

An interview in *Lincoln Lore* with David S. Reynolds regarding his newest book, *Lincoln's Selected Writings* (W.W. Norton, September 2014)

Sara Gabbard: I think that your division of the book into three parts was a perfect way to present the subject. Please explain to our readers your “game plan.”

David S. Reynolds:

When planning this book, I realized there had never been a Lincoln volume that brought together three kinds of writing: a broad sampling of Lincoln’s own works, a range of comments on him in his own time, and modern views of him. So colossal a figure as Lincoln, I think, can be understood only if we understand various perspectives: his own, that of his contemporaries, and that of more recent commentators. By representing these different views of him, my book tries to capture Lincoln’s ample spirit and his profound impact on history.

SG: Was it terribly time-consuming to decide which items to use in each of your three parts? It seems as if you would have had to go through mountains of material in order to make your final selections.

DSR:

Mountains of material, yes! The challenge here was to make selections from three enormous bodies of writing: the eight volumes of Lincoln’s collected works; the countless responses to him by his contemporaries; and the more than 14,000 books and numerous articles and book chapters that have been written on Lincoln since his time. With regard to Lincoln’s writings, I started with the classics—the First and Second Inaugurals, the Gettysburg Address, the Cooper Union speech, the Emancipation Proclamation—and worked outward to lesser-known but still fascinating and important writings by him, including speeches, letters, poems, proclamations, and excerpts from his debates with Senator Stephen A. Douglas. In making these Lincoln selections, I made sure to include everything that was contained in other single-volume Lincoln anthologies and to add other significant works that these anthologies omit. When choosing works by Lincoln’s contemporaries, I tried to represent different genres--news reports, editorials, campaign songs, poems, and fictional works—and varying attitudes toward him, from the hagiographic to the hostile to the moderate. An especially daunting task was making choices from the many superb writings on Lincoln that have appeared since his death. Here, I strove to bring together works by leading historians and critics who explore different themes related to Lincoln--including race, the law, politics, writing style, military leadership, literary culture, and global influence—in order to provide a rounded picture of America’s greatest president.

SG : I've always been fascinated by the 1838 Lyceum Address, mainly because it seems so unlike most of his later concise, lawyer-like speeches. What is your "take" on this Address?

DSR:

The lyceum address typifies Lincoln's early speeches, which tended to be rambling and discursive, as opposed to his later ones, like the Gettysburg Address and the two Inaugurals, which were pithy and eloquent. But a similar theme runs through all of Lincoln's major speeches, from the lyceum address onward: that is, the need for Americans to devote themselves to what he calls "the preservation of our political institutions." Both early and late in his political career, Lincoln feared that these institutions were threatened by lawless, revolutionary passions. The lyceum address was delivered during what historians have called "the turbulent decade"—a time of race riots, violence against abolitionists, church burnings, and so on. In his lyceum speech, Lincoln gives instances of such violence—the lynching of a black man in St. Louis and race-related vigilante violence in Mississippi—and decries this "mobocratic spirit," which, he contends, erodes America's governmental and legal framework. He calls upon his countrymen to rise above anarchic, revolutionary passions and to observe laws and the governmental process as established by the founding fathers. This same reverence for the Constitution and the founders undergirds his later, more famous speeches.

SG You chose to include the 1846 Handbill Replying to Charges of Infidelity. Please comment on both the handbill itself and the background which caused Lincoln to issue the statement.

DSR:

In 1846, Lincoln ran for Congress in the Illinois Seventh District against the Democrat Peter Cartwright, a famous Methodist preacher. Cartwright, trying to rally his Christian base, accused Lincoln of being a skeptic or even an atheist. In response, Lincoln published a handbill stating that although he belonged to no church, he had never denied the truth of the Scriptures or had spoken with intentional disrespect of religion. He distributed his handbill among influential friends and later sent it to a local newspaper, which printed it. Lincoln's handbill was ambiguously worded. Although Lincoln read the Bible, believed in God, and sometimes attended church, he never became a church member or expressed a definite faith in Christ's divinity or the Bible as God's revealed word.

S DSR:

G: Please explain the 1847 “Spot Resolutions.” Do you see any current support for this type of reasoning in international affairs?

DSR:

Like many antislavery Northerners, Lincoln opposed the Mexican War, launched by President James Polk, because it seemed to be a Southern ploy to extend slavery into new western territories that would be acquired from Mexico. Trying to show that the war had not originated on U. S. soil—and was therefore an act of American aggression—Lincoln in December 1847 proposed a resolution before the House of Representatives requesting President Polk to identify the exact spot (the geographical location) where the war began. Lincoln’s spot resolutions got nowhere and had a temporarily damaging effect on his career, for it made him appear unpatriotic and nitpicking. Derogated by opponents as “spotty Lincoln,” he later defended himself by insisting that, while he had spoken out against the war, he always voted for bills financing American troops. Territorial disputes and questions about American imperialism, which informed Lincoln’s spot resolutions, surround modern wars too, as we see in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

SG: Do historians give the 1854 “Peoria Speech” the attention it deserves?

DSR:

Most historians recognize its importance, but it is still not as celebrated as it should be. The speech is significant for several reasons. Responding to Senator Stephen Douglas’s Kansas-Nebraska Act, which made possible the expansion of slavery into the western territories, Lincoln made careful a historical argument to support his view that American’s founders had placed slavery on the road to extinction and that now this principle was in danger of being violated. Also, for the first time publicly, Lincoln firmly expressed his moral opposition to slavery. He declared, “I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of it just influence in the world.” The speech also outlined Lincoln’s views on race. Unlike most people in his day, Lincoln believed that African Americans were human beings, not property. In the speech, Lincoln affirmed the humanity of blacks, even though he conceded that black people would never be accepted as equals in America due to widespread racism and therefore should be deported to Liberia. Finally, the Peoria speech is noteworthy for its charitable attitude toward the South. Southerners, Lincoln declares, are exactly what Northerners would be in their situation, and vice versa. This compassionate outlook anticipates his famous pronouncement about “malice toward none” and “charity for all” in the Second Inaugural Address.

SG: Please comment on the 1859 letter/autobiography to Jesse Fell.

DSR:

This letter contained the first autobiographical sketch written by Lincoln. Jesse Fell, an old friend, had been asking for information about Lincoln's life because of growing interest in the possibility of a Lincoln candidacy for the presidency. After refusing Fell's request several times, Lincoln finally responded with this autobiographical letter. Lincoln introduced this "little sketch" of himself with the self-effacing comment, "There is not much of it, for the reason, I suppose, that there is not much of me." In the letter, Lincoln emphasized his humble beginnings: his birth on the Kentucky frontier, his childhood in a "wild region" of Indiana "with many bears and other wild animals still in the woods," and his simple education, which amounted to a short time in school studying "'*readin, writin, and cipherin*' to the Rule of Three," after which he educated himself, studied for and practiced the law, and entered politics intermittently. "I was losing interest in politics," he confessed, until the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which "aroused me again." Lincoln described himself as nearly six feet four inches tall, "lean in flesh, weighing, on an average, one hundred and eighty pounds; dark complexion, with coarse black hair and gray eyes."

SG: You cover several of the speeches which President-elect Lincoln made in 1861 during his trip from Springfield to Washington. Did he have a specific purpose in mind for these presentations? Were they effective?

DSR:

President-elect Lincoln made this trip east at a perilous historical moment. As a result of the election of an antislavery Republican president, seven Southern states had already seceded from the Union; four more would follow. Lincoln's speeches on his trip east were intended to communicate his deep commitment to the Union and his disavowal of hostile intentions against the South. Pointing out what he saw as the impossibility of secession, he declared that the rights of a state did not nullify the Union and the Constitution under which all the states were created. He insisted that he did not want war but that he would firmly defend federal property in the South, such as forts—which indeed he did in April 1861, when he called up 75,000 volunteers after the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina.

SG Please compare Lincoln's First and Second Inaugural Address. Can we assume that he had a different goal in mind for each?

DSR:

The First Inaugural was intended to prevent the outbreak of civil war by assuring the South that the North would not interfere with slavery where it already existed. The only dispute between the sections, Lincoln said, was that one believed that slavery was right and ought to be extended, while the other thought it was wrong and ought not to be extended. The Union, Lincoln declared, was perpetual and could not be dissolved by a state or a group of states. Lincoln concluded by telling the South, “We must not be enemies.” He reminded Southerners that they were tied to Northerners by “the mystic chords of memory” that connected all Americans to the Revolutionary generation. In the Second Inaugural, Lincoln again encompassed both the Northern and Southern points of view, but this time with the goal of healing the nation’s wounds after the war. The war, he said, had originated because of a disagreement over slavery. During the war, both sections read the same Bible and prayed to the same God. It was now time, he declared, to put aside malice and exercise charity. The Second Inaugural had the tone of sermon: only 750 words long, it mentioned God fourteen times, contained three Biblical quotations, and invoked prayer three times. But Lincoln took no definite religious position. Instead, he communicated his longstanding conviction that God’s ways remain unknowable to humans.

SG: You quote from “The Wisdom of the First Inaugural Address.” Please describe this piece.

DSR:

This article, which appeared in the Republican newspaper the *New York Tribune*, praised the Inaugural for “its sagacity as well as its courage.” The essayist took note of Lincoln’s judiciousness, calmness, and decisiveness, exemplified by his unshakable fidelity to the Constitution and the Union and his gracious but firm attitude toward the South.

SG: Describe Emerson’s “The President’s Proclamation.”

DSR:

Ralph Waldo Emerson, America’s leading philosopher, described the Emancipation Proclamation as “a poetic act,” one of the rare “jets of thought into affairs” that happen once a century or so, a crucial “step forward in the direction of catholic and universal interests.” Like everything virtuous, Emerson wrote, the freeing of millions of enslaved blacks was aligned with nature, “because Nature works with rectitude,” and “the virtues of a good magistrate undo a world of mischief, . . . as one midsummer day seems to undo a year of war.” For Emerson, both the war and emancipation were inevitable, since principled justice, as embodied in Lincoln, naturally brought about the North’s sacred struggle for freedom.

SG: As required for historical accuracy, you include several anti-Lincoln diatribes. Please comment on “Lines on the Proclamation Issued by the Tyrant Lincoln” and “Lincoln as Absolute Dictator: A Copperhead’s Perspective.”

DSR:

“Lines on the Proclamation,” a poem written by “a Rebel” and published in a Confederate newspaper, was a bitter response to Lincoln’s 1863 “Proclamation Appointing a National Fast Day,” one of several proclamations of prayer or thanksgiving that Lincoln issued during the war. The poem rails against Lincoln, describing him as a “maniac-tyrant” who encouraged his people to pray for the success of the Union Army, which, says the author, was only a “coward hireling band” that brought “murder, rapine, blood” into “the noblest, fairest land on earth” (the South), “a more Christian clime” than the North. The poem reminds us that the Confederacy, which, unlike the North, mentioned God in its Constitution, considered itself truly Christian, as opposed to the “infidel” North, with its allegedly satanic leader. The other piece, “Lincoln as Absolute Dictator,” expressed the common view on the part of Copperheads—Northern Democrats who opposed the war—that Lincoln used his presidential war powers in what the writer calls a “despotical and atrocious” manner.

SG: Your book *Walt Whitman’s America* is not only my favorite book about Whitman but my favorite for the picture you give of 19th Century America in its totality. Please comment on Whitman’s reaction to the assassination, including your own chapter titled “My Captain.”

DSR:

There was good reason that Walt Whitman gave a speech on “The Death of Abraham Lincoln” over and over again in the last dozen years of his life. He was fixated on what he called “the tragic splendor of [Lincoln’s] death, purging, illuminating all.” The assassination, he declared, had unequaled influence on the shaping of the Republic. Many violent, contradictory cultural elements Whitman had tried to harness and redirect in his poetry volume *Leaves of Grass*—tensions over slavery, sensationalism, crowd participation at theaters, acting style, and mob violence—found their outlet in the murder of Lincoln in Ford’s Theatre by the white-supremacist actor John Wilkes Booth, and the upwelling of confusion and grief that followed. In Lincoln’s death, Whitman declared, “there is a cement to the whole people, subtler, more underlying, than any thing in written constitution, or courts or armies.” The reminiscence of Lincoln’s death, he noted, “belongs to these States in their entirety— not the North only, but the South—perhaps belongs most tenderly and devotedly to the South.” Lincoln had been born in Kentucky, so that Whitman called him “a Southern contribution,” and he had shown kindness to the South during the war—Whitman noted, for instance, that he avoided the word “enemy” in his speeches. In

death Lincoln became the Martyr Chief, admired by many of his former foes. In life and death Lincoln had, in Whitman's view, accomplished the cleansing and unifying mission he had designed for his own all-encompassing poetry.

SG: How reliable is Carl Sandburg in his treatment of Abraham Lincoln?

DSR:

Like Whitman, Sandburg was a poet responding to Lincoln. Both poets wrote colorfully and passionately about this figure who, for them, embodied America's highest democratic ideals. Sandburg produced a full-scale Lincoln biography—his two-volume *The Prairie Years* appeared in 1926, followed by his four-volume *The War Years* in 1939. Sandburg's biography won a Pulitzer Prize and had a lasting influence on popular views of Lincoln. Sandburg renders Lincoln's life in a lively, encyclopedic narrative that is based fact but, at times, is sentimental and embellished. Some of his sources are unreliable or unidentified. Historians today fault him with occasional inaccuracy. Nonetheless, Sandburg's book remains a landmark in Lincoln biography.

SG: Allen Guelzo subtitles his book on the Lincoln/Douglas Debates as “The Debates that defined America.” Please comment.

DSR:

Guelzo points out that Lincoln in his debates with Stephen A. Douglas raised the possibility that there could be a moral core to American democracy. For Douglas, slavery was a neutral institution that was condoned by the Constitution and that could be voted up or down by individual states. For Lincoln, slavery was a gross injustice that contradicted America's egalitarian ideals. Lincoln's moral redefinition of America, Guelzo suggests, guided the North during the Civil War and influenced American policy in later periods, such as the Cold War era and the Age of Terror.

SG: Richard N. Current refers to Abraham Lincoln as “The Master Politician.” Do you agree?

DSR:

I certainly agree. As a politician, Lincoln skillfully built the Whig Party in Illinois before navigating his way to the Republican nomination for president in 1860. Although he did not campaign for himself—presidential candidates did not do that then—his backers made much of his image as the rough-hewn Illinois Railsplitter, the quintessential self-made American. Besides having populist appeal, Lincoln was an adroit wire-puller and party manager. He regularly rewarded supporters, real or potential, with offers of government jobs. He avoided extreme statements, and he knew how to manipulate others unobtrusively.

SG: Language is so important in the Lincoln story. For so long, I think that the story of the Address at Cooper Union was generally given only a cursory glance until Harold Holzer described the Address as the speech that made him president. Please comment.

DSR:

Holzer argues convincingly that the address that Lincoln delivered at New York’s Cooper Institute on February 27, 1860 led to his becoming president. Lincoln electrified the New York audience of 1,500 with his speech, in which he presented historical evidence that America’s founders, whom he identified as the signers of the Constitution, stood opposed to the westward expansion of slavery. By making this case persuasively, Lincoln demonstrated that the Republican Party, labelled by its opponents as dangerously revolutionary, was actually conservative in its adherence to the nation’s fundamental principles. Stylistically, the Cooper Union speech was direct, logical, and forceful, with dramatic rhetorical flourishes, such as its peroration, in which Lincoln, having declared slavery to be morally wrong, said, “Let us have faith that might makes right, and in that faith let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it.” Like many of Lincoln’s great statements, this one combines firmness (“might makes right,” “let us...dare ”), religious resonance (“Let us have faith..and in that faith”), and humility (“let us...do our duty as we understand it”).

SG: How do you present Eric Foner’s writing on Lincoln and Race?

DSR:

My book contains selected passages from different sections of Eric Foner’s *The Fiery Trial* that reveal an evolution in Lincoln’s views of race. Lincoln never fully overcame the racial attitudes prevalent among whites of his era. In conversation, he used the words “nigger” and “darky,” and he enjoyed blackface minstrel shows. But Foner points out that Lincoln’s pronouncements on

race became more progressive as time passed. Early on, in the 1850s, though he voiced his opposition to slavery, he spoke quite conservatively about alleged differences between whites and blacks that he thought would prevent them from living on equal terms in America. He also publicly endorsed colonization, or the movement to ship blacks to Liberia or elsewhere. But after issuing the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863, Lincoln ceased his public support of colonization, a plan he had come to regard as unfeasible. In his private relations with African Americans, he did not exhibit racism. Frederick Douglass, who met with Lincoln often during the war, said, “In all my interviews with Mr. Lincoln, I was impressed with his entire freedom from popular prejudice against the colored race.” Shortly before his death, Lincoln wrote that he believed the right to vote should be extended to blacks who were “very intelligent” or who had served in the Union army—the first endorsement of African-American suffrage by a U. S. president.

SG: What was James McPherson’s view of Lincoln and the Strategy of Unconditional Surrender?

DSR:

McPherson demonstrates that although Lincoln wanted peace, he knew it could be achieved only through a hard war. Lincoln was a hands-on commander-in-chief. He read books on military strategy and kept a vigilant watch on developments on the battlefield. He spent more time in the telegraph office, sending and receiving military dispatches, than anywhere else except the White House. He shaped the aggressive tactics of Generals Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan, whose campaigns destroyed the Confederacy and brought about its unconditional surrender.

SG: What is the subject of your next book?

DSR:

I’m working on a book for Penguin in which I place Lincoln in his times by discussing unexplored connections between him and his cultural and social contexts.

David S. Reynolds is a Distinguished Professor of English and American Studies at the CUNY Graduate Center. His books include *Walt Whitman’s America*, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, *Mightier than the Sword: “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” and the Battle for America*, *Waking Giant: America in the Age of Jackson*, *Walt Whitman*, *George Lippard*, and

Faith in Fiction: The Emergence of Religious Literature in America. Reynolds is the editor or co- editor of seven books. He is the winner of the Bancroft Prize, the Christian Gauss Award, the Ambassador Book Award, the Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Prize, the John Hope Franklin Prize (Honorable Mention), and finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. He is a regular contributor to the *New York Times Book Review*.