Review

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For generations, historians have been arguing over which of the founding documents Abraham Lincoln revered more: the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution.

Lincoln himself left room for doubt. “I have never had a feeling politically,” he stated in 1861, “that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence.” Yet at his inauguration just a few weeks later, Lincoln asserted his imperiled executive authority by citing not that revolutionary document (whose implied right to throw off authority was being cited by secessionists) but rather the set of rules crafted “to form a more perfect union” in 1789. “You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government,” he warned disunionists, “while I shall have the most solemn one to ‘preserve, protect and defend’ it.” That “solemn” oath came directly from Article II of the Constitution.

The problem for historians—indeed, for Lincoln himself—was how he managed to maintain faith in the Declaration’s promise of equality while suppressing a rebellion under the terms of a document that enshrined inequality? Lincoln found one pathway in the Book of Proverbs (ironically inspired by a letter from then-future vice president of the Confederacy Alexander H. Stephens). The assertion of principle in the Declaration was “an ‘apple of gold’ to us,” mused Lincoln. “The Union and the Constitution, are the picture of silver, subsequently framed around it.” It was possible, even essential, to keep both picture and frame intact.

Lincoln kept this particular, infelicitous rationale to himself, but its subsequent discovery has certainly not inhibited the ongoing scholarly debate about his thoughts and actions, as this highly useful new book of essays compellingly demonstrates. To keep Lincoln “relevant,” its editor, Lucas Morel, cautions in the preface, “our task should not be to remake him in our image but to render an accurate portrait of him in his age” (xii).

By and large, the contributors have made every effort to do so, with the inevitable mixed results. Most of the essays come from leading Lincoln authorities, and they bring few surprises but many pleasures, since they generally focus on their authors’ specific areas of expertise or most recent research. Fred Kaplan compresses his bicentennial book about Lincoln’s writing by focusing on the literature that both inspired and cautioned him. From the Shakespeare soliloquies in one of Lincoln’s earliest primers, Scott’s Elocution, as Kaplan reminds us, Lincoln learned “that ambition is a two-edged sword. It could be used in Christian humility, serving virtue and the larger good, or it could be a manifestation of the sin of self-glorification” (27). The Kaplan chapter is neatly paired with John Channing Briggs’s lovely essay on Lincoln and Shakespeare, in which the author asserts that Lincoln admired the Bard not because he warns against tyranny but because he “animates and plays out an intriguing variety of tyrannies in political and psychological spheres”—a theme that reminded the future president not to deny the evil of slavery but to confront it—a stretch, perhaps, but a fascinating one (39).

Following a section titled “Lincoln’s Character” (featuring chapters by Michael Burlingame on Lincoln and race and Diana J. Schaub on Frederick Douglass’s evolution in “learning to love Lincoln”), the book turns to politics. Editor Morel contributes a fine essay, “Lincoln, Liberty, and the American Constitutional Union,” getting right down to the brass tacks of understanding “whether preserving the American union was more important to him than promoting liberty for all” (127). The verdict? “Lincoln believed justice required both human equality and government by consent of the governed and therefore was devoted to the principles of the Declaration of Independence as well as the practice of self-government as manifested in the Constitution and the rule of law” (129).

Allen C. Guelzo portrays a Lincoln mesmerized by public opinion but sometimes cautious of how and when to shape it. Joseph R. Fornieri posits that Lincoln’s “theology of labor” originated in “the mutual influence of American religious and democratic traditions” (209), and Matthew Pinsker reminds us in a particularly solid essay
that as a master politician, Lincoln was capable of sidestepping Declaration and Constitution alike, allowing himself “a wide berth on the question of what was actually forbidden” by the law (203). Two scholars end the book by bravely dipping their toes into the murky waters of “Lincoln and modern-day America.” Ronald J. Pestritto and Jason R. Jividen provide an especially lively essay, “Lincoln and the Progressives.” But, while finding fault with academics they declare guilty of “a recasting of the American founding grounded in the idea of historical contingency,” they give Lincoln a pass for committing much the same sin himself (318).

As Lincoln had insisted in his 1861 fragment inspired by Proverbs, it was possible—and essential—to preserve both the “apple of gold” and the “frame of silver,” even if it meant abrogating constitutional safeguards in the name of preserving the Constitution itself. As he put it: “Let us act, that neither the picture, or apple shall ever be blurred, or bruised or broken.”4 Can those two aspirations coexist today? As Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas points out in the introduction, “Lincoln was acutely aware that policymaking, including policymaking by judges, succeeds only to the extent that citizens permit it” (10). Readers might disagree with some of the conclusions advanced in this collection, but the research is solid throughout, and the writing is sterling. Morel has assembled a collection no Lincoln scholar—or serious student of the Civil War era—can afford to be without.

4. Ibid.