Review

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Abraham Lincoln was “a man of profound feeling, just and firm principles, and incorruptible integrity,” wrote Civil War general and politician Carl Schurz.¹ Lincoln was a prolific thinker and during his life was often lost in thought.

In writing *Lincoln’s Political Thought*, George Kateb, one of the most influential philosophers of liberalism, examined the one-million-Lincoln-utterance record to discuss in detail not only Lincoln’s political thought and its complexity but also his career and intense passion for equality. According to Kateb, Lincoln’s devotion to equality became a religious conviction.

Considering the concept of Union and the Constitution, Kateb believes that to save the Union, Lincoln destroyed the Constitution twice, by suspending it as a wartime measure and then by enacting the Thirteenth Amendment to abolish slavery. In the first instance the effort was to save the Constitution, and in the second it was to bring the document in line with the Declaration of Independence’s promises of equality. Kateb is both critical of and sympathetic to his subject. While his “intense admiration” (ix) of Lincoln did not disappear, the author writes that the “cumulative effect of his words leads me to less unmixed Lincoln than I began with.” Kateb’s conclusion is that his admiration of Lincoln was “now joined to some dismay” (ix). Though ultimately sympathetic, Kateb expresses disappointment in Lincoln’s legacy, a feeling that is understandable given his interpretation of the sixteenth president, the Founders, and the Constitution. Kateb argues that Lincoln’s reverence for the Founders and their constitution was misplaced given their sanction of “white privilege.” If read carefully, Lincoln’s invocation of the Bible and providence was actually a heterodox indictment of the traditional Judeo-Christian God. Kateb notes that the Second Inaugural Address actually gives “reason

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to hate God, the unforgiven father, or not to love him” (202). More praiseworthy for Kateb is Lincoln’s “master passion,” his conviction of the equality of human beings. Kateb sees, however, a disjunction between this passion for equality and the principles of the Founding. While he believed “that [Lincoln] was a great man, good man, and a good writer, there is no need to apologize for thinking that as president he made all the difference, if ever one person of politics could” (ix). The author’s analysis has nothing to do with Lincoln’s partisan politics, which was raw, ripe, and necessary for his success. This partisanship does not really interest the author, but what does engage him is the way Lincoln used words and wrote speeches. Kateb writes, “As a lawyer and a politician, he could be counted on to withhold his full meaning, and to engage in other sorts of distortion” (40). Lincoln “either was captivated by what he was saying or was afraid to look closely enough at it, or he did not want to insist on it. He wanted to leave it uncertain because he was uncertain, or certain but out of season” (40).

Lincoln believed that it was a mistake to think of “American exceptionalism,” as we believe we understand it today, because we fall short of the ideals envisioned in the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln thought that America was exceptional because it was founded on principles that guide our public life yet remain aspirational. This is why he saw the Declaration of Independence as fulfillment of a moral ideal. As Lincoln said, “It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land; but something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people in this country, but hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have an equal chance.”

For example, Lincoln’s deepest commitment was to “human equality” and opposition to slavery. But Mr. Kateb points out that “the abolition of slavery was not originally a tenet of Lincoln’s political religion,” (53) and while the president “always hated (and not merely disliked) slavery,” he “never lost his fear of the consequences of immediate abolition” (171).

As for the Constitution, the author believed it was “fundamentally a constitution of slavery” (110) in Lincoln’s time for white Americans and “only apparently a constitution of freedom” (105).

In some speeches, the author asserts, Lincoln defended questionable concepts even though he was an opponent of slavery.

Kateb contends that President Lincoln’s thoughts were of both “military necessity” and “political necessity.” Regarding “political necessity,” Lincoln thought that the framers of the Constitution, who Lincoln had admired since he was a child, “acquiesce[d] [to] the entrenchment of slavery” when drafting the constitution (111). In order to rectify the Founding Fathers’ constitutional contradictions, Lincoln used his war powers through “military necessity” to issue his Emancipation Proclamations. In these instances, Kateb argues that “Lincoln chose to override the Constitution and then to justify what he did” (145). However, Kateb ignores the rationale of seizing the “property” of the enemy during wartime, which is the line of thought Lincoln used to justify his emancipation war orders. Slaves were property, their value placed next to their names in the tax assessors’ books. Kateb recognizes that Lincoln “could not have stayed in politics if he had not believed there was such a method” to end slavery, “or if he did not at least say that he believed there was such a method” (123). The philosopher pejoratively points out that like “everyone active in politics on the anti-slavery side, he had no strategy that could work in the system.” The problem with this point is that Lincoln’s political rivals, the Democratic Party and its main champion, Stephen A. Douglas, “had a strategy that appeared to work: popular sovereignty” (126). Believing that African Americans had no rights, Douglas “could make their human status subject to popular will.” But Kateb’s decision to mostly ignore politics creates a vacuum in many of his theories. At times, the book meanders down abstruse corridors of the author’s own speculations. After all, politics in America is the be-all and end-all. President Lincoln was forced to use many concepts like race, geography, strategy, and language in a time of war where the very survival of the Union was at stake. Lincoln’s personal and political strategy in dealing with the South and slavery went much farther than mere words the thrust of Kateb’s book.

Kateb’s sympathy lies with those abolitionists who believed that the Constitution sanctioned a national right. He uncritically accepts Roger B. Taney’s verdict in *Dred Scott* that the Constitution was a proslavery document in this sense. This reading does not do justice to the Founders, to the Constitution, and to Lincoln. Kateb does not take seriously the antislavery principles of the Founders, a key element of the Republican Party’s ideology. At Cooper Union, Lincoln quoted Madison himself, who on August 25 at the Constitutional Convention stated that he “thought it wrong to admit in the Constitution the idea
that there could be property in men.” Frederick Douglass himself, the most prominent black abolitionist, made much of the fact that the Constitution nowhere mentioned the word *slave* or *slavery*. While it is true that Founders like Jefferson were hypocritical to hold slaves, the very universality of the principles that they declared contained an inner logic and power that enabled Lincoln to claim the moral high ground. In reducing the Founders and the Constitution to Taney’s pro-slavery interpretation, Kateb creates too far a chasm between Lincoln and both. He does not take seriously the motto “freedom national, slavery local,” which became the core doctrine of the Republican Party. Moreover, if Kateb really reduces inalienable rights to white privilege then there could be no fixed precedent for Lincoln to oppose Stephen A. Douglas’s doctrine of popular sovereignty. Kateb does not take the power of ideas as seriously as Lincoln did. The failure to live up to a standard does not render that standard meaningless. Lincoln’s statesmanship was predicated on preserving not just any Union but a Union dedicated to the universal principles of the Declaration and the Constitution as its framework. Since he disapproves of the Constitution and yet approves of Lincoln’s passion for equality, Kateb is ambivalent about the core of Lincoln’s statesmanship. Furthermore, Kateb’s claim that Lincoln destroyed the Constitution is an opinion that does not engage the alternative viewpoints of other scholars like Herman Belz and Daniel Farber.

Kateb acknowledges the height of the trials that President Lincoln faced during the years he held office. However, Kateb contends that Lincoln’s presidency illustrates it is impossible to always do the right things with the right justifications in a democracy. Though we may disagree with Kateb’s answers, he nonetheless raises the most fundamental and probing questions about Lincoln’s political thought and statesmanship. Many libraries are filled not only with Lincoln’s writings, but with uncountable books regarding the man. Each book reveals more material about his life, mind, works, thoughts, ideals, morals and ethics. Certainly, this volume shows that there is still much more to learn about our sixteenth President. In tackling the big questions, it is a work worth wrestling with.