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REVIEWARTICLE

**"NOW HE BELONGS TO THE AGES": A HISTORIOGRAPHY OF SEAN WILENTZ, (ED.)
THE BEST AMERICAN HISTORY ESSAYS ON LINCOLN**

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ABSTRACT

Abraham Lincoln was the 16th President of the United States (1861-1865) and over a century and a half after his assassination, there remains a sleuth of opinions and oftentimes contradictory interpretations of his actions while in office. While some historians of note regarded him as the Great Emancipator whose singular action freed more than three million slaves and marked a major turning point in the historical evolution of the United States. Conversely, others saw him as just another product of his age – a racist politician who believed in the impossibility of “bringing about in anyway the social and political equality of the white and black races – that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people . . .” Lincoln was hailed as the believer in the equality of the races while at the same time he believed “that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality.” This essay is therefore an attempt to critically appraise the position of noted authorities and their writings on this American statesman

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INTRODUCTION

“Now he belongs to the ages.” With this remarks, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton acknowledged the loss, by United States of its sixteenth president and his elevation, as it were, to another realm, of history and historians, and of historiographers and historiography of several ages to come. This became rather prophetic. Abraham Lincoln’s life and presidency has been and continues to be, a subject of much fascination, not only for American historians but also scholars and students of contemporary world history, which, consequent upon the influence of the United States in contemporary history has been more or less saddled with understanding and appreciating the ‘American story.’ There is a plethora of writings – articles, books, reviews, and other essays on Lincoln. Some were more or less an uncritical celebration of Lincoln as the “Great Emancipator” while some were avidly critical who saw nothing more than “Lincoln the rail-splitter.” However, there are some than made very definite efforts at attaining commendable levels of historical objectivity, a standard canon in historiography. These Lincoln essays began, literally before the gun with which Wilkes Booth shot Lincoln at the Ford’s Theater became cold.

This near-fever pitch interests in Lincoln and his presidency continued for half centuries after his assassination. “For five decades after his assassination, Lincoln’s position as the second greatest American (after George Washington) had arched upward until by 1909, the centennial of his birth, Lincoln had eclipsed even Washington as the central icon of American democracy.”¹ The enthusiasm seemed to wane in the inter war years (up till, perhaps the end of WWII) which made historian J.G. Randall to ask (author of *Lincoln the President*) “Has the Lincoln theme been exhausted?”² This was at a time when more than four thousand Lincoln articles were already in print. The response of historians seemed in agreement with Randall’s “no” such that today there are more than sixteen thousand articles on Lincoln.³ The remarkable interest in Lincoln continued/resumed in the post war period (the major works on Lincoln in the 1930s and early 1940s were written by amateur historians)⁴ as though in response to the summons of James Randall. Historians of note dedicated themselves to writing or rewriting the Lincoln story and this was more or less the background to the publication by the Organization of American Historians in 2009 of *The Best American Essays on Lincoln*. This was in recognition of Lincoln’s bicentennial birthday who was described in the acknowledgement as “...arguably the greatest U.S. president.”⁵

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In this paper, efforts shall be made at a historiographical and methodological review of the Sean Wilentz edited *The Best American History Essays on Lincoln*. There shall be an evaluation of issues including the traditions, schools, and paradigms of each essay as well as the interpretations, sources/documentations and the extent of the contribution of each essay to historical scholarship. Sean Wilentz prefaced the selected essays with review of the metamorphosis of the living Lincoln as the "butt of ridicule and worse, from all across the political spectrum" to the murdered "emancipator, commander-in-chief, orator, and martyr."⁶ He averred that the "idealization of Lincoln as Father Abraham, (especially in the 1930s and early 1940s) have never lost their purchase on Americans' imagination, even though for some they were too lofty to be true."⁷ Thereafter, there emerged writings that not only rejected the modern Lincoln legend but also directed harsh criticism at the mythmakers. Chief of these was Edmund Wilson who condemned Lincoln as "a ruthless centralizer of state power, on par with Lenin and Bismark."⁸ While Wilentz strenuously strove at being objective by admitting that some historians' singular intention for writing on Lincoln was to "take him down from the pedestal he enjoyed in the American lore," his introduction was not particularly flattering to Lincoln. Perhaps it is worth noting that Wilentz is not particularly fascinated by Lincoln the martyr. In his work titled *New Republic Essay*, he projected Lincoln as the "antithesis of a visionary whose greatness came from his ability to transcend politics."⁹ On the contrary, according to Wilentz, Lincoln was "a pragmatic and often ruthless politician whose career offers a rebuke to those who denounce "mere politicians" for their cravenness and partisanship."¹⁰

The theory employed by Richard Hofstadter in his "Abraham Lincoln and the Self-Made Myth," (from *The American Political Tradition*, 1948 was doubtlessly "rooted in the Marxism of the 1930s."¹¹ His interpretations appeared to be a complex admixture of radical deconstruction while employing the radical paradigm. This should not be surprising given the time of publication. This was a time in which the Lincoln persona was being resurrected from approximately two decades of abeyance during which most of the major works (apart from James Randall's) were undertaken by none professional historians who uncritically celebrated and eulogized Lincoln. These included *Young Mr. Lincoln* by Henry Fonda (1939) and Raymond Massey's *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* published in 1940.

The Marxian influence on Hofstadter was vividly demonstrated when he stated *inter alia* "Lincoln's great achievement was to take policy on slavery "out of the realm of moral and legal dispute" and turn it into a question of "free labor's self-interests so that proposals to halt the spread of slavery became nothing but a plan "for the material benefit of all Northern white men."¹² Hofstadter was invoking, in very clear terms the Marxian economic interpretation. In essence, Lincoln's actions on slavery was catering or pandering to the economic interests of Northern white men. Apart from this, When Hofstadter focused on the person of Lincoln, the influence Engels was apparent. According to the writer, Lincoln was "keenly aware of his role as the exemplar of the self-made man" and "he

played the part with an intense and poignant consistency that give his performance the high quality of a high art."¹³

Engels had stated very clearly that "men make their history themselves ..." ¹⁴ Hofstadter was in essence demystifying the selfless, unassuming Lincoln who was naturally humble but had greatness thrust upon him. According to Hofstadter, even though his simplicity was real, Lincoln was however complex enough to understand and appreciate the (political) value of his simplicity and this value was also appreciated by his colleagues who "transmuted it into one of the most successful political symbols – the hard-fisted rail splitter."¹⁵ Reconciling the "fact" of Lincoln tremendous humility and self-effacement with ambition seemed incongruous. According to him "the demands of Christianity and the success myth are incompatible ... the motivating force in the mythology of success is ambition, which is closely akin to the cardinal sin of pride."¹⁶

After stating in unmistakable terms his objections to the myth of Lincoln the humble man who appeared not ambitious, Hofstadter went ahead to briefly examine the life of young Lincoln and concluded that his life was that of an intensely ambitious boy-man who was preparing for life as a politician which was further underscored by his first attempt at seeking office at age twenty-three barely half a year after taking up residence in New Salem, Illinois. In addition, the writer made a bold and apparently successful attempt at shattering the legend of a self-made man when he stated: "while many of the stories about the hardships of his youth celebrated in Lincoln are true, it is noteworthy that success came to him suddenly and at a rather early age." Continuing, he added that "like his influential friends, Lincoln belonged to the party of rank and privilege."¹⁷

The Marxist/economic interpretation of Hofstadter's work was further reinforced by the attention he paid to Lincoln's economic thought. Lincoln, according to the writer was "thoroughly middle class in his ideas" and that "the vital test of democracy was economic – its ability to provide opportunities for social ascent to those born in lower ranks..."¹⁸ Even though Hofstadter was not a Marxist, he was evidently influenced, as Iggers *et al.* stated that Marxism is a very useful tool as a guide to historical study.¹⁹ On the very contentious and yet defining feature of Lincoln's presidency, the American Civil War and the slavery question, Lincoln, in Hofstadter's view was not the 'slavery-hating, Negro-loving, freedom-fighter and Great Emancipator' he had been portrayed in the writings prior the 1940s. Lincoln was "never much troubled about the Negro ... he had always been interested in the fate of free republicanism and its bearing upon the welfare of the common white man with whom he identified himself."²⁰ He contended that Lincoln was, "... thinking of free white worker: the Negro was secondary"²¹ hence his determined attempts at colonization to free up America of the 'black menace' and create more room and opportunity for white workers. His goal for fighting the American Civil War was as he declared it "to bring back the South with slavery intact."²² His intention was to bring back the South, save the Union, restore orderly government and "his move towards emancipation began after all other policies had failed."²³ Hofstadter appealed to a particularly poignant discussion of Lincoln concerning the Emancipation

Proclamation during which Lincoln stated “Things had gone from bad to worse ... I now determined upon the adoption of the emancipation policy ...”

The author thus implied expressly that Lincoln was forced to issue the proclamation because “things had gone from bad to worse, and as a result the slaves were to be declared free!”²⁴ Hofstadter’s article is a compelling read. He more or less demystified the self-made myth of Lincoln. He went further to describe a man full of ambition and resembling for all practical purposes the regular everyday American politician. Instead of the Great Emancipator, the Lincoln that appeared in Hofstadter’s article was racist, who was only concerned first and foremost with the interest of white men only. This essay may have earned its place as one of the best as a consequence of the remarkable departure in orientation and analysis that was current in the intellectual/professional history world at the time of its publication. Instead of the hero-worship that appeared to be the standard measure of Lincoln’s essay in the academic milieu, the writer employed a combination of Marxist worldview as a paradigm and deconstructionist and radical interpretation to arrive at a fresh, different, even if unflattering view of the sixteenth president of the United States.

Edmund Wilson’s Abraham Lincoln is a conventional narrative in method. It is revisionist in approach and its interpretation is deconstructionist. Wilson appeared to take exceptions to suggestions that Lincoln was not religious/spiritual and sought to present him as someone who grew in/into religion/spirituality overtime. He traced Lincoln’s lack of spirituality overtime and painstakingly pointed out that Lincoln became transformed by accepting or believing the “Doctrine of Necessity” which Lincoln explained as “that the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest, by some power over which the mind itself has no control.” Lincoln added that he understood this to be the opinion held by several of the Christian denominations.²⁵

The author appeared determined to project a persona of the religious and/spiritual Lincoln. Referencing Lincoln’s law partner and biographer, Wilson stated “Herndon admits that Lincoln’s doctrine of necessity had a conception of divinity behind it.” Continuing, “He firmly believed in an overruling Providence, Maker, God, and the great moral of Him written in the human soul.”²⁶ Twice in the same paragraph, Wilson stated that there is no evidence that Lincoln changed his views even though he added that the use of the word God in latter life by Lincoln should not be misconstrued to mean that he believed in a personal God. He went ahead to suggest that Lincoln’s reference to the deity with such words as mind or reason might imply “the more secular aspect of the creative or fatal operation of history.”²⁷ Wilson copiously referred to many of Lincoln’s speeches where he, Lincoln, acknowledged or referred to the deity and by the time he was president was freely referring to God and quoted variously from the scriptures. The author implied that as Lincoln ‘grew’ in office and he became more ‘matured’, in personal conversations, correspondence and speeches, and as he spoke concerning the conflict that defined his presidency (and his place in history) he seemed more willing to and it served his interest more and more to “invoke the traditional Lord of Hosts. In addition, “he came to see the

conflict in a light more and more religious, in more and more Scriptural terms, under a more and more apocalyptic aspect.”²⁸

In the deconstructionist approach that characterized part one of *The Best American History Essays on Lincoln*, Wilson moved sharply from the religio-spiritual discourse to present Lincoln in no uncertain terms as a very ambitious man who was determined to tread uncharted paths in life and was focused on leading his own pack than being a member, a follower, of another.²⁹ “The young Lincoln was extremely ambitious ... and was not unsympathetic with the South.” Wilson was at best contemptible of writers whom he described as writing “romantic and sentimental rubbish” about Lincoln. He disdained in particular Carl Sandburg’s two volume *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years* and the four volume *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*. However, while Sandburg was more dismissed by Wilson, he had unqualified respect for Herndon. It was as though if Herndon says it, it must be true! Depending almost exclusively on Herndon and a few other associates, Wilson averred that Lincoln was very arrogant. He wrote of Lincoln: “He seemed always to have had the conviction of his own superiority.”³⁰ “Lincoln’s perceptions,” according to Herndon “were slow, cold, clear and exact.”³¹ Referencing his secretary, it was stated that “it would be an absurdity to consider Lincoln a modest man, adding that it was the intellectual arrogance and unconscious assumption of superiority that men like Chase and Sumner could never forgive.”³²

Edmund Wilson’s article, by the time of its publication nearly five decades ago was opening new vistas in understanding historical Abraham Lincoln, as opposed to mythical Abraham Lincoln. His deconstructionist interpretation coupled with the conventional narrative form was an invaluable asset to writing a great piece. However, his near pusillanimous acceptance of Herndon and his sources seemed to go against the hero worship that he claimed to disdain so much. His sources were largely primary but he was still apprehending Lincoln through the eyes of others. He appeared to, perhaps as a consequence of long interaction with them through the agency of their records, to “Like them too much!”³³

James Oliver Horton’s article was written from the revisionist interpretation of history. “Naturally Anti-Slavery: Lincoln, Race, and the Complexity of American Liberty” was an effort at putting in the proper perspective Lincoln’s anti-slavery credentials especially within the context of the broader anti-slavery movement in *ante bellum* United States. Lincoln had claimed in 1864 to be anti-slavery. He stated “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.”³⁴ This appeared to be a very true statement for fifty-five year old man who then was the sixteenth president of the United States. It was the rider “I cannot remember when I did not so think, and feel”³⁵ which seemed to have no basis in his own history – personal, professional, public, or intellectual. Even though he thought slavery was wrong, Lincoln believed it was protected by the Constitution of the United States. Whereas Lincoln was anti-slavery in the sense that he believed in the free-soil principle that it should be placed on the path of ultimate extinction, he was not a radical abolitionist in the genre of William Lloyd Garrison or Frederick Douglas. When Lincoln ultimately arrived at the conclusion that slavery should be abolished, he

hoped to ship the emancipated slaves out of the United States to make the U.S a white-only country, even though his brand of colonization was moderate.³⁶

According to Horton, Lincoln's anti-slavery credentials were viewed with great suspicion by abolitionists. He stated: "they regarded Lincoln with great suspicion and saw his anti-slavery position as hypocritical."³⁷ Perhaps they were right. In 1847 the Attorney Abraham Lincoln defended slaveholder Robert Matson in an effort to use the court to hold on to his human property.³⁸ Horton argued persuasively that Lincoln was not "naturally anti-slavery." He deconstructed Lincoln's natural anti-slavery credentials and showed that Lincoln's anti-slavery progressively matured overtime, instead of being instinctual, as Lincoln implied in his statement of not remembering ever having a different opinion about the injustice/wrongness of slavery. He underscored his argument with the attitude/opinion of African American leaders concerning Lincoln who they never saw as being on their side on the slavery question. In addition, the continued protestation against the southerners' charges of being anti-slavery by Lincoln was used by Horton to strengthen his argument.

Furthermore, the author vigorously argued that Lincoln was at best ambivalent on the issue of abolition even as the American Civil War entered its second year. Staying consistent with his thesis, Horton argued that Lincoln responded more to political expediency than any commitment to anti-slavery and inferred that the committed anti-slavery Lincoln was a product of the civil war when he stated rather tersely "the war changed Lincoln."³⁹ Continuing, he suggested that "there was a great distance from Lincoln's position ... in the late 1850s ... when he denied advocating their rights." "Lincoln had indeed become publicly anti-slavery"⁴⁰ except that it was not natural but progressed overtime. This progress, he added was acknowledge by radical abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Horton concluded that the "naturally antislavery Lincoln had emerged by the end of Lincoln's life." By the end of his life, Lincoln had grown to be what he said himself to be – antislavery and was still growing." This growth, however, the author averred "led to his premature death ... but also led African Americans to remember him as the Great Emancipator."⁴¹ James Horton's use of a combination of primary (speeches, newspapers including *The Chicago Daily Times*, *New York Tribune*, and *The Liberator* among others) and secondary sources (books and articles published between 1953 and 2006) is admirable.

He appeared to have mastered his sources as well as his interpretation and his blending of the notion of progress, in this instance of Lincoln, is well done. Adopting the traditional school of historical interpretation and as methodology the chronicling/empiricism, David Herbert Donald wrote the short essay titled "A Strange, Friendless, Uneducated, Penniless Boy," stating matter-of-factly that "nearly all the stories about Lincoln boyhood were apocryphal."⁴² Doubtlessly, Donald agreed with the submission credited to Lincoln's cousin, Denis Hanks: "Abe exhibited no special skills in Ky."⁴³ Donald appeared to be heavily influenced by economic (Marxist) and geographical determinism. Apart from looking at history from below (as inspired by Marxism) in the lives of Thomas Lincoln and of his poverty, he believed the rugged geography of the frontier

region coupled with the poverty of Lincoln's parent explained his (Lincoln's) apparent lack of playmates while growing up.

Going further, his attempts at psychoanalysis as a bases for Lincoln's lack of friends is very interesting, especially considered within the backdrop of the general economic socio-conditions and geographical milieu of most American families west of the Appalachia in *ante bellum* United States. Donald's approach may as well been the template adopted by Michael Burlingame several years later when, in his *Abraham Lincoln, 1809 – 1865*, he "depict the suffering and everyday tragedies of life in the Kentucky back country, where Lincoln's feckless father hired out young Abe to do backbreaking menial labor ..."⁴⁴ The "strange, friendless, uneducated, penniless boy" description of Lincoln by himself was obviously believed by the writer who went at great length in writing an essay to suit the description. In addition, the essay suggested that the writer believed that Lincoln's strength of character owes so much to his back country experience where his friendlessness, lack of education and pennilessness seemed to have combined to produce a strangeness that the author strove to explain.

Curiously interesting was the attempt by the writer to connect young Abe's grief on the loss of his mother to his inability to make friends, including female friends. Referring to Lincoln's step mother, he stated: "... she arrived before Abraham had time to accept the loss of his mother ... In such circumstances ... it is as if their most intimate link, to a parent, has been destroyed, they are fearful lest they invite another devastating hurt."⁴⁵ The author explains Lincoln's "inability" to have an enduring relationship with women his age in his New Salem Days. His attachments, the author noted, "were to older, married women." He concluded, "He needed a mother more than he needed a wife."⁴⁶ He concluded by stating that Lincoln's "temperament and early training made him a man of great reserve that was incapable of fellowship."⁴⁷ While acknowledging that the author implicated economic circumstances as well as physical and social geography as factors in shaping Lincoln's life's trajectory, locating his personality, especially his being a "strange and friendless" boy in the loss of his mother at age nine is at best a mono-causality that has no place in historiography. Lincoln's friendlessness cannot be isolated from his intellectual arrogance. Similarly, his cold and calculating political sagacity cannot be ignored. Lincoln may have, because of his own intense personal ambition, been guarded to an extreme. Explaining this complex character by his grief at age nine may as well be described as ahistorical.

The Feminist approach and gender-centric paradigm of Jean H Baker's *Mary and Abraham* is evidentiary clear from its first paragraph. In addition, the interpretation is not only revisionist, it is also radical. Baker was very critical of the derisive anecdotes about marriage while bemoaning the fact that despite its universality, "marriage is so little studied."⁴⁸ She made an extensive (five lines) quotation from "David Donald's most authoritative biography ever written about Lincoln" which praised Lincoln as a "faithful husband" and Mary Lincoln as "his most loyal supporter and admirer."⁴⁹ What she found convenient to ignore in the same essay she quoted from was that Lincoln had stated sometimes in the mid 1830s that he will

“never again think of marrying; and for this reason; I can never be satisfied with anyone who would be blockhead enough to have me.”⁵⁰ From the outset, then, Baker was clearly pursuing an agenda, that of radical feminism, to contradict any suggestion that the Lincoln’s marriage was filled with problems and heartaches caused by Mrs. Mary Lincoln. Baker appeared determined to ‘rescue’ Mary Lincoln from the opprobrium she had been consigned to by male historians who “depicted Lincoln marriage as a disaster essentially because of Mary Todd Lincoln’s failings.” She added that women are always “held responsible for the quality of a marriage” and in this case because “men write history and have especially controlled the Lincoln story.”⁵¹ Baker was absolutely and unsparingly critical of the “many historians,” who, “deciding they do not like Mary Lincoln and with extraordinary vehemence extrapolating their personal judgment onto the marriage.”⁵² She referenced several historians including Michael Burlingame and his short book *Honest Abe, Dishonest Mary*, adding that an unsuccessful Lincoln marriage was historically serviceable especially when the writers successfully “provided their hero with some alternatives.”

Paucity of documentary evidence was advanced by the author for “this controversy” apart from the perceived ignorance of the institution of marriage on the part of Mary Todd haters. The interpretation given by male historians to the disruption in the Lincolns’ courtship as an indication of trouble or the trouble to come was interpreted by Baker as a “misogynist renderings” in which Mary was humiliated. Baker also weighed in on the place of communication or lack of it in the Lincoln’s marriage as well as their deep concern for the well being of one another. The “facts” used by the many male historians depicted as Mary haters were used, albeit from a different perspective to arrive very different conclusions. This approach by Baker was consistent with the broad feminist perspective which speaks broadly about the victimization or oppression of women. “This new feminism had as its basic proposition that women everywhere and throughout history had been subjected or ... oppressed by men.”⁵³ Her analytical deconstruction of ‘bad wife Mary Lincoln’ was very much in agreement with the view that “the subordination which women experienced in a male dominated culture needs to be fully recognized.”⁵⁴ Baker’s approach, as militant and unsparing as it is, is illuminating and refreshing. Her article, first published in 2001 might as well forerun new vistas in historical reconstruction and historiography especially pertaining to the role and place of women, individually and as a collective, in history.

The fact that most of her sources are secondary is also important. In essence, these were evidence that have been examined before but without the peculiar interpretation Baker brought to bear on them. Her conclusion was absolutely fitting as to how Lincoln himself viewed his wife and their partnership. On learning, first about his nomination for the Republican ticket and later in November 1860 when informed about his electoral victory, Lincoln reported said “Mary, Mary we are elected.” As Baker asserted, “this was a good testament to the profound respect and affinity the Lincolns had for each other...”⁵⁵ The third theme of the Essays on Lincoln focused on Lincoln the Politician have three articles: Richard N. Current’s “The Master Politician”; “The Origins and Purpose of

Lincoln’s “House-Divided” Speech” by Don E. Fehrenbacher and David M. Potter’s “Why The Republicans Rejected Both Compromise and Secession.” Current used, as method, a mixture of chronicling empiricism focusing on the approximately the last two decades of Lincoln’s life in which he portrayed Lincoln as a bare knuckles politician who not only was intensely ambitious but who was also brutally calculative and shrewd in pursuing the ambitions. Deconstructionist in interpretation, Current presented a not so flattering image of Lincoln as someone who was impelled primarily by his personal interests with little or no thought for the interest of the people and who was “at least long one step removed from honest men.”⁵⁶

According to the writer, Lincoln’s display of intense devotion to personal ambition was already evident when he, Lincoln argued that “turn is about fair play” in his run up to the Congress in 1847. While in Congress, the author stated, Lincoln “left no monument of constructive legislation.” He added that Lincoln “gave little attention to legislative matters while his big concern was presidential politics, devoting much attention to the making of a president and the unmaking of another.”⁵⁷ The deep frustration Lincoln experienced after his commitment to the making of Zachary Taylor as president went unrewarded by a deeply sought for political appointment was not only a proof of self interest according to Current, it was also a clear indication that Lincoln was not a “natural-born genius in politics” but a regular politician who “had been so far, lucky.”⁵⁸

Furthermore, author Current depicted Lincoln as Machiavellian when he stated that Lincoln’s scheming during the fall out of the Kansas-Nebraska debacle was intended to “head off his most dangerous rival, Stephen Douglas” in road-railing undecided Whigs into the Republican camp. Weakening Douglas was tantamount to strengthening himself for the 1858 senatorial race as well as the 1860 presidential nomination. While campaigning for the former, Lincoln, according to the author, relentlessly tied Douglas to sitting President James Buchanan in a “conspiracy to spread slavery and fix it permanently on the nation” at a time when Lincoln was actually in League with Buchanan who was using official patronage to assist Lincoln in his senatorial ambition.⁵⁹ Lincoln’s expressed interest in the 1860 Republican nomination has an history of its own which appeared to be indicative of a astute politician who knew what he wanted but carefully orchestrated being asked by others. Lincoln, Current posited, worked very hard in eliminating, or at least reducing the chances of other contenders within the Republican camp by carefully and rather surreptitiously playing up their supposed electoral weaknesses, without as much as pointing any direct attention to himself.⁶⁰ When asked about presidential aspirations, he demurred. While the ever-calculative Lincoln “took care to keep himself from being knifed in the back, he was busy using the knife on his rivals for the nomination and doing all he could to enhance his reputation...” After getting the nomination, he carefully avoided taking public position on any issue that might alienate potential voters including Know-nothings, and the temperance movement among others, in what was known as “the strategy of avoidance.”⁶¹ Current expressed in very clear terms that if there was any kingmaker in Lincoln’s

run up to the presidency, it was Lincoln himself. A similar if somewhat cloudy scenario was repeated in the 1864 primary elections.

Lincoln appeared to have made deals with Anti-slavery John C. Fremont while at the same time he calculatingly dropped Vice President Hamlin for Southern Democrat Andrew Johnson in order to present a national platform, which, in his opinion had a greater chance of success. While Current did not out rightly suggest that Lincoln rigged the 1864 elections, he stated in very clear terms how Lincoln deployed his powers of incumbency to great effects including the deployment/furloughing of soldiers in critical areas close to Election Day.⁶² In such areas as New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland among others, Current contended, "the citizens in uniform may have made the difference between victory and defeat."⁶³ The writer concluded by making an appeal to Lincoln's pedigree as a master politician that his supposed opposition to Republican radicalism may have been the vintage Lincoln, wanting to be asked or pushed, to do what he wanted to do all along – free the slaves. While this may be somewhat farfetched, it is not completely implausible for a man who seemed to be a master in the art, or science of politics.

Lincoln's "House Divided" Speech essay, written by Fehrenbacher used commentary as methodology while its interpretation is a combination of traditional and revisionist. The author's conclusion that the purpose of the speech was to "polarize public opinion and elicit a clear-cut decision upon the most critical aspects of the slavery issue"⁶⁴ may not have been the intention of Lincoln when he gave the speech. This conclusion appears to contradict the author's stated position that "it is hard to agree with the historians who detects a ring of authenticity in William Herndon's postulations that Lincoln was prepared to sacrifice ambition for principle. In his opinion, Lincoln was a calculating politician who had his sights trained on the White House in 1858 and could not possibly be contemplating defeat because "the time has come when these sentiments should be uttered, and if it is decreed that I should go down because of this speech, then let me go down linked with the truth - let me die in the advocacy of what is just and right."⁶⁵

This pretentious talk, he averred, does not sound like the flesh and blood Lincoln of 1858, (of anytime, I might add) because Lincoln was "a man of flexibility and discretion..." Fehrenbacher suggested that this famous speech must be considered within the context of the time it was written and given without projecting the outbreak of the civil war or the emancipation of slaves into it at all. He thus went ahead to advance the plausibility of Lincoln as only "examining alternatives to a divided house, dismissing one and accepting the other."⁶⁶ He added that Lincoln denied having a wish to interfere with slavery in the southern states a correspondence barely a week after the speech. According to him, Lincoln's stated intention appeared to have simply been to arrest the spread of slavery to the territories, which, once done would avert the current crises, even though slavery might continue to exist for another century.⁶⁷ The phrase "ultimate extinction" Lincoln explained, meant that the spread of slavery should be

headed off; arrest the spread of it, and place it where Washington, and Jefferson, and Madison, placed it, it would be on a course of ultimate extinction.⁶⁸ The controversies surrounding this speech were further intensified by the scriptural phraseology with which it was laden.

The phrase "living dog/dead lion" was interpreted to mean that Douglas, Lincoln's political foe, was "at least a caged and toothless leader as far as the battle for freedom was concerned."⁶⁹ This might be true but could Lincoln be simply referring to, or at least imagining himself (as the) emerging leader (living dog) compared to a spent political force (dead lion), meaning Douglas?

The writer of "Why the Republicans Rejected Both Compromise and Secession," David M. Potter used the commentary method combined with a radical and neo-revisionist interpretation. It has been the conventional/received wisdom to assume that Republicans made the choice of a civil war in their rejection of secession and compromise. Potter argued persuasively that such conclusions emanated from the perspectives of "historians who, as rational beings, try to write about history as if it were a rational process." Continuing, he stated, "Accordingly, they number the alternatives and talk about choices and decisions."⁷⁰ History in the real world, as it was during the crises of 1860-1865, does not give such clear choices and "whatever choices anyone exercised in 1860-61, no one chose the American Civil War, because it lay behind the veil of the future, it did not exist as a choice."⁷¹ In essence, the historical actors (Lincoln and his Republican colleagues) did not choose war, the war choose them. This deterministic view of history is what Isaiah Berlin argued against when he "in the past, individuals could have chosen to act otherwise than how they did; they could have avoided acting in the ways they did act."⁷²

The writer detailed the various Congressional initiatives at compromise and showed the broadly partisan voting patterns in which Republicans consistently frustrated such efforts. It must be noted that no citations were used for the sources of information. He faulted the thought that the conflict that followed the rejection of secession and compromise was some sort of alternative. He became a Rankean positivist in his argument when he stated categorically "...the supreme task of the historian, and one of most superlative difficulty, is to see the past through the imperfect eyes of those who lived it and not with his own omniscient twenty-twenty vision."⁷³ Ranke's dictum had been "to show what actually happened."⁷⁴

Potter argued that the rejection of compromise, far from meaning the acceptance of secession or war, was the firm conviction as the right course by men (Republicans) who viewed secession more as a political blackmail as opposed to a genuine indication of danger to the Union.⁷⁵ He averred that Lincoln and Seward were convinced about the superficiality of secession which could and would be undercut by a resurgence of union sentiments once Lincoln's non-abolitionist credentials as well as the secessionist errors are apparent.⁷⁶ According to Potter, Lincoln placed much premium on Southern Unionism and fully expected its upsurge to drown the growing tide of secession. He backed up his reasoning with excerpts from

Lincoln's message to Congress in July 1861: "... There is much reason to believe that the union men are in the majority in many, if not in every one of the so-called seceded states."⁷⁷

His conclusion, fitting as it was to his thesis, was brilliantly revisionist: "when Republicans rejected compromise and secession ... it was perhaps not because they really preferred the Civil War with all its costs ...

They did not know that it would end by leaving them with a war on their hands ... they rejected compromise because they could not bear to make concessions to fire-eaters ... They rejected separation because they could not bear to see the union broken up."⁷⁸ John Hope Franklin's Emancipation Proclamation was a forceful conventional narrative that followed the traditional genre of historical interpretation. He placed very heavy premium on Lincoln's "naturally antislavery" affirmation, tracing his commitment to abolishing slavery to this (Lincoln's) 1831 supposed statement to a friend in New Orleans: "if I ever get a chance to hit this thing, I'll hit it hard."⁷⁹ It is, however interesting to note that "the authenticity of the tale is suspect among Lincoln scholars" since the eyewitness who allegedly heard Lincoln say this in New Orleans did not go that far with the twenty year old Lincoln on this journey.⁸⁰ In addition, Franklin's source for the "hitting hard" statement, William Henry Herndon, has been, to a large extent discredited. One of James Randall's protégés classified it as amateur and his informants, extreme lunatic.⁸¹ It would have been appropriate for the venerable Franklin to treat such reminiscence with caution as suggested by Cuthoys and Dockers.⁸²

Franklin evaluated Lincoln's challenges/dilemma within the context of the politics of slavery and his own racial bias but succinctly locating his decision for emancipation "as a necessary war measure." He quoted Lincoln as saying "Things have gone from bad to worse ... We had reached the end of our rope ... we had about played our last card and must change our tactics, or lose the game."⁸³ He then traced the history of the actual drafting of the Emancipation Proclamation and concluded that it was Lincoln's in its entirety. The mixture of primary and secondary sources by Franklin is invaluable for an excellent narrative. Its only weakness is the uncritical acceptance of Herndon's tale. The author of *Ordeal By Fire*, James M. McPherson wrote the article "Lincoln and the Strategy of Unconditional Surrender" which he themed on Lincoln's desire to obtain a "soft peace through a hard war." This was perhaps the background to William Tecumseh Sherman vow in 1864 to "make Georgia howl" before embarking on his scorch earth policy march from Atlanta to Savannah in 1864. McPherson discussed in details Lincoln's devotion to, as well as his self-education on military matters, which, he believed was a consequence of his commitment to his duties as Commander In Chief of the Army and the Navy.

He depicted Lincoln as a hands-on commander who was deeply involved with his generals in prosecuting the Civil War with examples such as firing George McClellan, visits/conferences in the War Department, as well as a near fatal visit to Fort Stevens where Lincoln was nearly hit by bullets.⁸⁴ According to McPherson whose paradigm in this article was nationalist,

despite the fact that Lincoln had been the subject of much historical enquiry, his role as war leader and military master strategist had been largely ignored. For him, so much remains to be done on Lincoln the Commander in Chief and military leader.⁸⁵ Lincoln the strategist, in McPherson's view, do not deserve the scorn of some military historians who deplored Lincoln appointment /commissioning of political generals many of who ultimately proved to be more of military liabilities. McPherson labeled such criticism as a demonstration of parochial definition of military strategy.⁸⁶ McPherson argued, quite persuasively, that such appointments were absolutely necessary to guarantee the support of various ethno-cultural interest groups which was essential in the broader national strategy. In addition, while some indeed may have not been military successes, it was the same arrangement of political military commission that produced such brilliant generals like Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman. The argument of McPherson that Lincoln deliberately pursued a strategy of unconditional surrender, brilliant as it is seemed to ignore such fundamental issues as the fact that Republicans' rejection of compromise at the outset of the war and that a negotiated settlement may have inflicted an irreparable damage to the Union as it was known.

Thus Lincoln, in a sense, became a pawn in a large historical process. He simply had no other choice if his stated purpose - to save the Union - must be realized. This was not a strategy Lincoln opted for out of a plethora of options. This was the only choice he had. McPherson sources were a mixture of primary sources such as civil war era newspapers, biographies (including George McClellan's autobiography) and memoirs; and secondary sources including books written in the first half century of Lincoln's assassination.

Mark E Neely's "Lincoln and the Constitution," a fitting conclusion, was essentially revisionist, stating clearly in his introduction that "the depiction of Lincoln as a tyrant was to have more influence on history than it merited."⁸⁷ He added in a persuasively Lincolnphiliac apologetic "there was nothing of a dictator in Lincoln," he was just impulsively practical than constitutional." Lincoln is presented in this essay as a realist who disdained the fine points of law. In addition, the political Lincoln seemed palpably ignored. For instance, the writer stated that "Lincoln hated war because they are unconstitutional and unnecessary."⁸⁸ He then went ahead to reference Lincoln's comments on the Mexican war while campaigning for Zachary Taylor.

Lincoln stated *inter alia*, that "it is a war of conquest brought into existence to catch vote"⁸⁹ The author however did not acknowledge the political context of the statement (Lincoln was following party lines: "voting to condemn Polk and the war while voting supplies for it." In addition, "the Whigs were ready to use the war both ways - by condemning the war president while running a war hero as **Whig** candidate."⁹⁰

If Lincoln ever hated wars, he must have loved this since it advanced his politics and at the same time, if he had a love for war, he must have hated this because he disliked President Polk. In one word, Lincoln was a politician without a permanence of interests or friends!

ENDNOTES

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⁴ Sean Wilentz, (ed.) Introduction to *The Best American History Essays on Lincoln*. New York: Palmgrave/Macmillan for The Organization of American Historians, 2009, xii

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⁶ *Ibid.* xi

⁷ *Ibid.* xii

⁸ *Ibid.* xiii

⁹ Sugrue, *Lincoln Resurrected*. 106

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 109

¹¹ Wilentz, *The Best American History Essays*. xiii

¹² Richard Hofstadter. *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*, New York: 1948, 113 in Guelzo, Allen, "The Not So Grand Review: Abraham Lincoln" *Journal of American History*, Vol. 96 number 2, September 2009, 401

¹³ Hofstadter, "Abraham Lincoln and the Self-Made Myth," in Wilentz (ed.) *The Best American History Essays on Lincoln*. 4

¹⁴ Christopher Hill, "Marxism and History," *Modern Quarterly*, 3, 1948, in John Tosh, (ed.) *Historians on History*. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2009 88

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¹⁷ *Ibid.* 9

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 12, 13

¹⁹ Georg G. Iggers and Q Edward Wang, *A Global Study of Modern Historiography*. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008, 268

²⁰ Hofstadter in Wientz, 22

²¹ *Ibid.* 32

²² *Ibid.* 29

²³ *Ibid.* 33

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Edmund Wilson, "Abraham Lincoln", in Sean Wilentz (ed.) *The Best American History Essays on Lincoln*. 42, 43

²⁶ *Ibid.* 43

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.* 45

²⁹ *Ibid.* 46

³⁰ *Ibid.* 53

³¹ *Ibid.* 54

³² *Ibid.* 53

³³ Valerie Yow, "Do I Like Them Too Much?": Effect of the Oral Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa," *Oral History Review*, 24/1 Summer 1997, 55-79

³⁴ James Oliver Horton, "Naturally Anti-Slavery: Lincoln, Race, and the Complexity of American Liberty" in Sean Wilentz (ed.) *The Best American History Essays on Lincoln*. 63

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.* 64

³⁷ *Ibid.* 64

³⁸ *Ibid.* 65

³⁹ *Ibid.* 79

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 80

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 84, 85

⁴² David Herbert Donald, "A Strange, Friendless, Uneducated, Penniless Boy" in Wilentz, (ed.) *The Best American History Essays on Lincoln*. 87

⁴³ *Ibid.* 88

⁴⁴ Sugrue, 109

⁴⁵ Donald, in Wilentz, 90

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 100

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 104

⁴⁸ JeanH.Baker, "Mary and Abraham:A Marriage" in Sean Wilentz, (ed.) *The Best American History Essays on Lincoln*., 107

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Donald in Wilentz, 101

⁵¹ Baker in Wilentz, "Mary and Abraham.," 108

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Ann Curthoys and John Dockers, *Is History Fiction?* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008, 161

⁵⁴ Iggers *et al.*, 373

⁵⁵ Baker in Wilentz, "Mary and Lincoln," 123

⁵⁶ Richard N. Current, "The Master Politician" in Wilentz (ed.) *The Best American History Essays on Lincoln*. 129

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 130

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 133

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 136

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 138

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 139, 140

⁶² *Ibid.* 145, 146

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 168

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 152

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 155

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 156

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 159

⁷⁰ David Porter, "Why The Republicans Rejected Both Compromise and Secession" in Wilentz (ed.) *The Best American History Essays on Lincoln*, 188

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 177

⁷² Curthoys and Dockers, *Is History Fiction?* 118

⁷³ Porter in Wilentz, 177

⁷⁴ Iggers, *et al*, 122

⁷⁵ Porter in Wilentz, 182

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⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 186

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 187

⁷⁹ John Hope Franklin, "Emancipation Proclamation" in Wilentz, (ed.), *The Best American History Essays on Lincoln*, 191

⁸⁰ Hofstadter in Wilentz, 15

⁸¹ Keith A. Erekson, Review Essay: "Telling the Story of The Ages," *Journal of Abraham Lincoln's Association*, Vol. 31 No. 1, 2010, 40.

⁸² Curthoys and Dockers, 288

⁸³ Franklin in Wilentz, "Emancipation Proclamation," 191

⁸⁴ James McPherson, "The Strategy of Unconditional Surrender" in Wilentz, (ed.) *The Best American History Essays on Lincoln*, 208- 209

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 210

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 211

⁸⁷ Mark E. Neely's, "Lincoln and the Constitution" in Wilentz, (ed.) *The Best American History Essays on Lincoln*, 229

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 232

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 232

⁹⁰ Current, "The Master Politician" in Wilentz, 133