
The resurgence of Lincoln scholarship in the past decade has produced a number of impressive one-volume biographies. To that list one must now add Richard J. Carwardine’s *Lincoln*, an entry in the Longman series Profiles in Power. Carwardine is a British scholar and the book was published in the United Kingdom, but it reveals the author’s mastery of the nuances of antebellum American politics and culture. Lincoln scholars will find the familiar topics covered in their depth and complexity, with probably at least a few surprising interconnections among topics and themes. The general reader will find the book sophisticated in its presentation yet easily accessible.

Carwardine’s central project is to uncover and explain the sources of Lincoln’s power. Unfortunately, power is never precisely defined. Carwardine uses it to mean about the same thing as agency, or the ability to accomplish one’s goals. This is not necessarily the result of any office one occupies but rather derives from the personal resources of character and intellect that an individual brings to a task. These resources provide the basis for one’s authority and legitimacy.

Carwardine argues that there were three principal bases of Lincoln’s power: his personal ambition, his sensitivity to public opinion and ability to adapt to it, and his skill in using the political party and other communication networks (xii). Carwardine traces those sources of power chronologically, not thematically, through Lincoln’s career. Among the sources of opinion to which Lincoln was especially sensitive, says Carwardine, was religious opinion. He maintains that Lincoln was able to unite “appeals to Protestant millennialism and to Enlightenment rationalism” (xiii), thereby enlisting the force of spirituality in politics in behalf of his cause.

The first chapter traces Lincoln’s career before 1854 and attributes much of his driving force to personal ambition. It generally supports the statement attributed to William H. Herndon that Lincoln’s ambi-

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tion was an “engine that knew no rest.” And it is consistent with a reading of the 1838 Lyceum address that sees it as foretelling Lincoln’s own ambition to exceed the achievements of the nation’s founders. Carwardine explores Lincoln’s beginnings in Whig politics, explaining that he left Congress in 1849 after one term not because he had lost favor with the voters but because of a prior resolution—which he himself had initiated—that congressmen from the Springfield district would not be re-elected. This resolution had been offered at the 1843 Whig convention after Lincoln lost the nomination to John J. Hardin.

Carwardine also traces the origins of Lincoln’s antislavery convictions, refuting the argument that they were a product only of the introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Noting that slavery was on the periphery of Lincoln’s consciousness while he was in state politics, Carwardine nonetheless observes that Lincoln’s beliefs were shaped both by personal revulsion at the actions of slaveowners and slave-traders and by the economic principles of the Whig party. Slavery stifled what Whigs saw as the natural human impulse to improve one’s condition through individual enterprise. This foreshadowed the later argument that Lincoln would make in defense of equality: people were not equal in all respects, but in the right to eat the bread one’s own hand had earned, blacks were every bit the equal of whites. Yet Lincoln did not castigate Southern slaveowners, because, Carwardine maintains, he believed they too were caught up in an evil system. He assumed that they also abhorred slavery, although they did not know what to do about it. This early belief, of course, anticipates both why Lincoln underestimated the threat of secession and why he proposed a lenient plan of reconstruction.

Somewhat less convincing is Carwardine’s account of the religious influences on Lincoln during these early years. He correctly observes that Lincoln’s religious beliefs evolved so that he was more responsive to the orthodox Protestantism of the 1850s than of the 1830s. Even in the 1850s, however, he notes that Lincoln was more affected by the Unitarian views of William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker. In focusing especially on Parker’s influence, Carwardine echoes the claims advanced by both Garry Wills and Ronald Fornieri.

But Lincoln was also strongly fatalistic. Carwardine attributes to him the belief that slavery was doomed as a punishment for national sin. This is a view that Lincoln expressed in 1862, confronted by the harsh reality of a devastating and inconclusive war, but there is scant evidence to project it backwards to the Lincoln of the early 1850s. No more satisfying is Carwardine’s resolution of the resulting paradox: If
Lincoln believed that slavery was doomed anyway, why did he exert himself to prevent its spread? Carwardine explains that Lincoln fused fatalism and activism by regarding himself as an instrument for the achievement of God’s wishes, but he makes clear that this too was a belief Lincoln adopted during the war, not during the early 1850s, the period that Carwardine is trying to explain.

The transition between the young and the more mature Lincoln occurs with the 1854 Peoria speech—and appropriately so—since this was the speech that returned Lincoln to politics and made opposition to the spread of slavery his central issue. In the second chapter Carwardine focuses on the period between 1854 and the Senate campaign of 1858, and during this period he locates the prime source of Lincoln’s power as the ability to discern and to adapt to public opinion. Lincoln saw a reciprocal relationship between the people and their representatives. Thus he abandoned the doctrine that state legislatures could instruct representatives how to vote, adopting instead the Burkeian view that a representative owes his constituents his best judgment. Accordingly, he believed that politicians could shape public opinion, but that to do so they needed first to understand it so that they could tailor their appeals to it. In this view, Lincoln anticipated a mid-twentieth-century notion of the function of rhetoric as bringing about the mutual adjustment of people and ideas.

Lincoln was a gifted orator, although he was not a powerful speaker or a commanding physical presence. Rather, his power stemmed from his sincerity, an ability to empathize with his audience, and the clarity and directness of his appeals to his listeners’ understanding and rational judgment. These skills equipped him well for the politics of the day, in which parties appealed to voters less on their ideological principles and institutional structure than on what they could do for their supporters (56). His personal appeal, Carwardine notes, was rooted in the fact that he “never lost that rapport with country folk” (47).

The content of Lincoln’s appeal to the people was grounded in the judgment that slavery was morally wrong. He saw a fundamental dividing line in this respect between the advocates and opponents of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The former viewed slavery as a matter of moral indifference, and the latter viewed it as morally wrong. Stephen Douglas preferred to focus on race, engaging in the racist prejudice of the times. Lincoln generally did not dispute Douglas about this, and he occasionally participated in race baiting on his own. Instead he invoked the evils of slavery, always emphasizing that opposition to slavery did not entail a commitment to racial equality. He made
statements, such as his opening remarks at the Charleston debate, that contemporary audiences will find embarrassingly racist. Yet those statements not only were advanced for Lincoln’s time but they created a rhetorical space in which he could keep his political aspirations viable. In general, Carwardine’s account of Lincoln’s ability both to interpret and to modify public opinion is cogent and compelling.

During the period between the senatorial campaign and Lincoln’s election to the presidency, the primary source of his power appeared to be his ability to work the levers of the emerging Republican party. According to Carwardine, Lincoln labored actively to make himself better known to party members; his efforts to secure publication of the debates was one means toward that end. He also understood that if Republicans were to create a strong national party, they must harmonize their differences. For that reason he argued against local parties holding fast to their own platforms when they would cause unnecessary division among Republicans by being unacceptable to a national electorate. Lincoln also saw parties as serving a larger moral purpose and recognized that the Republican party benefited from the fact that it had inherited the Whig moniker of being “the Christian party in politics” (91).

Carwardine’s account of the 1860 election is particularly thorough. He recounts the successful efforts of Richard Oglesby to create the image of Lincoln as the “rail splitter.” He describes the political benefit to Lincoln of keeping his opposition to the Know-Nothings private, unlike Seward who had lambasted them in public. He explains how Lincoln turned his lack of previous experience into a virtue by espousing simple government. He analyzes how the 1860 Republican platform melded appeals to conservative nationalism, to champions of economic enterprise through work, and to antislavery Protestants. Most significantly, he refutes the widely held belief that Lincoln won in 1860 only because the opposition vote was divided among three candidates—a view that awards Lincoln only a very limited mandate. But by analyzing the election results, Carwardine convincingly argues that Lincoln would have prevailed even against a single opponent, and therefore that his victory should be viewed as decisive.

Even so, however, electoral victory conveyed no immediate power. Carwardine devotes an entire chapter to the period between Lincoln’s election and the end of his first year in office. He describes the central problem of this period as “confronting the limits of power,” partly because Lincoln had no power during the interregnum and partly because he needed to establish the credibility of his leadership upon taking office. He misread and undervalued Southern threats of seces-
sion, but once it came he maintained a consistent position. He would not be the first to go to war, yet he would prevent any further erosion of the Union. Lincoln was successful in achieving these goals, placing the onus of the conflict on the South. He was also successful in holding the border states for the Union, one of his primary objectives during the early months of the war. This goal constrained his actions. For example, Lincoln’s sensitivity to border-state public opinion required him to revoke Frémont’s emancipation order. Nor was Lincoln’s policy entirely consistent. He imposed a blockade against the rebel states, for example, which is an act of war and which seemingly undermined his claim to be only suppressing domestic insurrection. Carwardine hints at the instability of Lincoln’s early wartime policy by acknowledging that it was successful yet noting that, as the conflict continued, Lincoln would need to redefine the purposes of the war in order “to inspire the devotion of the mass of instinctive Unionists in the face of setbacks, suffering, and loss” (185).

The power to define the situation, Carwardine believes, was the essence of Lincoln’s wartime power. He devotes two chapters to the war years, one focusing on Lincoln’s changing objectives and the other on the means for achieving them. As he has elsewhere in the book, he takes issue with David Donald’s characterization of Lincoln as a passive president, maintaining that he never lost focus on his essential strategy. He had to find the right moment to redefine the war for the Union as a war against slavery, and his great achievement was “to take a stethoscope to Union opinion and read it with such skill that he timed to perfection his redefinition of national purpose” (193). By late 1862, Carwardine maintains, a new consensus had developed and Lincoln heeded it. On this reading, the colonization proposals of 1862 become not a sincere offering but a dramatization of the limits placed on Lincoln’s maneuverability by the older understanding of the Union, hence conveying the need for a new conception of the war. Proposing colonization at that late date would demonstrate his desire to send slavery into retreat while revealing the limitations on his power to do so. It was the redefinition of the war aims, Carwardine implies, that naturally led to the Emancipation Proclamation once the colonization proposals had recaptured the political center for Lincoln and made clear to moderates that he was not a dangerous radical. Meanwhile, Lincoln was coming increasingly to see emancipation as mandated by God and necessary to abate the terrible punishment represented by the war.

Although this account rings true in many respects, it is too neat an explanation. To be sure, Lincoln began by regarding emancipation
as constitutionally impermissible, then saw it as a means to military victory, and finally came to view it as an end in itself. To be sure, the unrelenting pace of the war produced a radicalization in war aims. But Carwardine’s account makes it seem as though Lincoln’s purpose was clear all along and that his skill lay in finding just the right moment when public opinion was ready for him. That view is at odds with the earlier claim that Lincoln shaped as well as reflected public opinion. It exalts Lincoln beyond what the evidence warrants. Carwardine’s evidence is equally compatible with the contrary hypothesis contained in Lincoln’s 1864 letter to Albert Hedges, “I claim not to have controlled events, but confess frankly that events have controlled me.” In this version, Lincoln’s genius lies less in his calculation than in his adaptability. This view does not necessarily portray Lincoln as passive, but it does question the degree to which he started with a clear conception of purpose and then imposed it on events.

If redefinition of the situation was Lincoln’s great achievement, then it follows that his principal task was rhetorical: mobilizing support among the Northern population, or, as Carwardine puts it, “to encourage, nurture, and sustain a potent Union patriotism” (249). His methods involved persuasion, drawing on “a formidable network of government and voluntary agencies” (249). Unlike his pre-presidential years, he very seldom gave public speeches but instead relied heavily on newspapers and pamphlets. He drew on the idea of Union, which had both political and religious symbolism. Carwardine especially emphasizes the patriotism of evangelicals and other religious bodies. Lincoln was receptive to a religious interpretation of the war in which emancipation served as atonement for sin and as a means of national redemption. Carwardine maintains that the Democrats in 1864 were never able to counter this appeal, whereas Lincoln was able to use it to unite the diverse elements of the Republican Party.

A brief concluding chapter identifies Lincoln’s “power in death,” explaining that his martyrdom gained power “from its Christian, vicarious character” (310), which made it possible to magnify the good Lincoln embodied and the evil of the assassination. Finally, Carwardine maintains that Lincoln’s legacy in both life and death was “an enhanced and ambitious nationalism” (312).

Carwardine’s arguments are intriguing. There is much to say in behalf of the thesis that Lincoln was remarkably able both to read and to shape public opinion. There is an increasing body of scholarship on the role of religion in Lincoln’s worldview. And a focus on ambition does help one to see continuities across the span of Lincoln’s life. The underlying assumption that the effective use of power is understood
by exploring its roots is also borne out by this account. But the book’s defect is also the consequence of its virtues. In positing fundamental continuity, Carwardine implies a greater sense of plan and purpose than the evidence warrants, and he minimizes the role of changing circumstances. Lincoln was active, but he was probably reactive as much as proactive. While he sometimes moved to shape public opinion, at other times he followed it. While Lincoln’s record can be probed for religious influences, as this and other recent writing has done, Carwardine often gives those influences too great a role compared with other influences that also were operating on Lincoln.

In short, in the course of defending his argument, sometimes Carwardine takes the argument too far, so that the conclusion is overdetermined. That does not happen often, however, and the book’s great strengths are the comprehensiveness and detail with which situations are described and the linkage of Lincoln’s position to the sources of his power. And, while even those steeped in U.S. culture sometimes have difficulty coming to grips with the nuances of antebellum politics, Carwardine, a Welshman, succeeds remarkably well in capturing the complexity and flux of those years and their contribution to Lincoln’s emergence and success. This is the equal of any of the one-volume Lincoln biographies that have appeared in recent years.