Review Essay

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Speaking in the Illinois legislature in 1837, the young Abraham Lincoln described “politicians” as “a set of men who have interests aside from the interests of the people, and who, to say the most of them, are, taken as a mass, at least one long step removed from honest men.”¹ In view of the ubiquitous political scandals that taint our national headlines, Lincoln’s words seem as fresh today as they were one hundred and seventy years ago. In a delicious irony to be savored, so called “Honest Abe” forthrightly included himself amongst the group he was describing: “I say this with the greater freedom because, being a politician myself, none can regard it as personal.”² Does this mean that Abraham Lincoln was a self-loathing politician? Impossible! Since by all accounts he was the quintessential political animal enlivened by public life. How then does one explain his disparaging remarks about politicians?

While Lincoln the Whig was no doubt acting as a consummate politician by stirring public animus against the Democratic Party and the status quo, his dissatisfaction also implies that he expected politics to be something more than a clash of self-grasping interests. And while he ironically points to the unscrupulous side of his profession, his life clearly testifies that politics can be an honorable vocation.³ Thomas Schneider’s Lincoln’s Defense of Politics: The Public Man and His Opponents in the Crisis over Slavery is therefore aptly named since it defends the nobility of politics as the art of the possible, not the perfect. Indeed,

². Ibid.

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Lincoln the politician appreciated both the dignity and the depravity of human nature and its curious compound of both good and evil. His defense of politics therefore eschews a sterile legalism devoid of principle or a utopian devotion to principles in their abstract purity. The dignity of politics falls in between these two extremes—counterpoised against a lofty idealism and a low pragmatism. Striking the mean, Lincoln’s statecraft was informed by moral principle, while, at the same time, bound by the political constraints of the democratic process, public opinion, and the rule of law. Unlike far too many of his time (and ours), he resisted the perennial temptation either to reduce politics to “strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles” or to elevate it to a higher plane of moral transfiguration.

Schneider’s useful and insightful book is therefore as much a reflection upon the nature of politics in general as it is upon Lincoln’s politics more particularly. This work of political philosophy is a welcome addition to the ever-growing and rewarding literature on the sixteenth president. As the jacket accurately notes, the study is “not primarily a work of history but a consideration of the historical alternatives on their merits.” It takes the form of a dialogue between Lincoln and his political opponents from both North and the South on the intertwined questions of slavery and the Union. Schneider examines seven key figures whose thought spans the political spectrum of the Civil War era: Stephen A. Douglas, Alexander H. Stephens, John C. Calhoun, George Fitzhugh, Henry David Thoreau, William Lloyd Garrison, and Frederick Douglass. In each case, he analyzes their core teachings, finding their approach to politics—or lack thereof—deficient in comparison to that of the sixteenth president’s. Lincoln’s defense of politics thus comes to light as a response to the alternatives propounded by his opponents. In advancing his thesis, Schneider states: “These opponents sought to reduce the tension, which they regarded as unsustainable, between moral and legal considerations bearing on the question of slavery. They compel us to ask whether Lincoln purchased superior flexibility of political approach at the price of consistency. The case that is made here for Lincoln’s integrity as a politician—for his undividedness—rests on his refusal to see law and morality as excluding each other” (11–12).

Schneider begins his book by engaging those historians who perceive a fundamental divide between law and morality in Lincoln’s

4. Ibid.
politics. While James M. McPherson casts Lincoln as torn between the “agonizing contradiction between his ‘oft-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere could be free’ and his oath of office as president of a slaveholding republic,” Richard Hofstadter sees him as pragmatist who consistently placed interest before principle (6–9). Neither view, according to Schneider, does justice to Lincoln’s prudence, which was both principled and pragmatic. While upholding the core principle of slavery’s containment and its ultimate extinction, Lincoln the politician readily acknowledged his constitutional duties. He was more than willing to compromise when necessary, without abandoning those principles, in order to preserve the Union.

Schneider first considers Stephen A. Douglas who, like Lincoln, offered a moderate solution to the slavery problem based on the Union’s preservation. However, Douglas’s narrow interpretation of the Declaration of Independence as applying exclusively to white men of Anglo-Saxon ancestry, offered no higher standard to adjudicate the justice or injustice of policies; it simply affirmed the status quo. That, in effect, as Harry V. Jaffa has noted, “transform[ed] the Declaration from a document of natural law to one of positive law” (17).

In sum, Douglas attempted to diffuse sectional strife by evading the moral question of slavery. Based on this strategy, he stigmatized Lincoln as a radical abolitionist who would appeal to a higher law in abrogation of the Constitution’s procedural safeguards. In response, Lincoln distinguished between “those provisions [of the Constitution] that were matters of principle from those that were the results of compromise or sectional interests” (17). Since slavery inevitably raised questions about good or evil that could not be evaded, Douglas’s attempt at moral neutrality was futile. Schneider summarizes the fatal flaw of Douglas’s position, which Lincoln deftly exploited during their 1858 debates: “The thrust of Lincoln’s attack was directed at the delusory attractiveness of Douglas’s position, which did not require coming down on the side of either freedom or of slavery. Douglasism represented an evasion of the question; but since there was really no evading it, his doctrine represented, in fact if not by intent, a concession to the proslavery faction” (20–21).

Part Two of the book examines the defense of slavery by three prominent southern figures of their time: Alexander Stephens, John C. Calhoun, and George Fitzhugh. Stephens was vice president of the Confederacy and a former Whig colleague of Lincoln in the U.S. House. His thought is notable in revealing the inner contradiction and failure of southern pro-slavery unionism. Though Stephens’s notori-
“Cornerstone” speech of March 21, 1861, which justified slavery as a divinely sanctioned institution “in strict conformity with nature,” has garnered much attention over the years. Schneider focuses upon an earlier and equally revealing speech delivered on the occasion of Stephens’s retirement from the House in 1859. This earlier speech anticipated the proslavery argument of the Cornerstone Speech, which was neither new nor anomalous. Both provided a justification of slavery based upon a higher law. Stephens’s politics thus represented a “higher law constitutionalism” (28). In reply to Seward’s incendiary remarks about fidelity to a law higher than the Constitution, Stephens retorted: “We must stand on the ‘higher law,’ as well as upon the constitution. The latter must be subordinate to the former. But as I read the inscriptions upon the canvas of the universe about us and around us, and over us, as well as the teachings of inspiration, ‘order is nature’s first law;’ with it, come gradation and subordination; this principle extends from the Throne of the Creator to the utmost limits of his works. We see it in the heavens above . . . we see it in the earth below, in the vegetable and animal kingdoms . . . we see similar distinctions and gradations in the races for men, from the highest to the lowest type” (26–27). Stephens sought to anchor the Constitution upon the new moral foundation of human servitude. Schneider’s culling of pithy quotes like the one above helps to make this book a potentially useful resource in the classroom for students and scholars alike.

Schneider then analyzes Lincoln’s correspondence with Stephens during Georgia’s pending vote of secession. The exchange provides a vivid contrast between their clashing political views on slavery and the Union. It is also of particular importance in revealing the connection between law and morality implicit to Lincoln’s defense of politics. Stephens had argued that the core issue between North and South was constitutional. Whether in the territories or in the states, the institution was beyond the legitimate scope of the federal government to regulate. Lincoln, on the other hand, emphasized that the impending crisis was not primarily about the Constitution, but about the rightness or wrongness of slavery: “You [of the South],” he famously observed, “think slavery is right and ought to be extended; while we [of the North] think it is wrong and ought to be restricted. That I suppose is the rub. It certainly is the only substantial disagreement between us” (32). Given his legal obligation to the rule of law, Lincoln repeatedly pledged to uphold those provisions of the Constitution that protected slavery. Yet southerners were unimpressed with such platitudes. They were convinced that Lincoln was an abolitionist wolf in sheep’s clothing.
In reply to Stephens, Lincoln used the “apples of gold in pictures of silver” metaphor from Proverbs 25:11 to convey didactically the inseparability of liberty and Union, and the corresponding reconciliation between moral and legal obligation implicit to his defense of politics. Just as the picture of silver was framed “to adorn and preserve” the apple of gold, so were the Union and Constitution intended “to adorn and preserve” liberty for all. Lincoln reminded Stephens and his southern brethren that “The picture was made for the apple—not the apple for the picture.” Indeed, gold is more precious than silver. This did not mean, however, that the Union and the Constitution—“the picture of silver”—were therefore dispensable. The Union and the Constitution nonetheless played an indispensable role in preserving the apple of gold—the principle of liberty for all. While Stephens would “conceal” or “destroy” the apple of gold to justify slavery, the abolitionists would efface the picture of silver because of its compromises with the institution. In either case, the precious fruit of the republic or its protective casing would be “blurred, or broken.”

Stephens attempted to hold the South in the Union, but the kind of Union he sought to preserve was altogether different from the one envisioned by Lincoln. Schneider correctly notes that Stephens’s secessionist colleagues saw more clearly than he did that slavery was ultimately incompatible with a Union dedicated to the Declaration. For Lincoln, the Union was “worthy” of saving in view of the principles for which it stood. Schneider cogently summarizes the defect of proslavery Unionism in these terms: “Stephens could not bridge the gap between his moral and constitutional views of slavery. His failure in this respect helps to explain why he was unable to persuade more of his fellow Georgians to join him in standing firm for the Union” (34).

Schneider’s two other notable defenders of slavery are John C. Calhoun, spokesman of states’ rights, and George Fitzhugh, a Virginia author and perhaps the most radical southern thinker of the time. Schneider traces the foundations of their political thought and finds interesting parallels: both thinkers rejected the Lockean view of a pre-political state of nature in which all human beings enjoyed rights antecedent to government. Moreover, both thinkers claimed to have borrowed from Aristotle. In the end, both wound up substituting interest for justice.

Schneider convincingly argues that Calhoun and Fitzhugh both misconstrued Aristotle. While Calhoun claimed, seemingly in agreement with Aristotle, that government should cultivate the “higher qualities of men,” unlike Aristotle, he assigned a quasi-moral status to interest, substituting it for natural justice. And while Fitzhugh claimed, also seemingly in agreement with Aristotle, that slavery was part of natural bonds that connect the family and household, unlike Aristotle, he failed to offer a reliable standard, apart from the shifting sands of historical accident and convention, to justify his defense of universal slavery. By attempting to transform the regime into a family association, Fitzhugh ignored Aristotle’s crucial distinction between the lower associations of the family and the tribe and the more comprehensive association of the polis, which, according to Aristotle, is different in kind from these prior communities. Contrary to Fitzhugh, who conflated the family with the polis, Aristotle distinguished the latter from the former as the all-embracing community, defined by a common sense of justice and governed by political rule amongst free and equal citizens, not by the despotic rule of master over slave.

Schneider makes the case that southern slavery and secession alike constituted an abandonment of politics. “Behind southerners’ reluctance to acknowledge a reciprocal right to rule in their northern fellow citizens,” he notes, “lay their far deeper reluctance to acknowledge anything like it in their own slaves. The recognition of such a right in another person means recognizing the right to be ruled politically, as opposed to despotically. Political rule is based on the presupposition of a nature common to rulers and ruled, and it reflects a relatively high degree of confidence in the capability of human beings to rule themselves. This is the philosophical content of Lincoln’s defense of politics” (178).

Part Three of the book examines Lincoln’s political opponents from the other side of the spectrum—the abolitionists. Henry David Thoreau, William Lloyd Garrison, and Frederick Douglass are treated as representative figures. The common thread amongst these abolitionists was their recalcitrant demand that principle be perfectly translated into practice despite the limits of politics. Nonetheless, Schneider also recognizes important differences between them, and he provides a nuanced and lucid interpretation of the differences. For example, he distinguishes between the “Garrisonian abolition-
ists,” who condemned the Constitution as an immoral covenant with hell until it was dissolved by the South’s secession, and the “political abolitionists” like Douglass who “stressed the connection between legality and morality, which led them to the paradoxical conclusion that slavery, was, in fact, unconstitutional” (128).

According to Schneider, “No one among Lincoln’s opponents subjected democracy to a more radical critique in view of indifference of the majority to a great moral wrong than did [John] Brown’s admirer Henry David Thoreau” (88). Most provocatively, Schneider takes issue with the conventional view of Thoreau as a social reformer by noting that the author of “On Civil Disobedience” was almost completely disengaged from politics. He contends that Thoreau is best characterized not as a reformer but as a radical individualist seeking self-emancipation. Vacillating between a deep skepticism about the prospects of politics and the hope for an enlightened minority to redeem the nation, Thoreau remained aloof from political participation. He sought to influence others through his writing and his personal example. Ultimately, Schneider finds Thoreau’s political skepticism self-defeating.

By contrast, William Lloyd Garrison was the paradigmatic social reformer. Schneider traces the development of Garrison from an uncompromising disunionist who criticized Lincoln and the Republicans to a “Lincoln Emancipationist” who aided the sixteenth president’s re-election in 1864. Notwithstanding this convergence, Schneider contends that Garrison could not fully cure himself of political immoderation. Before the war he endorsed the immoderate panacea of disunion; while during it, he was willing to embrace an unbounded use of executive power to achieve the desired political goal of emancipation.

Schneider concludes his examination of the abolitionists with perhaps the most complex figure amongst them: Frederick Douglass. He traces the development of Douglass’s position from a Garrisonian abolitionist to an “antislavery constitutionalist,” noting the superior political sense of the Rochester abolitionist over his Massachusetts colleague. Distinguishing between the two abolitionist camps, he states: “The Garrisonians stressed the dependence of slavery on law and condemned the Constitution; Douglass, along with other political abolitionists, stressed the lawless nature of slavery and exalted the Constitution as ‘warrant for the abolition of slavery in every state in the American Union’” (140). Although Douglass was correct in rejecting the southern view of the Constitution as a proslavery document, the rule of law nonetheless made concessions to the institution of slavery that could not be swept aside by either an appeal to higher law
or to even the most liberal construction of the document. Schneider’s discussion of Douglass is illuminating insofar as it goes; however, he fails to account for Douglass’s own frustration with politics as evinced by his willingness to embrace disunion in response to the execution of John Brown.

The book reaches a crescendo with Lincoln’s opposition to the Crittenden Compromise. Lincoln, who as a politician was not averse to compromise, opposed this particular compromise because it relinquished the core principle of the Republican Party and therefore constituted a breach of faith (167). This principled opposition reveals that Lincoln was not merely a pragmatist who made decisions on the basis of expedience, utility, or interest. On the contrary, there were moral limits that he would not transgress as a leader and principles that he would not surrender. He would risk war rather than surrender the core principle that animated his political engagement.

While Schneider’s book makes a fine contribution, it would have been enhanced by acknowledging recent Lincoln literature that covers some of the same ground. For example, in his discussion of Lincoln’s politics of emancipation, he fails to even reference Allen C. Guelzo’s recent and important work on the topic. Additionally, Lincoln’s political theology is conspicuously absent from the book. Lincoln’s defense of politics was also informed by an ultimate and more comprehensive vision of order and history that integrated the traditions of reason, revelation, and republicanism in defense of liberty and Union. Indeed, Lincoln was politically engaged with the theologians of his time. One thinks of his reply to the proslavery theology of Presbyterian Minister Frederick Ross. Both Mark A. Noll and Ronald C. White Jr. have done a marvelous job in revealing the theological context of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address as a reply to the political theology of the North and South. The Second Inaugural, perhaps Lincoln’s greatest speech, receives scant attention by Schneider.

Nonetheless, Schneider’s book is a welcome addition to Lincoln literature. He erudite shows that Lincoln’s defense of politics eschewed the extremes of his northern abolitionist and southern proslavery opponents alike by harmonizing the principles of the Declaration with the rule of law under the Constitution. Lincoln pursued a politics that was informed by higher moral considerations, but that neither conflated morality with law nor divorced the two. Rather, he wisely recognized the extent to which politics participates in morality while maintaining a distinct integrity of its own. This is a valuable lesson for our time. Schneider has done us a great service in shedding light on the character and nobility of politics through the example of a true master of the political art—Abraham Lincoln.