

Lincoln's Rowdy America

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Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times

by David S. Reynolds.

Penguin Press, 1,066 pp., \$45.00

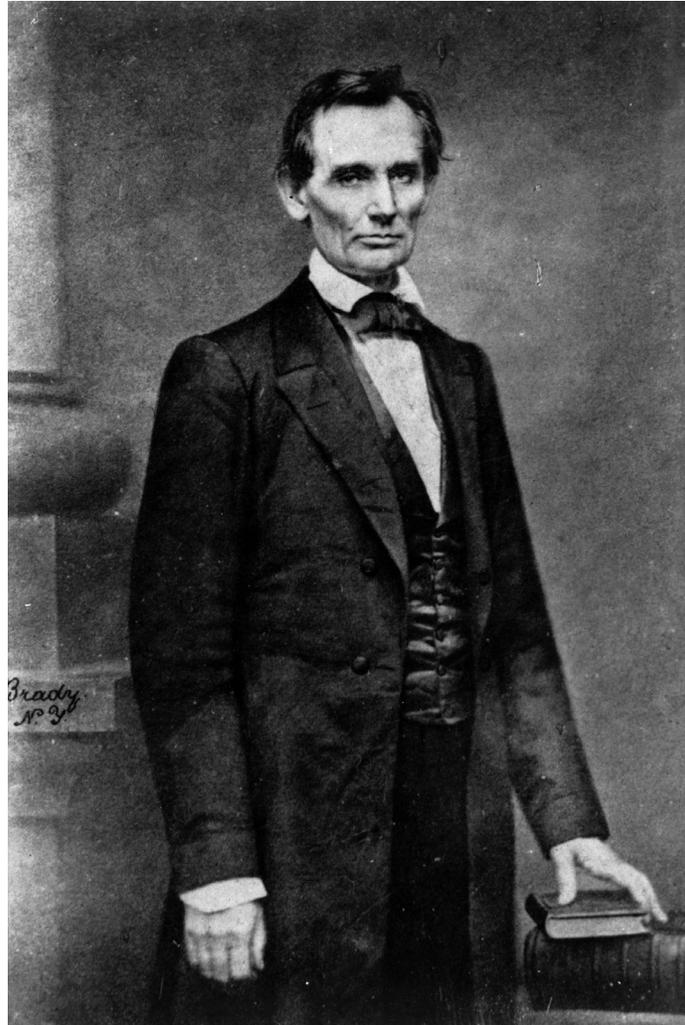
Amid the dismal presidential contest of 1856 that put James Buchanan, a moss-backed northern apologist for slavery, in the White House, Walt Whitman, in an essay entitled "The Eighteenth Presidency!," summoned a very different sort of national leader. Whitman envisaged a "heroic, shrewd, fully-inform'd, healthy-bodied, middle-aged, beard-faced American," perhaps a "boatman come down from the West across the Alleghanies," who would "walk into the Presidency, dress'd in a clean suit of working attire." Then this champion of "the real America" would overturn the politics of "filth and blood," "dirt and excrement" that had crushed the masses "under the feet of slavery." That figure uncannily resembled Abraham Lincoln, then virtually unknown outside Illinois: Lincoln the lawyer had indeed been a boatman as well as a rail splitter in his younger days, and although clean-shaven when Whitman wrote, he arrived in Washington early in 1861 fully bearded, as if to fulfill the poet's prophecy.

In fact, Whitman's imaginary westerner, a patriot who repudiated party politics and miscreant politicians, differed sharply from the actual Lincoln, who was a politician to his marrow. Still, the image of Honest Abe as an unaffected democratic champion cemented his reputation, and it long survived his death to inspire millions here and abroad. Somehow Whitman outlined the essentials of an enduring Lincoln identity before he or hardly anyone else had heard much of anything about Abraham Lincoln.¹ Short of divination, something evidently was in the air in the 1850s that Whitman captured and Lincoln at least appeared to embody.

David Reynolds's ambitious biography *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times* aims to capture that atmosphere, cataloging and evaluating the jumble of cerebral philosophy, dirty jokes, and everything in between that furnished Lincoln's inner life and fed his public persona. Recognizing Lincoln as the foremost mythic self-made American, Reynolds describes the cultural materials that went into his actual self-making, from weepy parlor songs to tightrope dare-devilry high above Niagara Falls. Drawing on a distinguished scholarly career spent immersed in the popular culture of pre-Civil War America, Reynolds, a professor at the CUNY Graduate Center, illuminates aspects of Lincoln's significance that elude more conventional biographers.

There are perils in this kind of study, and *Abe* does not escape all of them, especially when it draws strained connections between Lincoln and his cultural surroundings. But Reynolds resists the larger and more damaging temptation to render his subject as the sum of his influences. Reynolds's Lincoln does not simply reflect his times; he creates them as well. Indeed, large portions of the book focus on what truly made Lincoln important: his political career, about which cultural correlations can explain only so much, as Reynolds implicitly concedes. These sections, though less diverting than those about popular devotions and fads, depart from some commonplace but misleading views, above all about Lincoln, slavery, and race; and apart from some dubious passages in the book's final chapters, they are persuasive. Writing a comprehensive cultural biography of Lincoln is a large task on its own, but by shifting at times out of culture and into politics, Reynolds has accomplished a good deal more.

Reynolds's treatment of Lincoln presents a version of pre-Civil War American culture that he has advanced in several books, beginning with his landmark study *Beneath the American Renaissance* (1988). Taking up Herman Melville's observation that "great geniuses are parts of the times; they themselves are the times," that book asserted that the major American authors of the mid-nineteenth century—including Emily Dickinson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Henry David Thoreau, as well as Whitman and Melville—have been badly misinterpreted as alienated, solitary rebels from sentimental, genteel America. Reynolds discerned that their work gathered strength from an alternative, now submerged, profane America, and from what he called its "subversive imagination," contained in an outpouring of perverse murder tales, sadomasochistic pornography, lurid exposés of urban upper-class decadence, and more—"bizarre, nightmarish, and often politically radical."



Abraham Lincoln before delivering his Cooper Institute address,
New York City, 1860; photograph by Mathew Brady

In mining this cultural underside, Reynolds has never ignored high literary and philosophical influences on his subjects. Nor is he interested in obliterating the literary canon. He insists, rather, that writers of genius alloyed the perceptions of Shakespeare with a rowdy, dark, often prurient American popular culture that had its own demotic versions of Shakespeare and that earlier critics scarcely recognized as any kind of culture at all. For example, Reynolds shows that the doomed *Pequod's* final moments in *Moby-Dick* cannot be fully appreciated, as they would have been in the 1850s, apart from contemporary popular depictions of gory disaster.

Reynolds went on to develop this insight in a full-length study of Whitman and another of Harriet Beecher Stowe and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He also contributed a laudatory life of a political subversive idolized by some of his literary subjects, the abolitionist John Brown. At some point, he must have noticed that he and his subjects kept bumping into the most imposing American of all, the hero prefigured in "The Eighteenth Presidency!" Lincoln, moreover, is regarded by some as one of America's greatest writers as well as its greatest president, "the maker of a style that is unique in English prose," according to the historian Jacques Barzun. Given where Reynolds has been headed for the last thirty-odd years, his writing *Abe* seems almost inevitable.

Lincoln's closest associates recalled him as a man of boundless curiosity for whom "life was a school," as a fellow Illinois lawyer remarked; he was "always studying and mastering every subject which came before him." Although he was a rationalist repulsed by extremism and driven by a desire to achieve and sustain amity and union, he thought inclusively, assimilating as best he

could every morsel of human existence and embracing high and popular culture alike.

That embrace, Reynolds says, afforded Lincoln a richness of vision similar to that of the great novelists, poets, and philosophers, which operated as easily inside the sensational as the sublime. Just as the narrator of *Leaves of Grass* contained multitudes, Reynolds writes, “so, too, did Lincoln.” That vision in turn helps explain his political success. Lincoln disliked the nickname “Abe” much as, once elected, he spurned the formal title “Mr. President.” But without “Abe,” Reynolds contends—“the approachable everyman from what was then the West” relentlessly promoted by his political managers—there would have been no President Lincoln. And so Reynolds has written a biography of Abe, the man he believes Lincoln actually was.

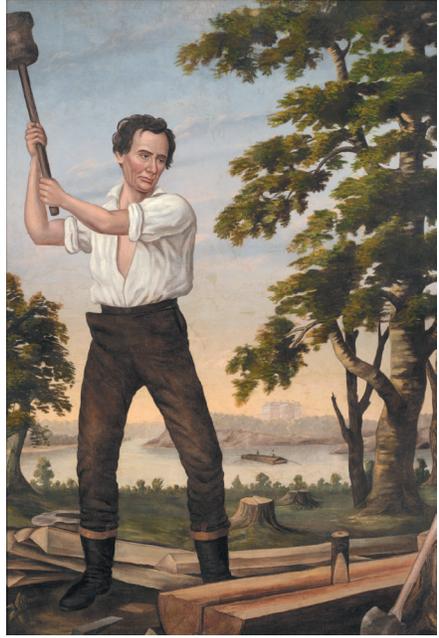
The book is especially good on Lincoln’s early backwoods years in Kentucky, Indiana, and finally Illinois. As an adult he said little about his upbringing, consigning it (with an autodidact’s nod to Thomas Gray) to “the short and simple annals of the poor.” Reynolds depicts a richer milieu, in which easily accessible books, carnivalesque storytelling contests, and local debating societies provided Lincoln with a buffer against a frontier masculinity defined by stupefied drunkenness and eye-gouging violence. As he grew to a muscular six foot four, Reynolds reveals, he established his toughness while fending off outright brutality, excelling instead in the arts of the pithy putdown and scatological joke, all the while refusing tobacco, scorning liquor, avoiding (and for a time mocking) organized religion, and feeding his mind with Alexander Pope, Robert Burns, and Shakespeare’s plays.

Covering the rest of Lincoln’s life, Reynolds is prone to informative digressions into larger cultural backgrounds and significances, though his erudition occasionally gets the better of him. A discussion of Lincoln’s near-suicidal depression upon the death in 1835 of his first love, Ann Rutledge, for example, prompts him to speculate on the sensational effects of the mournful songs and poems that he says Ann favored, then to lead us on a ramble that takes in everything from shape-note songbooks to Bob Dylan, proving only that Lincoln enjoyed the same sad songs as countless other Americans of the era. Later, a clever discovery about a once-famous tightrope daredevil named Charles Blondin, to whom cartoonists likened President Lincoln, turns into a far-fetched assertion that the president “identified strongly” with the showman. Describing Lincoln’s wife’s extravagant shopping sprees, Reynolds observes, out of nowhere, that “Mary’s attitude toward clothing was the opposite of Henry David Thoreau’s . . . spartan simplicity.”

Most of Reynolds’s excavations, though, enrich our understanding of major events. His chapter covering the 1860 election locates Lincoln in Manhattan on the February day he gave the speech at Cooper Union (then the Cooper Institute) that established him as a serious presidential candidate. In the morning, he walked from his hotel to the studio of Mathew Brady, who tidied him up and made the picture that would become one of his most effective pieces of campaign propaganda, at a time when politicians had barely begun to exploit photography. Reproduced endlessly over the ensuing eight months, Brady’s image of a high-cheeked, serene, slightly grave Lincoln offered indispensable visual proof that he was no western hick but a man of substance, plausibly a statesman. “Brady and the Cooper Institute speech made me president,” he reportedly said later.

But there was more. Across the street from Lincoln’s hotel, where he spent most of the day, was Phineas T. Barnum’s museum, which at one time or another exhibited the Feejee Mermaid, the Siamese twins Chang and Eng, and, most famously, the much beloved, two foot eleven inch Charles S. Stratton, known to the world as General Tom Thumb. Lincoln did not visit the museum that day, and it would be three more years until, at a low point in the Civil War, he held a reception for Tom Thumb at the White House. Still, the Barnum culture of grotesque spectacle had attracted millions to the museum and was well known to Lincoln.

Lincoln, Reynolds argues—neither Brady’s image of him nor Whitman’s imagined ideal from four years earlier, but the man himself, freakishly tall and, by conventional standards, almost as freakishly ugly—fit right in with that culture. Indeed, Lincoln seemed deliberately to turn his looks and that culture to his advantage, especially in his speechmaking, as he did that night at the Cooper Institute. He began speaking, as he usually did, while fidgeting and otherwise accentuating his awkward, ungainly, even bizarre appearance. Onstage in the cavernous auditorium, he looked as much like a Barnum oddity as any politician alive. But gradually Lincoln kindled to his antislavery subject, started to appear almost incandescent, held his listeners rapt, and won not just applause but adulation. A prominent member of the audience, the patrician lawyer George Templeton Strong, remarked that while Lincoln began his speech looking like “a barbarian, Scythian, yahoo, or gorilla,” he eventually won the crowd over as “most sensible, straightforward, honest,” a man of “evident integrity and simplicity of purpose.”



Chicago History Museum

The Railsplitter, a painting of Abraham Lincoln displayed at his rallies during the 1860 presidential campaign

Although often presented as if eternally shrouded in glory, Lincoln has always had strong and sometimes fierce political detractors at both ends of the political spectrum. In 1866, a year after Lincoln's assassination, the white supremacist, Lincoln-hater, and Richmond newspaper editor Edward A. Pollard published *The Lost Cause*, which has proven to be something of a foundation text for ideas shared by modern neo-Confederates as well as the antigovernment militia movement and its outcroppings. (When apprehended in 1995, Timothy McVeigh, the militant who carried out the Oklahoma City bombing, was wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with Lincoln's portrait above his assassin John Wilkes Booth's infamous words "Sic Semper Tyrannis," the Virginia state motto.) More temperate voices have assailed Lincoln as a statist despot who shredded the Constitution.

On the left, meanwhile, the radical abolitionist critique of Lincoln as either a phony—"the slave-hound of Illinois," Wendell Phillips called him—or a laggard has lived on in depictions of Lincoln as a reluctant emancipator who cared everything for the Union and little about ending slavery until the flight of escaped slaves to Union lines forced his hand. In a major speech in 1876, Frederick Douglass, who had earlier both criticized and praised Lincoln, observed that this view was myopic and unfair. Lincoln, he explained, was a statesman, bound to consult his country's sentiments. Thus his actions on slavery, far from tardy or indifferent, were "radical, zealous, determined."

Of more recent vintage is a condemnation of Lincoln as an incorrigible racist who actually supported or at least tolerated the enslavement of Blacks. During his lifetime, legions of racists, North and South, constantly assailed him in the vilest terms as a traitor to the white race, the devilish Abraham Africanus I, a Negro in disguise (although "Negro" wasn't the word they used), and an advocate of miscegenation (a word coined specifically to smear Lincoln). Some Black critics, meanwhile, notably Douglass when he wasn't praising him, cursed Lincoln as indifferent to Black suffering.

One is hard put, though, to find anyone singling out Lincoln as a racist fiend either before his murder or for decades thereafter. Then, in 1964, just as the civil rights movement's leaders claimed they were fulfilling his legacy, Malcolm X said, "I think Lincoln did more to deceive Negroes and to make the race problem in this country worse than any man in history." In 1968 Lerone Bennett Jr., an editor at *Ebony* magazine, indicted Lincoln as a resolute white supremacist, a claim he enlarged upon three decades later in a book entitled *Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream*.

Drawing on statements, wrenched out of context, that Lincoln made before the war expressing

opposition to equal civil and political rights for Blacks, as well as on his support for the colonization movement that proposed sending free Blacks to Africa or some other foreign destination, Bennett presented him as not simply anti-Black but pro-slavery—even as a forerunner of Adolf Hitler. Lincoln’s famous statements about equality as the core American value, his impassioned pleas that Blacks deserved human rights, and his announced intention to put slavery “in the course of ultimate extinction” were to Bennett just empty and deceptive rhetoric. His Lincoln did not just subscribe to racist views; he was an outright oppressor for whom white supremacy was “the center and circumference of his being.” And in representing the central principles of his irredeemably racist country, Lincoln was, Bennett made clear, “a key, perhaps the key, to the American personality.”

Forced Into Glory swiftly met with harsh criticism, not simply from protective Lincoln specialists but also from leading historians of the Civil War era, who found the book’s analyses “one-dimensional” and “relentlessly polemical,” its strongest conclusions “totally unfounded,” and its more particular interpretations ranging in quality from “wrong” to “absurd.” Of its many illogical claims, one stood out: If Lincoln even remotely fit Bennett’s description of him, why would his election in 1860 have prompted southern states to secede from the Union in the name of preserving slavery? Yet the thrust of Bennett’s tendentious indictment has not only survived, it has practically become an article of faith on some parts of the left, used to justify recent monument toppling and school renaming.²

On the matter of Lincoln and slavery, Reynolds, in line with most current historians, is unequivocal: Lincoln loathed the institution, so much so, Reynolds writes, “that he chose civil war over tolerating its spread.” That loathing had been ingrained as far back as Lincoln could remember, and it grew into a conviction that he should help eradicate slavery. Reynolds quotes Lincoln’s friend and fellow Illinois lawyer Leonard Swett: “He believed from the first, I think, that the agitation of Slavery would produce its overthrow, and he acted upon the result as though it was present from the beginning.”

If Lincoln hated slavery so much, though, why didn’t he join the abolitionists? Here Reynolds leans partly on his cultural interpretations, citing a transcendent search for harmony and order on Lincoln’s part that precluded abolitionism. A more political interpretation would cite Lincoln’s longtime devotion to the Whig Party as a vehicle both for his personal ambition and for his support of government-encouraged economic development, mingled, in the North, with its relative friendliness to the antislavery cause compared to its Democratic Party rivals.

But Reynolds also convincingly roots Lincoln’s alternative antislavery politics in his certitude that the abolitionists’ high-minded strategy of moral suasion would stir up trouble but never break the slaveholders’ power, and in his reverence for what he perceived as an essentially egalitarian Constitution that, despite its concessions to slavery and contrary to radical abolitionists’ renunciations, contained great antislavery potential. The antislavery constitutionalism that Lincoln embraced and helped develop would become the cornerstone for the politics of the Republican Party and in time would ignite southern secession. Before then the argument had evolved to win over a wide range of antislavery agitators with its insistence, Reynolds writes, “that antislavery principles were actually embedded within the Constitution”—a Constitution that, if interpreted correctly, as the abolitionist Douglass at length came to conclude, was “a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT.”³

Reynolds is no less categorical on Lincoln and race than he is on Lincoln and slavery, rebuking Bennett’s depiction of Lincoln for its “utter falsity.” To be sure, Lincoln did not advocate equal political and civil rights for whites and Blacks, as some abolitionists did. Without question, he shared many of the conventional racist beliefs of his time. But what made him who he was lay in his ability to transcend those beliefs.

Lincoln’s views on racial equality were advanced enough for him to embrace Black suffrage even before his famous final speech calling for it; in a 1864 letter he told the governor of Louisiana that the vote, “the jewel of liberty,” ought to be kept “within the family of freedom”—the opening wedge for and the surest guarantor of full equality. Lincoln actually said hardly anything about race in public except in reply to his racist adversaries’ attacks. “Race is our obsession, not Lincoln’s,” the historian Eric Foner has written.⁴ Yet Lincoln did fixate for decades on southern Christian theology that claimed God had decreed Black racial inferiority and enslavement. There were few subjects on which he demonstrated fiercer contempt.

As Reynolds’s subtitle insists, Lincoln was a man of his own time and place, not ours—some-

thing detractors like to dismiss as an evasive apology, thereby burying his historical significance. That Lincoln sometimes casually referred to Blacks with the most notorious racial slur, in public as well as private, might be historically telling had he failed to stand up to racist demagogues. Lincoln's enjoyment of blackface minstrel shows, which was almost universal among white Americans, should not come as a surprising, let alone damning, historical fact. Reynolds points out that the shows displayed genuine pathos and nobility in addition to racist burlesque.

More revealing and more distinctive was Lincoln's genuine love for spirituals and other Black music, which led him as president to slip away from the White House to encampments of Black "contrabands"—slaves who escaped to Union lines—to listen to their singing. Neither should we be surprised by his defensive disavowals of Black political and social equality during his Senate campaign in 1858, while debating in Negrophobic districts of southern Illinois against possibly the most brutal race-baiter in American politics, Stephen A. Douglas.

Nor, finally, should it be shocking to learn that Lincoln supported various voluntary colonization schemes even after his election to the presidency—to some critics, his telltale racist offense. Lincoln hardly foresaw the elimination of the Black presence in the United States, having observed in 1854 that there was "not surplus shipping and surplus money enough in the world" to complete the task. He not only understood but commended the status of free men of color as voters as well as citizens at the nation's founding: "In proportion to their numbers," he remarked in the aftermath of the *Dred Scott* decision, they "had the same part in making the Constitution that the white people had," only to see those rights suppressed over succeeding decades.⁵

Lincoln's support for colonization sprang neither from a horror of Blacks as a vicious, degraded race, a view he repudiated, nor from a fear that, once freed, ex-slaves would attempt to annihilate their former masters. He did express concern that white hatred of Blacks would persist in as yet unimagined forms, with voluntary colonization serving as a kind of subsidized escape hatch. Several leading Black abolitionists shared a similar racial pessimism of their own that mounted in the fearsome 1850s, and they too endorsed voluntary colonization, as did radical white abolitionists like Douglass's associate James Redpath. Above all, perhaps, Lincoln's support for colonization, like his support early in the war for partially compensating owners for freeing their slaves—actually carried out in the District of Columbia—was inseparable from his ever-evolving political calculations to ease the way for ending slavery, especially in the border states. In any event, after he issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, announcing freedom with no mention of colonization, Lincoln never brought up the idea in public again and basically left it behind.

Abe helps show that the supposedly urgent issue of Lincoln's racism is more worked up than it is urgent, if indeed it is really an issue at all. Lincoln was not as radical on racial equality as some white antislavery advocates, Reynolds reminds us—few if any serious historians over the last sixty years have harbored any delusion otherwise—but neither was he one of those antislavery racists whom Frederick Douglass described as "opposing slavery but hating its victims," or one of those Republicans who, as a *New York Times* editorial in 1858 claimed about the party, "aimed at the good of the *white men* of the country, and had nothing to do with negroes." Rather, Lincoln believed to his core that Blacks were entitled to enjoy equally the natural rights elaborated in the Declaration of Independence—above all, he stated repeatedly, the right to the fruits of their labor. In that sense, he was a thoroughgoing and unflinching racial egalitarian, far in advance of most white Americans.

The basic decency embedded in that egalitarianism helps explain Lincoln's oft-noted easy relations with Black people, from his numerous Black neighbors at home in Springfield to abolitionist celebrities like Douglass and Sojourner Truth. It helps explain his habit, one that Reynolds notices, of quietly holding out in his speeches the possibility that one day, perhaps, white prejudice—which he regarded as irrational—might disappear. It helps explain why, as president, he praised Black freedom fighters with their "clenched teeth, and steady eye, and well-poised bayonet" while he assailed the "malignant heart, and deceitful speech" of white racists who opposed the Emancipation Proclamation and Black military enlistment. It helps explain why, during the last years of his life, he glimpsed an expanded equality as no president before him and only a decided minority of other white Americans had.

The Emancipation Proclamation instantly transformed the Civil War into a social revolution and turned the Union military into an army and navy of liberation. By also opening up enlistment to Black soldiers and sailors, some 180,000 of whom would fight in the Union cause, the proclamation altered the social and political stakes for the nation after as well as during the war.

While Lincoln consulted with Douglass and other Black leaders, in part to hasten the flight of the enslaved to Union lines, he realized that the military sacrifices being made by Blacks would be ample reason to afford them some form of political equality as well as freedom. Finally, two days after Lee's surrender at Appomattox, he became the first American president to endorse publicly the opening of suffrage to Black men, possibly by national decree. It would have been unthinkable at the outbreak of war. Evidently the revolution had only begun.

Reynolds is tempted, as the upheaval mounts, to liken Lincoln to John Brown, whose failed raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859 had led to his glorification in certain prominent quarters. The linking is not completely surprising, as Reynolds's biography of Brown borders at times on adulation born of Brown's uncompromising antiracism, which set him apart even from other radical abolitionist whites. But the Lincoln–Brown connection has been getting attention from other scholars as well. Events redeemed Brown, so the argument goes, insofar as overthrowing slavery required, as he had forecast, an apocalyptic purging of the sin of human bondage. It entailed, as Brown thought it would, whites working alongside Black leaders and attacking slaveholders with the help of armed Black recruits, including tens of thousands who had only recently freed themselves by escaping their enslavers.

Even the Union's military operations resembled Brown's, including an effort—which, according to Douglass, Lincoln described to him as “somewhat after the original plan of John Brown”—to arouse more slaves to strike out for their freedom. Having set out to eliminate slavery peacefully, Lincoln wound up prosecuting a ruthless, so-called hard war. In the end it was Brown's strategy, not Lincoln's, that destroyed slavery.⁶

Reynolds plays around with this imaginary history and wishful vindication of Brown at Lincoln's expense, but he wisely backs off. The Union Army and Navy, with Blacks recruited through the Emancipation Proclamation, wreaking merciless havoc in the South wasn't at all Brown's misbegotten plan or larger strategy. His raid, Reynolds writes, “was a vigilante effort, motivated by the higher law”—led, he might have added, by a self-appointed, God-struck avenger who hated the Constitution and took up arms against the federal government—“that deepened the national divide.” Lincoln, on the contrary, “directed a Constitution-backed war that never lost sight of restoring the entire nation and putting it on a just basis.” He honestly hoped that his legitimate, democratic election as president would help initiate slavery's eventual but sure extinction, yet the slaveholders would not stand for it.

Lincoln's strategy was to build a political party with a broad coalition, bring the issue of halting slavery's expansion before what he called the “great tribunal, the American people,” and win that contest in 1860, after which he held fast to principle against violent insurrectionists who would break up the Union rather than accept the election's result. That strategy led directly to the Civil War. It evolved, as all wartime strategies do, after it became clear that crushing the rebellion required Lincoln's proclaiming slavery's immediate and not gradual demise, and even then on the strength of a Union military victory. The unforeseen result of slavery's immediate abolition, he observed in his second inaugural address, was “fundamental and astounding,” and it accompanied a broadening of his own views on racial equality. Yet as David Reynolds's brilliant cultural history reminds us, destroying slavery and saving American democracy had grown from Lincoln's strategy, not John Brown's. □

¹“The Eighteenth Presidency!,” though, would have no part in Lincoln's image-making, since Whitman, after printing some page proofs, left it unpublished. Only in the 1920s, when the proofs surfaced, did it appear in three different versions, including a French translation by Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier published in the influential Paris review *Le Navire d'Argent*.

²The most common charge in the current attacks on Lincoln, also leveled in *Forced Into Glory*, concerns his approval of the hanging of thirty-eight indigenous Americans after a bloody, protracted uprising in Minnesota in 1862 in protest against enormous land theft and corruption, which left four hundred white settlers dead. To Bennett, Lincoln's “hard-hearted” authorization of “one of the largest mass executions in military history” bespoke his racism. Disregarded is the fact that the military commission in charge of the matter, looking to crush the Sioux, sentenced 303 men to death. Lincoln faced intense official as well as popular pressure to sign off on all of the sentences but, appalled by the vengeful proceedings, he instead chose, at a critical moment in the middle of the Civil War, to halt the executions and examine each case with extreme care. He singled out, first, those Sioux convicted of rape on persuasive evidence, and then those who had participated, as he put it, in “massacres” of civilians as “distinguished from participation in battles.” He wound up pardoning or commuting the sentences of 265—making him responsible for the greatest executive clemency decision of its kind in American history. Local racist whites

greeted Lincoln's intervention with seething resentment, which damaged his already imperiled reelection prospects in 1864. Told later that he would have had a larger margin of victory in Minnesota if he had approved more executions, Lincoln reportedly said, "I could not afford to hang men for votes." After he was alerted to how, distracted by the slaveholders' rebellion, he had neglected and thereby helped inflict brutal Indian suffering, he vowed to reform government policy "if we get through this war, and if I live." See Paul Finkelman, "'I Could Not Afford to Hang Men for Votes': Lincoln the Lawyer, Humanitarian Concerns, and the Dakota Pardons," *William Mitchell Law Review*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (2013). The critiques of *Forced Into Glory* quoted here are found in Eric Foner, "Was Abraham Lincoln a Racist?," *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, April 9, 2000; and James M. McPherson, "Lincoln the Devil," *The New York Times Book Review*, August 27, 2000.

³On Lincoln and antislavery constitutionalism, see James Oakes, *The Crooked Path to Abolition: Abraham Lincoln and the Antislavery Constitution* (Norton, 2021).

⁴*The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (Norton, 2010), p. 120.

⁵It does need noting that Lincoln, unlike some antislavery advocates, did not endorse repealing the notorious and deeply entrenched state black laws that severely restricted Black political and civil rights in Illinois and elsewhere. His remarks in 1857 about Black voting at the founding strongly implied that he believed the imposition of those restrictions had been unjust—a risky enough statement as he prepared to run for the Senate against Stephen A. Douglas—but he would go no further. Once Lincoln was elected president, however, his administration, one historian writes, "quickly took steps to enforce racial equality in civil rights in areas where it believed it had jurisdiction." On this point, and on the earlier antiracist movements that fought discrimination, see Kate Masur, *Until Justice Be Done: America's First Civil Rights Movement, from the Revolution to Reconstruction* (Norton, 2021), p. 280.

⁶For this strained assertion, see, for example, H.W. Brands's otherwise excellent *The Zealot and the Emancipator: John Brown, Abraham Lincoln, and the Struggle for American Freedom* (Doubleday, 2020). On the plan that Lincoln presented to Douglass, see David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (Simon and Schuster, 2018), p. 437. Lincoln, always the canny politician, may have associated the plan with Brown in order to help persuade Douglass to accept the mission. Of course, Douglass had prudently refused to join the Harpers Ferry raid, calling it suicidal, but he could have understood Lincoln's proposal as an insurrectionary effort that would succeed.