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Lincoln's legacy

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What the sixteenth President of the United States of America means to Barack Obama and others

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O n February 10, 2007, Barack Obama, then a relatively unknown US senator, stood on the steps of the Illinois statehouse. A crowd numbering in the thousands braved the winter weather to hear him speak. Obama first warmed his audience with inspirational snippets drawn from his autobiography. Then, setting up the key passage of his address, he invoked one of the critical chapters in the nations political history: In the shadow of the Old State Capitol, where Lincoln once called on a house divided to stand together, where common hopes and common dreams still live, I stand before you today to announce my candidacy for President of the United States of America. As the crowd cheered and chanted his name, Obama repeatedly circled back to Lincolns memory: the sixteenth Presidents rise from humble origins, his perseverance, and his unrelenting focus on reuniting a nation ripped apart by the scourges of slavery, sectionalism, and Southern secession. Obama concluded with one more homage to Lincoln an allusion to his greatest speech, the Gettysburg Address asking his supporters to help him usher in a new birth of freedom on this Earth.

Less than a year later, Ron Paul, a congressman from Texas, roasted beneath arc lights on the television programme Meet the Press. Opposing the war in Iraq while equating federal power with tyranny, Paul at the time commanded an army of supporters, millions of shock troops eager for radical change: the so-called Ron Paul Revolution. The congressman hoped to march with these libertarian followers to the Republican presidential nomination. Midway into the interview, the journalist Tim Russert said: I was intrigued by your comments about Abe Lincoln. Paul, it seemed, had remarked a year earlier that Abe Lincoln should never have gone to war. Here was Russerts signature move, a personal quotation designed to shatter a guest's composure and political ambitions. As Russert waited for Paul to recant what passes for heresy in the church of American politics, the congressman stood by his words. Insisting that Lincoln had sought to get rid of the original intent of the Republic, displaying the iron fist of Washington, Paul called the Civil War senseless.

From uncommonly frank discussions of race and citizenship, to confrontations over the Confederate flags semiotics and the proper scope of federal authority, to Senator Obamas ongoing efforts to wrap himself in Lincolns mantle, the 2008 election threatened to become a referendum on the sixteenth Presidents legacy. With the bicentennial of his birth looming, the sesquicentennial of the war he waged following soon after, and a relatively inexperienced legislator from Illinois in the race, an African-American man with a background in law and a once-in-a-generation gift for oratory, perhaps this should have come as no surprise. Still, a spate of recent books, all timed to celebrate Lincolns 200th birthday, reminds us that beyond the coincidence of historical anniversaries and a historic candidate in 2008, twas ever thus in the United States. Americans have long fought over Lincolns meaning; they did so even while he was still alive. And Lincolns ghost has loomed over American culture and politics from the time of his death.

Thats the moment that the Kunhardts Philip III, Peter, and Peter Jr use to open their new book, Looking for Lincoln, a lovingly illustrated inquiry into the origins of enduring myths and memories of Abraham Lincoln. On the night of April 14, 1865, Good Friday, Lincoln sat in a private box at Fords Theater, Washington, watching the third act of Our

American Cousin. John Wilkes Booth, an actor driven to violence by the Presidents recent support for African American voting rights, sneaked into Lincolns box and fired a single bullet into the back of his skull. After leaping on to the stage and fracturing his leg, Booth shouted out Virginias state motto, Sic semper tyrannis!. He then escaped into the night. Three doctors on the scene rushed to the Presidents aid, and they decided to bring him across the street to a boarding house, where a huge group of people kept vigil through the night. Lincoln died the following morning.

The story of Lincolns murder, though frequently retold, feels like a new wound here. The impact stems from a formula the Kunhardts employ throughout their book. They begin chapters by recounting, with only light analytical interventions, a representative event from the years after the assassination, moments in which key memories of Lincoln took root in the culture. They then include brief excerpts from eyewitnesses, including, in the books opening chapter, Secretary of War Edwin Stantons bloodless statement: The pistol ball entered the back of the Presidents head and penetrated nearly through the head. The wound is mortal. So it was. In this way, the Kunhardts allow historys actors, famous, infamous, anonymous, to speak for themselves. Finally, an extraordinary array of images drawings, newspaper clippings, editorial cartoons, paintings, photographs render what might otherwise have been an episodic history into something organic. A grainy photo of the room in which Lincoln died, for example, provides the first chapters motif. A bloodstained pillow, easy to miss at first glance, transforms an otherwise innocuous tableau of rumpled covers, a framed landscape print hanging over a spindle bed, and an empty chair, into one of historys most notorious death scenes.

In the aftermath of the assassination, the Kunhardts travel on to Easter Sunday, 1865, when Northern preachers began comparing Lincoln to Christ; to New York City, that same year, when a young boy named Teddy Roosevelt, who later modelled his politics on Lincolns, watched the funeral train; to the studios of artists and sculptors, whose works etched Lincolns image the deeply lined face, the rangy body with absurdly long limbs, and of course the iconic top hat into the national imagination; to the Lincoln centennial in 1909, celebrated in both North and South, sections reunited by a common desire to get back to the business of doing business; to the parlours of authors who published Lincoln biographies that still inform our judgements; to the start of construction on both the Lincoln memorial in Washington, DC and the Mount Rushmore monument in South Dakota's Black Hills; and finally, in 1923, to the Library of Congress, where Robert Lincoln, who until then had jealously guarded his fathers reputation, turned his papers over to the American people for posterity.

With these cases and others, the Kunhardts demonstrate the futility of separating history and memory where Lincoln is concerned. They also underscore the prominent role which African Americans especially Frederick Douglass, the renowned abolitionist author and orator played in preserving Lincolns legacy. In his outstanding new book, The Radical and the Republican, James Oakes goes even further, arguing that Douglass and Lincoln enjoyed something like a symbiotic relationship while they lived, shaping each others politics and world views. After Lincolns death, Douglass became one of the most important stewards of the Presidents memory. In Oakess account, Douglass and Lincoln also shared key attributes: they were self-made men whose success hinged on oratory. But they were divided for most of their lives by disparate goals: Lincoln was a committed politician, focused on building winning coalitions, while Douglas was a radical reformer, a firebrand unafraid to alienate others in the service of ideological purity. Over time, though, Lincoln became progressively more radical, particularly on racial issues, while Douglass embraced politics. The two men ultimately converged at the most dramatic moment in American history.

Douglass first took note of Lincoln when the latter gave his House Divided speech in 1858. In that address, Lincoln insisted that freedom and slavery were inherently incompatible, that they could not exist together in perpetuity within the borders of the United States. This government, he said, cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free . . . . It will become all one thing or all the other. Lincoln then predicted that the forces of liberty shall not fail. Evincing the classically Whiggish perspective that typified his views of the nations history and future, Lincoln insisted that, If we stand firm, we shall not fail. Wise counsels may accelerate, or mistakes delay it, but, sooner or later, the victory is sure to come. Progress would inevitably carry the day, sweeping away the institution of slavery. Reading these remarks, Douglass suspected that he had found a kindred spirit. And yet, two issues prevented him from embracing Lincoln at the time. First, Douglass still thought that politics necessarily sullied reform. And second, Lincoln didnt then believe that African Americans should enjoy full rights of citizenship in the eyes of the law.

Oakes deserves high praise for making sense of Lincolns ideas about race and slavery by suggesting an evolution that tracked historical developments. As early as 1837, Lincoln condemned the peculiar institution while serving in the Illinois legislature. He believed slavery was immoral and dangerous, a cancer in the body politic. Then, after the US defeated Mexico in 1848, acquiring vast new territory in the West, Lincoln insisted that slavery should not be allowed to spread. At the same time, he argued that the federal government had no authority to regulate slavery where it already existed. By the late 1850s, though, Lincoln began worrying that an increasingly militant class of slaveholders posed an existential threat to the nation. With the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Supreme Courts noxious Dred Scott decision serving as a backdrop, Lincoln gave his House Divided speech. Even so, he embraced colonization schemes, suggesting that, following the abolition of slavery, freed people should return to Africa. As Oakes suggests, He accepted racial discrimination because that was what most whites wanted. As late as 1858, then, although Lincoln may not personally have deemed African Americans inferior to whites, he remained a democratic racist. The will of the people demanded that black people occupy the bottom rung on the nations racial ladder. Lincoln campaigned for the Senate that year as a white supremacist.

The Civil War changed both Lincoln and Douglass. Lincoln quickly realized that his primary goal, preserving the Union, could only be accomplished by destroying slavery. And when the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, he also authorized African Americans to enlist in the army, a policy that had more immediate consequences. African American troops served heroically, challenging racial assumptions, and Lincoln moved haltingly towards calling for civil rights for all Americans. Douglass, meanwhile, embraced politics. In the summer of 1863, he met Lincoln for the first time. The President impressed him. But so long as Lincoln lived, the reformers doubts lingered. After Lincolns assassination, however, Douglass cherished his memory. On April 14, 1876, he delivered a speech at the unveiling of the Freedmens Monument in Washington, DC. The memorial, an emancipated slave kneeling at Lincolns feet, irked Douglass. Still, after calling Lincoln preeminently the white mans President, Douglass elaborated: Viewed from the genuine abolition ground, Mr Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent; but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined. The reformer could finally appreciate the politicians work.

Oakes takes up similar themes in his essay on Natural Rights, Citizenship Rights, States Rights, and Black Rights: Another look at Lincoln and race, which appears in Our Lincoln, a collection of essays edited by Eric Foner. This volume is a one-stop shop for readers wishing to know the latest Lincoln scholarship. In addition to Oakes and Foner, who writes about Lincolns enduring romance with colonization, contributors include James McPherson on Lincoln as a wartime President; Mark Neely on Lincoln and civil liberties; Sean Wilentz on Lincoln and Jacksonian Democracy; Harold Holzer on Lincoln and the arts; Manisha Sinha on Lincoln and African American abolitionists; Andrew Delbanco on Lincolns use of sacramental language; Richard Carwadine on Lincolns religiosity; Catherine Clinton on Lincolns family life; and David Blight on Lincoln and collective memory.

Like most edited collections, Our Lincoln is uneven. Two of its best chapters, Oakess and Foners, focus on Lincolns limitations. Oakes suggests that readers can only understand Lincolns troubling racial views by considering them on three levels: Lincoln believed that whites and blacks shared the same natural rights; near the end of his life he concluded that African Americans had earned citizenship rights; and he insisted that some issues marriage and voting rights, for example fell under the rubric of states rights. Reiterating a point he makes at greater length in The Radical and the Republican, Oakes concludes that, Lincolns democratic deference to popular opinion explains his perplexing inconsistencies at least as much as his own racial prejudices. But what of Lincolns persistent contention that freed African Americans must return to Africa? Foner suggests that colonization should be placed in the context of other nineteenthcentury racial engineering schemes, like Native American removal and Chinese Exclusion. Deep-rooted racial anxieties, then, shaped Lincolns views on the subject. He feared that whites and blacks could never live peacefully in an integrated society. And so, though they had been brought to the US in chains, African Americans would have to go for the greater good. Only after the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect did Lincoln stop speaking publicly about the virtues of colonization.

Alan Guelzos Lincoln: A very short introduction (160pp. Oxford University Press. Paperback, £6.99, US $11.95. 978 0 19 536780 5) tells the story of the Presidents life in approximately 35,000 words. What stayed and what went is the

story here. Guelzo opts to stint on Lincolns relationships, not just with his family but also with colleagues and subordinates, and goes long (relatively speaking) on intellectual context. This is a biography of ideas, especially liberal perspectives on equality, that forged Lincolns politics. Guelzo writes little about Lincolns upbringing, preferring to focus on his time as an attorney and a member of the Illinois legislature, experiences that taught him to distrust appeals to virtue and instead rely on the rule of law as a check to tyranny. From there, Guelzo hits the usual notes: the Compromise of 1850 and the KansasNebraska Act, which reopened the question of slaverys fate in the West; the House Divided speech and Lincolns debates with Douglass, which vaulted him on to the national stage; the 1860 address at the Cooper Union, which helped Lincoln secure the Republican Partys presidential nomination; then war, emancipation and martyrdom.

All the talk about race and slavery may be dragging Lincoln down. This is what Barry Schwartz argues in Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era. Schwartz writes that Lincolns reputation reached its height during the Progressive Era. Americans at the time focused on Lincoln as a man of the people and the nations saviour. Even as they engaged in egalitarian reform, Schwartz suggests, common people still embraced their leaders. Lincoln served as a subject of reverence and a symbol of union, equality, and justice. Later, though, in the wake of the modern civil rights movement and as the conditions of postmodernity began transforming the culture, Lincoln became a reminder of the nations continuing racial discrimination. As Americans grew more cynical, they viewed their leaders through jaundiced eyes. At the same time, Schwartz notes, multicultural ideologies encouraged racial and ethnic groups to cultivate their historical uniqueness, rather than focusing on narratives of a shared past. Lincoln, in this context, became best known for emancipation rather than for having preserved the Union. As a result, he reminded many Americans of chapters of history they preferred to forget.

Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era is a contradictory book. On the one hand, Schwartz acknowledges that the cultural preconditions necessary for the kind of adulation Lincoln enjoyed at the start of the twentieth century are undesirable. If Lincoln is to be revered as deeply as he was six or seven decades ago, Schwartz writes, then we must restore a social order of more authoritarian institutions, less negotiable loyalties, and sharper social discriminations. He concludes that such a restoration is not on the horizon, and few would look forward to the racial, religious, and ethnic tribalism accompanying it. On the other hand, he sometimes regrets that the result of these intertwined currents of postmodernity and multiculturalism is the shrinking of American historys triumphs and heroes. In these moments, as when he turns to right-wing activists such as David Horowitz for quotations about the nations moral decay, Schwartz transforms himself from a scholar of memory into a culture warrior. His book then becomes a narrative of declension, a lament for a bygone era. And when he writes without humour about contemporary parodies of Lincoln on the internet or in The Simpsons, Schwartz risks sounding like a grumpy old man, yelling at kids to get off his lawn.

Even after winning the presidency, Barack Obama continues to channel Abraham Lincoln. Obama arrived in Washington via the same train route that Lincoln did in 1861. He swore the oath of office on Lincolns bible. He chose the same lunch that Lincoln ate on his inauguration day. And with the nation mired in a dizzying array of crises, Obama says that he looks to Lincoln for inspiration. Ron Paul, meanwhile, did not secure the Republican nomination, despite the passion of his supporters. Nevertheless, he, too, continues to use Lincoln for political purposes. On April 15, Paul and hundreds of thousands of limited-government activists took to the streets to rail about the long reach of federal authority. In addition to claiming that income tax is unconstitutional, leaders of these so-called Tea Parties raised the spectre of secession. Rick Perry, the Republican governor of Texas, warned that if pushed, the Lone Star state might decide to leave the Union. And when political commentators heaped scorn on Perry, Paul defended him, noting that, it is very American to talk about secession. Perhaps, but Lincoln deserves a more generous 200th birthday present.

Philip B. Kunhardt III, Peter W. Kunhardt and Peter W. Kunhardt Jr
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