Review Essay

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There was little in Abraham Lincoln’s brief congressional career that distinguished him as a politician bound for greatness. As William C. Harris observes in his new book, Lincoln's Rise to the Presidency, after Lincoln’s single term in the U.S. House of Representatives ended in 1849, he “seemed destined for political obscurity” (57). Despite being an early and enthusiastic supporter of Zachary Taylor’s presidential candidacy, Lincoln was disappointed by his lack of influence when the new administration began distributing the patronage. No one, including Lincoln, could have imagined that in twelve years he would be inaugurated as president during the greatest crisis in the history of the republic. How was Lincoln able to go from a Whig lawyer virtually unknown outside of Illinois to the presidential nominee of a new party that was perceived as such a threat to the South that his election alone prompted seven states to renounce their allegiance to the Union? Lincoln’s meteoric rise to prominence on the national political stage during the 1850s has long been a subject of interest for students of Lincoln and of the causes of the Civil War. Now, Harris and John C. Waugh, in his book One Man Great Enough, attempt to shed new light on this crucial aspect of Lincoln’s development.

Building upon the argument in his prize-winning book on Lincoln and Reconstruction, Harris defines Lincoln as a conservative, and he claims that Lincoln’s “conservative strategy against slavery” enabled him to emerge as a nationally recognized leader of the Republican Party (1). Harris takes issue with scholars who have described Lincoln as a “moderate” opponent of slavery because that term was not applied to politicians during Lincoln’s time, and it fails to place Lincoln’s ideas in an appropriate historical context. Rather, Harris accepts Lincoln’s own description of himself as a conservative and defines Lincoln’s brand of conservatism as an ideology that “embodied a progressive
spirit that placed a premium upon equality of opportunity for all and viewed slavery as morally wrong” (2). According to Harris, Lincoln perceived slavery as “the great obstacle to the fulfillment of the Founders’ purposes for America,” and his opposition to slavery was therefore anchored in a conservative framework that sought a return to the principles and intentions of the Founding Fathers (2–3). As Harris demonstrates, Lincoln claimed on numerous occasions during the 1850s that the Declaration of Independence was more than simply a document that justified separation from Great Britain. For Lincoln, the Declaration represented a set of principles that transcended time and space. Lincoln’s expansive reading of the Declaration held that the Founding Fathers intended for the proposition that “all men are created equal” to apply to all men. As Lincoln stated in a July 10, 1858 speech at Chicago, this assertion of equality was “the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.”1 While Lincoln frequently invoked the Founding Fathers and claimed he was only seeking to restore what proponents of slavery threatened, the conservative label may not sufficiently encapsulate the nuances and potential implications of Lincoln’s rhetoric.

There is abundant evidence, however, of Lincoln’s seemingly conservative opposition to slavery. Harris suggests that the “germ” of this opposition might be contained in the March 3, 1837, protest that Lincoln and Dan Stone registered in the Illinois House of Representatives (18). In explaining why they had voted against resolutions that condemned abolitionists and acknowledged a “sacred” right to own slaves guaranteed by the Constitution, Lincoln and Stone claimed that slavery was an institution “founded on both injustice and bad policy” but blamed abolitionist agitation for making the problem worse. Waugh also sees great significance in the protest, as he devotes the prologue of his book to it and concludes that the House protest was where Lincoln’s “road to the Civil War” began. Waugh and Harris interpret the protest as evidence not only of Lincoln’s consistent moral opposition to slavery but also of his aversion to radical abolitionism and his belief that the federal government had no authority to interfere with slavery in the states. Despite the significance that Harris and Waugh attach to the 1837 document, they erroneously refer to it as a “resolution.” Harris also incorrectly claims that the measure

was “overwhelmingly defeated in the legislature” (18), when in fact Lincoln and Stone were exercising a privilege that allowed them to file a protest in the official House Journal that explained why they had voted against the resolutions.

Lincoln was apparently under no external pressure either to vote against the 1837 resolutions on slavery or to clarify the reasons for his opposition. Given the political climate in Illinois, Harris and Waugh point out that Lincoln took a risk by making his moral opposition to slavery known. The protest indicates that Lincoln was willing to take a principled stand even if it was not necessarily in his best political interests to do so. It also supports Lincoln’s later claims that he had “always hated slavery.” Yet Lincoln also acknowledged that prior to the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, he had “been quiet” about slavery and viewed it as a “minor question” because he “believed that everybody was against it.”2 By his own admission, Lincoln evinced little interest in the contentious issue of Texas annexation, and he did not join with opponents of the Mexican War who viewed the conflict as further evidence of a slave-power conspiracy.

As a member of the Thirtieth Congress Lincoln served largely as a spectator during the rather frequent and often heated debates that occurred over the issue of slavery. He voted for the Wilmot Proviso, which would have prevented slavery from expanding into any territory gained from Mexico, but he generally opposed the efforts of the few abolitionists in the House to inject their agenda into the proceedings. Lincoln was appalled by the presence of slavery in the nation’s capital, yet he voted against resolutions to repeal all laws related to slavery in Washington and to the conducting of a referendum on slavery that would have allowed the District’s adult male residents, including African Americans, to participate.

In the 1837 protest Lincoln claimed that Congress had the authority to abolish slavery in Washington, D.C., provided the measure was approved by the District’s citizens. Near the end of his term in Congress he drafted a plan for gradual, compensated emancipation in Washington that would have freed children born to enslaved mothers after January 1, 1850. Those born prior to that date could be emancipated if their owners accepted payment from the federal government. The plan required local authorities to apprehend fugitive slaves, allowed federal employees from slave states to bring personal servants into the capital, and would not take effect unless it was approved by the District’s white male citizens. Lincoln did not formally introduce his

2. Ibid., 2: 492, 514.
plan after learning that local support for the measure had eroded due to the efforts of some of his Southern colleagues. Nevertheless, Waugh sees this as a “notable antislavery statement” (163). Harris, on the other hand, writes that Lincoln’s attempt to reach a compromise “seemed to have conceded a great deal of moral weight on the issue” (54). Joshua Giddings, as Harris admits, did not see it that way and praised Lincoln’s proposal in 1860. Harris doubts the plan had any real chance of success and concludes that it provides evidence of Lincoln’s “subordination of the slavery issue to Whig party unity and to practical political realities” (55). While that may be true, the episode also further demonstrates Lincoln’s willingness to try and eradicate a wrong even when there was no apparent pressure on him to take such action.

Unlike Harris, who agrees with Don E. Fehrenbacher’s conclusion that Lincoln’s “retirement” from politics between 1849 and 1854 has been exaggerated, Waugh overstates the level of Lincoln’s disengagement. After mentioning Lincoln’s 1848 visit to Niagara Falls, Waugh claims that the “Niagara of his ambition had run dry” (167). Though Lincoln focused much of his energy on his law practice during this period, his 1852 eulogy of Henry Clay provides abundant proof that his political ambition had not diminished. Lincoln praised Clay’s efforts to preserve the Union and did not express any dissatisfaction with the Compromise of 1850, even though the New Mexico and Utah territories were organized without reference to slavery. The new fugitive slave law proved to be the most controversial aspect of the compromise. Considering the various crises that arose as a result of this draconian measure, which Lincoln defended as a constitutional necessity, one must question whether he was being a bit disingenuous when he claimed that slavery was on the path to ultimate extinction before Stephen A. Douglas engineered the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. Lincoln praised Clay’s efforts to have Kentucky enact a gradual emancipation law; however, he was also aware that Clay’s proposal had made little headway. The South was not only less inclined to consider emancipation but was also even more determined to obtain guarantees that its peculiar institution would be protected by the federal government. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was one such assurance, and while African Americans in the North formed vigilance committees and orators denounced the law as effectively nationalizing slavery, Lincoln’s acceptance of the act provides perhaps the most convincing support of Harris’s contention that Lincoln’s opposition to slavery was grounded in conservatism.

According to Lincoln, the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act
“aroused” him “as he had never been before.” Why had Lincoln not objected to a new fugitive slave law and the prospect of slavery expanding to New Mexico and Utah, yet was so troubled by the repeal of the Missouri Compromise line that prohibited the extension of slavery into the remaining territory from the Louisiana Purchase that lay above 36 degrees, 30 minutes north latitude? Waugh and Harris steer a middle course in explaining Lincoln’s motives for taking the stump in 1854, as they see the decision as a product of both genuine conviction and ambition. In analyzing Lincoln’s Peoria speech of October 16, 1854, Harris argues that Lincoln’s moral condemnation of slavery was coupled with “a conservative position on the laws protecting the institution and on the issue of black equality” (70). Harris sees Lincoln as primarily concerned with avoiding any association with radical abolitionism, in order to attract as many as possible to the anti-Nebraska standard. Lincoln’s conciliatory language regarding the South and his assurances that he was only seeking a restoration of the Missouri Compromise line and not the repeal of the Fugitive Slave Act or the abolition of slavery in the states, support that interpretation. Lincoln’s appeal to the legacy of the Founding Fathers and Declaration of Independence would also seem to strengthen the case for Lincoln’s conservatism, yet in his critique of popular sovereignty Lincoln asserted that African Americans were human beings and therefore entitled to the same natural rights as persons of European descent. The idea that African Americans were included in the Declaration’s proposition that “all men are created equal” was anything but a conservative argument in 1854 and one that radical abolitionists had been making for years.

Lincoln’s lofty rhetoric regarding the natural equality of all men made him vulnerable to attacks from opponents who charged that he was a proponent of the complete social and political equality of the races. Lincoln responded by drawing a distinction between natural rights and civil rights. On numerous occasions he denied that he was in favor of elevating African Americans to a position of complete equality and claimed that just because he did not want an African American woman for a slave did not mean that he wanted her as a wife. Lincoln’s views on race have attracted much attention in recent years, and while both Harris and Waugh acknowledge that Lincoln advocated colonization (Waugh confusingly refers to it as “recolonization”) as a solution to the race problem, Harris is much more critical of Lincoln than Waugh. Though Harris eschews the term “moderate” because it was not applied to politicians in Lincoln’s day, he has no such reservations about applying the term “racist” to Lincoln’s state-
ments, which he also characterizes as “deplorable” and “embarrassing” (4). Harris qualifies this assessment by pointing out that “in the context of racial sentiment in Illinois” Lincoln’s views on race were “mild and open to change” (86). Harris also does not believe that Lincoln was “the conniving racist that black writer Lerone Bennett and other modern critics have labeled him” (86). In discussing the oft-quoted and now infamous remarks Lincoln made on race in his debate with Douglas at Charleston, Harris argues that Lincoln was attempting to assure conservatives that he was not a radical advocate of racial equality, an issue which he “could not appear to equivocate” on in central Illinois (131). Given the importance that is currently placed on Lincoln’s statement at Charleston, it is curious that Waugh fails to mention it in his discussion of the Charleston debate.

By no means should Lincoln be given a pass for his remarks at Charleston or for some of his other comments on race, but it would be helpful if Harris further contextualized Lincoln’s position by providing some additional evidence of what his Democratic opponents were saying. One of Douglas’s primary modes of attack against Lincoln and the “Black Republicans” was that they favored racial amalgamation—a position that was well beyond the pale throughout Illinois and rest of the country in the 1850s and a charge Lincoln could not afford to go unanswered. Harris follows Douglas in claiming that Lincoln’s statements changed depending upon his location in the state. Since Charleston was in the vital central region of Illinois, Harris reasons that Lincoln could not afford to assert that African Americans were included in the Declaration. Though Lincoln did not make this point at Charleston, he made it in other places throughout central Illinois, including a notable speech a few weeks prior at Lewistown. Following the debate at Charleston, Lincoln did not relent from his position that African Americans were entitled to natural rights, and he placed an even greater emphasis upon slavery as a moral issue than he had earlier in the campaign. Lincoln’s remarks at Charleston and other similar statements on race are regrettable and indefensible today, but his inclusive interpretation of the Declaration, though ostensibly based upon a conservative appeal to the past, raised a variety of possibilities for change.

Just as there was no apparent pressure to issue a protest in 1837 or develop a plan to end slavery in Washington, Lincoln did not need to make a case for the natural rights of African Americans in order to combat Douglas’s doctrine of popular sovereignty, especially since he claimed he was only in favor of restricting the spread of slavery into the territories. As evidenced by the House Divided speech, Lincoln’s
rhetoric far exceeded this modest proposition. Harris maintains that the House Divided speech “did not contradict his earlier conservative position on slavery” since Lincoln did not advocate any measures to interfere with slavery in the states (94). Granted Lincoln was vague on the details, but was it a truly conservative position to assert that the country could not endure permanently half slave and half free and predict that slavery would either face “ultimate extinction” or become lawful everywhere? These propositions left little room for compromise and did not seek to perpetuate the status quo. The House Divided speech, as Harris points out, emphasized the idea that the Democratic policy on slavery, if allowed to go unchecked, would result in the nationalization of slavery. Harris is quite right that Lincoln was naïve to suggest that slavery would die a natural death if it were contained to the states where it already existed, but Harris does not seem to take Lincoln’s fears of slavery being nationalized as seriously as Lincoln did. Beginning in 1854, Lincoln attacked Douglas’s alleged indifference to slavery as a “lullaby” argument that was preparing the North to accept slavery everywhere. After all, if people believed there was no real distinction between an African American slave and any other species of property, such as a hog or cranberries, then why should anyone care whether slavery was voted up or down? While Lincoln warned of the likelihood of a sequel to the Dred Scott decision that would have made slavery legal in the states, Harris doubts the Taney court would have rendered such a ruling. Regardless, events in Kansas and Dred Scott only confirmed Lincoln’s belief that the country was on a dangerous path and in dire need of a course correction.

As Lincoln stated in the final joint debate with Douglas at Alton, the “real issue” in the campaign was the “eternal struggle” between right and wrong—the “common right of humanity” versus the “tyrannical principle” that one man may rule over another without his consent.3 He was unwilling to propose measures to ameliorate the condition of African Americans and advised Republicans not to make an issue of the Fugitive Slave Act, yet he clearly believed the country was at a vital crossroads. Perhaps Lincoln’s greatest talent and what made him both attractive to Republicans and frightening to slaveholding Southerners was his ability to combine a conservative appeal to the past with an uncompromising vision of the future. In his Cooper Union speech, for example, Lincoln disavowed John Brown and argued that his own position on slavery was truly conservative because it was in accordance with that of the Founding Fathers.

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3. Ibid., 3: 315.
According to Lincoln’s view, the Founders intended slavery to end and placed it on the course of ultimate extinction. This interpretation of the Founding remains open for debate, and Lincoln was purposefully vague on how the end of slavery would come about. Despite his attempts to assure Southerners that it would happen without Republican interference with slavery in the states, he also urged Republicans not to surrender their conviction that slavery was wrong. Something had to give, and while Harris makes a valid point that Lincoln underestimated the seriousness of Southern threats to secede, he overestimates the consistency of Lincoln’s “goodwill” towards the South. There is a clear difference between Lincoln’s attitude regarding the South in 1854, when he claimed that Northerners would not behave any differently if placed in similar circumstances, and 1860 when he chastised Southerners for misrepresenting the Republican position and making threats to destroy the Union if a Republican were elected president.

As the Union began to fall apart following the November 1860 presidential election, Lincoln wrote few letters and said very little publicly prior to his inauguration. Privately, Lincoln urged Republicans in Congress not to compromise on the issue of slavery in the territories, for as he wrote to Lyman Trumbull on December 10, 1860: “The tug has to come, & better now, than any time hereafter.” While Harris is critical of Lincoln’s naivete regarding the secession crisis and believes “no compromise would have satisfied the lower southern states,” he questions the wisdom of the president-elect’s “masterly inactivity” during the secession winter. Harris believes that Lincoln should have followed the advice of some of his correspondents and issued “a carefully worded printed declaration” that would have reassured people of his conservative intentions regarding slavery in the states (5, 294–95). According to Harris, such a document “could have had a salutary effect upon opinion in the upper and border South” (295).

This is a debatable point, and Harris does not mention that Lincoln prepared such a document following a conference with Duff Green, who visited Springfield on behalf of President Buchanan. In his statement, Lincoln acknowledged the “right of each state to order and control its own domestic institutions according to its own judgment exclusively” as “essential to that balance of powers, on which the perfection, and endurance of our political fabric depends.” Lincoln gave Green permission to publish the document if six U.S. senators from the Deep South signed a declaration urging all efforts at secession to

4. Ibid., 4: 150.
cease “until some act, deemed to be violative of our rights, shall be
done by the incoming administration.” Though Lincoln may have
maintained a vain hope that the secession crisis could be resolved
without violence, the Duff Green incident further demonstrates his
political acuity and his unwillingness to be bullied into a corner.

Lincoln’s Rise to the Presidency offers a thorough and provocative
account of Lincoln’s path from little known ex-congressman to the
White House. Following an introductory chapter on Lincoln’s early
life that includes a refutation of C. A. Tripp’s thesis concerning Lin-
coln’s sexuality, Harris focuses on the period from Lincoln’s time in
Congress to his inauguration on March 4, 1861. The book includes
chapters devoted to Lincoln’s term in Congress; his political revival
in the early 1850s; the Lincoln-Douglas Debates; the 1860 Republi-
can national convention; the presidential campaign; the selection of
cabinet members; Lincoln’s activities during the secession crisis; and
his journey from Springfield to Washington in February 1861. Har-
riss displays a command of the secondary literature and important
primary source collections. Much of the book is drawn from research
in The Collected Works and the online edition of the Lincoln Papers at
the Library Congress (an incorrect url for this collection is given in
the end notes). The scope of Harris’s work and his conclusions make
Lincoln’s Rise to the Presidency an ideal complement to other key books
on the topic, particularly Robert W. Johannsen’s Lincoln, the South
and Slavery: The Political Dimension (1991) and Don E. Fehrenbacher’s
Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850’s (1962). As Harris’s numerous
citations of Prelude to Greatness indicate, Fehrenbacher’s work remains
the standard after more than forty years.

While Harris’s work will be of interest to both scholars and Lincoln
enthusiasts, Waugh’s colloquial style and frequent use of quotations
from both Lincoln and his contemporaries indicate that his book was
written with a more general audience in mind. Waugh relies a great
deal upon Fehrenbacher’s Recollected Words and Wilson and Davis’s
Herndon’s Informants; but he does not explain his criteria for assessing
the veracity of these recollections, and he apparently accepted this
reminiscent material uncritically. One Man Great Enough covers a lot
of ground and is essentially a biography of Lincoln that begins with
his youth and concludes shortly after his inauguration in 1861. Those
with some prior knowledge of the subject may be frustrated by the
paucity of new insight, primarily a consequence of the book’s brisk
pace. Waugh attempts to cover so much ground that complex issues

5. Ibid., 4: 162–63.
such as the Lecompton Constitution, Lincoln’s support of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, and Douglas’s shifting position on the Missouri Compromise cannot be explained or analyzed in much depth. The book is also hampered by the frequency of minor errors, which individually do not amount to much, but collectively lead one to conclude that the editing process was a bit slipshod. Lincoln turned thirty-two in 1841, not thirty-three (105); the Lincoln-Douglas Debates were each three hours in length, not six (281); and the Missouri Compromise did not occur “a third of a decade” after the Northwest Ordinance was approved (210). There is also some confusion regarding Denton Offutt’s first name, the name of the proprietor of the Washington boardinghouse where Lincoln stayed during his time in Congress, and the middle initials of William H. Herndon, John M. Palmer, and Herschel V. Johnson (27, 153, 169, 316, 341). Stephen Douglas makes regular appearances throughout the book, and one wonders if Waugh initially set out to write a dual biography of Lincoln and his long-time rival. Given the important role Douglas played in Lincoln’s political development, Waugh’s comparisons are instructive, and considering both Waugh’s target audience and Douglas’s current place in popular memory, it is unfortunate that the Little Giant does not have an even larger presence in the work.

Waugh’s Lincoln is a man destined for greatness, but his frequent use of Lincoln’s words and those of people who knew him brings Lincoln alive in a way that should appeal to readers who know only the Lincoln that one encounters at the Greek temple in Washington, D.C. Harris offers a more focused and nuanced interpretation of Lincoln’s rise to the presidency that was anything but preordained. His thesis regarding Lincoln’s conservative strategy against slavery is stimulating and merits careful consideration from Lincoln students. While Lincoln framed much of his criticism of slavery in conservative terms, his strong moral condemnation of slavery, combined with his growing belief that the nation must become either all slave or all free, indicate that he envisioned a republic that would be a very different place than the one established by the Founding Fathers.