual and moral as well as physical world, and that there is an absolute limit—“while the earth endures”—a portentous phrase that sounds more scientific than religious. From Lincoln’s own speeches this is what we can infer concerning any liberal confidence he had in the “arc of history,” although there may be other places in his writings where he expresses himself more “liberally.”

These criticisms may strike some as merely peripheral, but they go to the heart of Guelzo’s claim for his approach to Lincoln as a “man of ideas” and illustrate a deep difficulty often besetting historians of ideas. Guelzo has attributed to Lincoln ideas from his liberal environment, but, as we have seen, there is some doubt as to whether this attribution is correct. If we want to understand “what shaped Lincoln’s thinking and values,” do we look mainly at external influences, at historical surroundings? Do the times make the man? That it is very difficult to elude the opinions of our own time and place was also Plato’s view: hence the metaphor of the cave, in which we all begin as prisoners. But some can and do escape to see the light, and some are helped to escape by others who already have. These are the
philosophers, male and female. So the biographer of a great man, particularly a “man of ideas,” must first try to discover what those ideas are and only then their source, asking how much is original with him and what he owes to others, to books, to travel, etc. But first of all—for which nothing must be allowed to substitute—what are his ideas? In Lincoln’s case, this means studying his speeches and other writings carefully, which is the only way to determine ultimately whether “intellectual” or “philosopher” is the better description. Otherwise, if we look solely or mainly to his time, we can easily attribute to him ideas that are not his and miss those that are.

Yet with the exception of the Lyceum speech, Guelzo ignores most of the same speeches McPherson omits and even some of the better-known political speeches. These are all important embodiments of Lincoln’s thought. The speech Lincoln gave to the Springfield Washingtonian Temperance Society in 1842, the year of his marriage, weighs the idea of temperance as total abstinence, showing its connections with Christianity and drawing parallels between the temperance revolution and the revolution of 1776. It is a marvel of rhetorical irony. The Handbill that Lincoln issued in connection with his campaign for Congress discusses the charge of infidelity levelled against him and shows how cautious he was in his public utterances, particularly on the subject of religion. He tells us he once argued for the Doctrine of Necessity, defined as the view that “the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest, by some power, over which the mind itself has no control.” How mysterious! Reminds us of Newton’s laws in physics! What is that power? Guelzo mentions Lincoln’s eulogy of Henry Clay, his “beau ideal of a statesman,” but says nothing more about that beautiful tribute (36, 56). Think how rarely the eulogy of a very great man is given by an even greater! That speech allows us to learn Lincoln’s own standard for measuring great statesmanship and great oratory, and indicates not only the things in Clay he admired but also their possible points of difference. Lincoln quotes at length from Clay’s splendid defense of the American Colonization Society in 1827 and its supporting of blacks’ equal right to freedom. Among other things the critics must do to have their way, Clay said: “They must blow out the moral lights around us, and extinguish that greatest torch of all which America represents to a benighted world. . . . They must penetrate the human soul, and eradicate the light of reason and the love of liberty. Then, and not till then, when universal darkness and despair prevail, can you perpetuate slavery, and repress all sympathy, and all humane, and benevolent efforts among free men, in behalf of the unhappy portion of our race doomed to bondage.”
The speech on Discoveries and Inventions starts with the Bible and makes a highly original study of speech and writing, considered as inventions, of the democratizing effect of printing, and of the unique role of America. The speech at the Wisconsin State Fair is full of reflections on the civilizing function of fairs, the advantage of intense cultivation of small plots of land, the relationship between labor and capital, and the pleasures of thought that accompany farming. All in all, a most impressive body of work. These speeches of Lincoln are a gold mine, a diamond mine of original thought, ready to be explored to draw an accurate picture of this “man of ideas.” Individual speeches have been subjected to careful study and only rarely, a number of them taken together, as in Lincoln’s Speeches Reconsidered, by John C. Briggs.1

Here are two additional examples of vital speeches—very prominent political speeches—Guelzo ignored, and two more where the omissions were much more of a word or a sentence rather than a whole speech, yet still consequential. After giving an excellent summary of the Dred Scott case (73), Guelzo does almost nothing to present Lincoln’s systematic reasoning opposing that decision (June 26, 1857), including his reflection on the kind of deference owed to Supreme Court decisions generally and his analysis of the original meaning of the Declaration of Independence with respect to the black race. The speech includes these famous lines: “Now I protest against that counterfeit logic which concludes that, because I do not want a black woman for a slave I must necessarily want her for a wife. I need not have her for either. I can just leave her alone. In some respects she is certainly not my equal; but in her right to eat the bread she earns with her own hands without asking leave of any one else, she is my equal, and the equal of all others.” (Note, in passing, that Lincoln assumes the black woman is living in this country, not Africa, and that her freedom entitles her to have an income and own property.) Another startling omission occurs in connection with Lincoln’s suspension of the writ of habeas corpus—the greatest civil liberties issue posed by the Civil War. Guelzo says much that is relevant and sensible (117) but without providing the constitutional arguments by which Lincoln defended himself against widespread criticism, as in his June 12, 1863, letter to Corning and summarized by McPherson (42–43).

An omission of much more limited scope occurs in connection with the sensitive issue of racism. Having himself raised the question whether Lincoln was a racist, Guelzo makes a very serious ad-

mission—that Lincoln harbored “not full-blown white racism” but white racism in a lesser form (59). In evidence of this he cites the following passage (I think from the first debate, but its source is not given): The “physical difference between the white and black races will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality.” Now this passage is not quite the same as the one found in the debate. There Lincoln places the word “probably” before the word “forever”—a very minor omission (if I have the right speech), it seems, and I’m sure inadvertent, but it isn’t minor at all. That’s because the word “probably” is one of the little qualifiers Lincoln uses to indicate his true position. Here “probably” means that racial separation may not be forever: it may be temporary, it’s not inevitable—as a strict racist would maintain. Moreover, we must realize that when Lincoln points only to “physical difference” he makes a crucial concession to the equality of the races! The phrase itself—the “physical difference between the white and black races”—draws our attention to the color difference but silently excludes and distracts us from the more significant kind of inequality, that of mind and soul. Racism, fundamentally, presupposes the superiority in these of the white race and the inferiority of the black, not just differences of looks, and that inequality Lincoln drops entirely. So only in appearance, and on the surface, is the passage in question racist. But appearance is not enough to go on when we know Lincoln is addressing a racially prejudiced white audience whose votes he desperately needs. Guelzo makes the point himself when he says that Lincoln was “alarmed whenever his advocacy of natural equality looked like it might be used as a bogeyman to wrap ‘nigger equality’ around him” (59). The alarm did not come from the prospect of that equality but from the fear of having his political hopes dashed by Douglas’s appeals to white racism.

Another curious omission is in Guelzo’s uncited summary (59, 60) of a crucial passage in the Peoria speech, part of a section so important that Lincoln repeated it verbatim in the first debate. (I will skip over the other racially denigrating ideas Guelzo attributes to Lincoln on the same page.) We’ll start with Lincoln himself. This part of the Peoria passage is one of the most instructive in all of Lincoln, but it must be followed step by step, from beginning to end. Lincoln starts by admitting that if “all earthly power” were his, he still would not know what to do with the slaves. He then lists several possibilities. His “first impulse” would be to free all the slaves and send them to Africa, an idea, he says, which has long-run prospects but must fail in the short run. The second is to free them all and “keep them among us
as underlings,” but this is hardly better for them. The third is to free them “and make them politically and socially, our equals.” He says his own feelings and those of “the great mass of white people” will not allow this, but he immediately distinguishes between “feelings” and “justice and sound judgment” and thereby calls the feelings into question (Guelzo makes this point on page 60), which still, if they are “universal,” “can not be safely disregarded.” Remember, the option envisaged here is sudden universal emancipation (even though what happened later historically was close to it and hence very difficult to achieve). So this won’t work either. Lincoln adds a fourth and very daring option: “It does seem to me that systems of gradual emancipation might be adopted; but for their tardiness in this, I will not undertake to judge our brethren of the south.” Think about it. Lincoln never rejects this possibility, and he does not couple it with either deportation to Africa or keeping the ex-slaves as “underlings.” In short, the only option left standing at the end is gradual emancipation, with the ultimate prospect of making blacks the political and social equals of whites! The underlying assumption here seems to be that gradually the races can and will get used to each other. So Lincoln begins by saying he has no solution himself and ends by pointing the way to the only possible solution. This doesn’t sound like white racism. Guelzo does mention that Lincoln, along with fellow Whigs, favored a combination of “gradual emancipation” and “colonization,” but that isn’t the option Lincoln presents at the end. And so it isn’t true to say that after considering the third option “Lincoln simply closed his mind to any further speculation and contented himself with regretting the existence of slavery in America in the first place” (60). Not only has Guelzo completely omitted the fourth and most important alternative, he has, by his concluding line, in effect added the charge of intellectual fecklessness to the charge of racism, both quite mistaken. Finally, if Lincoln had any racism in him at all, how are we to explain the friendly, uncondescending equality with which he treated Frederick Douglass, or the tribute to the black soldier in his Conkling letter, or his striving to get Louisiana to make concessions to black suffrage and education in its new constitution? Is it not time to clear this great man of the vile prejudice from which his mind had long before cleared him? Is it not time for the Great Emancipator to make a second and lasting appearance?

Guelzo’s epilogue is somewhat more difficult to understand than McPherson’s conclusion. Referring to Lincoln as the Great American Man, the first achievement with which Guelzo credits him is saving the Union and thereby saving the “single largest incarnation” of lib-
eral democracy itself. He quotes a rather florid passage from Richard Cobden, the British liberal, exulting in the rational and secular basis of American popular government, after which Guelzo adds: “All that might have been lost, in America and everywhere else, had the Confederate secession proved that, in fact, human beings could not cooperate by reason.” But that’s exactly what the Confederate secession did prove: reason was not enough, and the difference in perceived interests was so great that the Union was torn apart and could only be restored by brute force. That was the whole point of the Gettysburg Address. We are engaged in a great war to keep a nation “so conceived and so dedicated” together and to make sure it could endure.

Guelzo couches Lincoln’s second achievement in general terms. By linking liberal politics to free labor, “Lincoln made economic mobility and political equality the joint standard by which democratic government was to be measured in the future.” So the simple greatness of freeing the slaves is not celebrated in and of itself—no doubt because Guelzo had celebrated it so well at the point of its occurrence, saying “it was the greatest act of emancipation in that remarkable century of liberal emancipation, towering over the Reform Bill of 1832 and the repeal of the Corn Laws, over the emancipation of Jews in Prussia, Catholics in Britain, and serfs in Russia” (106).

The third and last achievement with which Guelzo credits Lincoln may be the most interesting of all. It is Lincoln’s correction of the all-out rationalism—the view that human life can be based on reason alone—that Guelzo attributes to liberalism and the Enlightenment. The picture is complicated. Guelzo is certainly correct in saying that Lincoln held the wrongness of slavery to be an absolute transcendent truth, but did he also issue the Emancipation Proclamation as “a humble suppliant of the Divine Will” (106–7)? In his epilogue, Guelzo calls Lincoln a “consistently secular man” (127) who came to discover “by a long and battlesmoke-stained path” that reason was not enough and that liberalism needed a belief in transcendence. This may, he thinks, have been Lincoln’s “most long-lasting achievement”—the realization that “the future of liberal democracy had to conform itself, whether it liked it or not, to the dictates of the justice of God” (128).

As for the insufficiency of reason in meeting the exigencies of political life, that was already a theme of Lincoln’s earliest great speech at the Lyceum. Guelzo himself quotes (without comment) the passage where, for the purpose of avoiding mob violence, Lincoln urges not strengthening reason or appealing to Christian virtue but inculcating reverence for the constitution and the laws (47). Here are his words: “Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to
the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap—let it be taught in schools, in
seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in Primers, spelling books,
and in Almanacs; —let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed
in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short,
let it become the political religion of the nation; and let the old and
the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes
and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly on its
altars.” This is undoubtedly the most remarkable passage in American
political literature. How seriously Lincoln meant it as a practical mat-
ter is hard to say. He calls this reverence a “political religion.” It is to
be breathed, taught, written, preached, proclaimed, and enforced. It
involves thoroughgoing habituation and inculcation. It must become
more active in every facet of life than the old religions then were—in
fact, it must become like the old religions used to be, even to the point
of being proclaimed and enforced by the state. In many respects it
rivals those religions themselves.

This passage proves several things. It shows that the young Lincoln
(aged twenty-nine) did not believe reason sufficed politically to pre-
vent lawlessness. It shows his philosophical independence of mind
in calling for something the founding fathers had not anticipated.
And it shows, as Guelzo says, that he was a “secular man”—a man of
reason rather than revelation. In fact, later in the speech, Lincoln tells
us that, with the passing of the revolutionary generation, those old
“pillars of the temple of liberty,” as he calls them, must be replaced
by new pillars, “hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason. Passion
has helped us; but can do so no more. It will in future be our enemy.
Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the
materials for our future defence.—Let those materials be moulded
into general intelligence, sound morality, and, in particular, a reverence
for the constitution and the laws . . .”

Paradoxical! We can no longer rely on the passions, not even on
individual self-interest. We did not believe a political religion, but the political
religion is devised by reason—by “cold, calculating, unimpassioned
reason.” This reason must be the kind Lincoln himself possesses, the
reason of the philosophical statesman, who can think his way to obey-
ing the laws but realizes that for most people thinking would not be
enough to vouchsafe that obedience. For them, habituation from the
earliest age is needed to make the reverence and obedience automatic,
no doubt supplemented and strengthened in later stages of educa-
tion by the rational appeal demanded by “general intelligence,” that
other new pillar of the “temple of liberty.” So Lincoln not only defies
liberalism’s contention that man as such can live on the basis of en-
lightened reason, but, in this paragraph at least, allows us to infer a drastic inequality between the philosophical statesman and the rest of us—an idea that must be left to inference because such a statesman would immediately recognize that for the sake of democracy itself it is best kept out of sight. Democracy needs superior friends, but they must not proclaim their superiority. That describes Lincoln to a T: the superior friend who always acts as an equal and whose devotion to liberty never ends. It is a type he mentions in the Lyceum speech, where, when liberty is threatened by rampant disorder, its friends may be “too few, and those few too weak, to make their friendship effectual.”  

Lincoln made his friendship effectual.

The more difficult part of Guelzo’s claim is that Lincoln saw the public need for the belief in divine justice after a long struggle led him to that belief himself. There is no question about Lincoln’s appealing to and encouraging the public belief in God’s justice and bounty, particularly after assuming the presidency. A beautiful example of this occurs in his Thanksgiving Proclamation of October 20, 1864. Yet even here Lincoln does not, as you might expect, make this public expression of gratitude specifically Christian; in fact it sounds more Old Testament than New.

What about his own belief? Guelzo adduces much evidence (105–7, 110, 120–21) from utterances reported by others, Lincoln’s private musings, and above all the Second Inaugural, for his having expressed or developed such a personal belief. And Guelzo knows as well as anyone that Lincoln was not religious for most of his life, which is why he calls him a “consistently secular man.” Even in the Handbill of 1846, in which Lincoln had defended himself against the charge of infidelity, he admitted he was not a member of a Christian church (without saying why), never plainly said he was a believer, and never plainly renounced the presumably anti-religious Doctrine of Necessity for which he had previously argued. For Lincoln to have become a believer during the Civil War—the war itself and the death of his son, Willie, have been given as reasons—he would have had to overcome all the arguments, whatever they were, to which he had once subscribed. It is certainly possible that Lincoln changed, but we would first have to be sure just what it was he changed to and why. None of the statements Guelzo cites would indicate that he embraced Christianity, and the others would have to be examined one by one.

Meanwhile, we must not forget that Lincoln had spent a lifetime

concealing his disbelief from all but those closest to him: He was an unbeliever in a sea of believers. And, as the war wore on, it might have become increasingly necessary for political reasons to appeal to Americans in their capacity as believers. Because of such considerations (and prior to undertaking further inquiry), I still put a question mark next to the question of Lincoln’s own final religious beliefs. Guelzo is correct in drawing attention to the new emphasis and voice President Lincoln gave to elements of religion that had the effect of elevating, inspiring, and strengthening American political life. In my judgment Guelzo is also sound in thinking this a good and necessary thing. Yet he might agree that Lincoln’s fundamental political framework remained essentially rational or philosophical rather than religious, even after adding this new emphasis.

Within that rational framework, the Declaration of Independence, with its four references to God, had already supplied a form of transcendence that in the eyes of Americans connects with the Bible, merging “nature’s God”—the Creator and source of equal rights—with the God of miracles and duties. Both parts of that transcendence have been weakened by a corrosive relativism and materialism, and Guelzo’s sense that it requires strengthening is surely right. It is hard to know whether Lincoln ended as a believer or not, but in either case it is apparent that he regarded the religion of the American people not as an evil to be destroyed but as a potential source of strength upon which the wise statesman would draw as needed. All the better for us, perhaps, were he not a believer—to show that appreciating the importance of religion to American democracy is hardly the preserve of believers alone.

Today, conscious of the deep strains among us and the foes we face abroad, our problems seem greater than ever. We have been blessed with one Lincoln: Dare we hope for another?