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‘Wide Awake’ Review: On the March for Lincoln

In the high-stakes presidential election of 1860, Abraham Lincoln’s candidacy was boosted by the zeal of young supporters who rallied in groups.

By
David S. Reynolds
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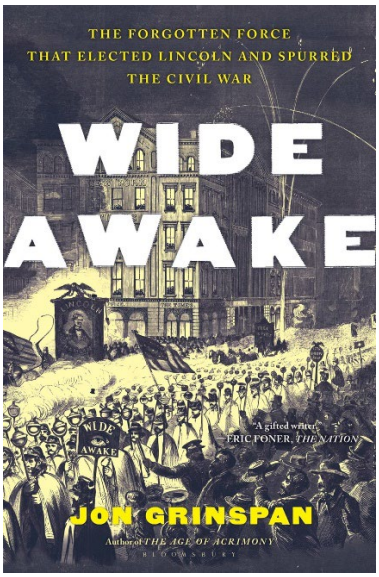

Wide

Wide Awake: The Forgotten Force that Elected Lincoln and Spurred the Civil War

By Jon Grinspan

Bloomsbury Publishing

352 pages

The nation is so divided that the two sides can't meaningfully talk politics with each other. A crucial presidential election looms. Many say that democracy itself is under threat.

As Jon Grinspan reminds us in his illuminating book, "Wide Awake," America has been in this situation before: in 1860, when Abraham Lincoln first ran for the presidency. The air bristled with hostility over the slavery issue. The stakes were precariously high. The North and the South had reached an impasse that would soon lead to civil war.

How did Lincoln, then relatively unknown in national politics, win this critical race? Presidential candidates at the time did not ordinarily campaign for themselves. One of Lincoln's opponents that year, the Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, went on a campaign tour under the pretense of traveling to see his mother. Lincoln, following custom, let others campaign for him. He mainly stayed in his hometown, Springfield, Ill., while supporters rallied throughout the North and in parts of the Upper South.

A youth movement known as the Wide Awakes played a huge role in promoting Lincoln's candidacy. The Wide Awakes are often mentioned in works on Lincoln, but Mr. Grinspan, a curator of political history at the Smithsonian Institution and the author of two previous books on the history of American democracy, is the first to probe them in depth.

He traces the movement to five textile clerks in Hartford, Conn., who formed a grassroots political organization in February 1860 to support the antislavery Republican Party. From this initial group, known as the Hartford Originals, the movement expanded quickly. Wide Awake clubs appeared throughout the North—as Mr. Grinspan writes, they emerged "in Bangor and Brooklyn, Cambridge and Columbus, St. Paul and San Francisco, and hundreds of cities and towns in between." Dressed in shiny oilskin capes and carrying torches, the Wide Awakes staged "monster" parades with fireworks and music, marching and thundering forth their distinctive chant: "Hurrah! Huzzah! Hurrah! Huzzah! Hurrah! Huzzah!"

As the chant suggests, the Wide Awakes were remarkable for enthusiasm, not eloquence, though some smooth-tongued antislavery politicians, including Charles Sumner and William Henry Seward, spoke at their rallies. True eloquence would come from the Wide Awakes' political hero, Lincoln, who as president coined linguistic gems like "the better angels of our nature," "with malice toward none," and "of the people, by the people, for the people." But Lincoln knew how important it was to attract zestful young voters. When he had run for Congress in 1846, he urged friends to whip up support among what he later called "shrewd wild boys about town."

In its early phase, Mr. Grinspan demonstrates, the Wide Awake movement opposed slavery but was not progressive on race. But the movement diversified. African-Americans became Wide Awakes, with the Ohio lawyer John Mercer Langston (later a congressman representing Virginia) and the Bostonian Lewis Hayden, a former slave, leading the way. Opponents came to view the Wide Awakes as dangerous radicals involved in a conspiracy

to bring about a horrid racial reversal in America. One journalist fumed: “The chief object seems to be to give the negro the supremacy over the white man.”

Did the enthusiasm of the Wide Awakes decide the election? Mr. Grinspan notes that Lincoln’s opponents in 1860 were divided among three parties: secessionist Southern Democrats, mainstream Democrats and the moderate Constitutional Union Party. Lincoln won only 40% of the popular vote: Mr. Grinspan argues convincingly that the Wide Awakes helped Lincoln become the top vote-getter and the winner of the Electoral College.

Mr. Grinspan describes both the minutiae and the larger meanings of the Wide Awake movement. Typical Wide Awakes, he tells us, were low-salaried male workers in their mid-20s—“young, laboring nobodies,” he calls them. The movement’s costly paraphernalia included cape, greatcoat, torches and fireworks, which were often paid for by parents, employers or other benefactors. Women flocked to see Wide Awake processions, and in some cases they formed Wide Awake clubs of their own, appearing publicly in sand-colored capes and dresses decorated with the word “ABE” in red, white and blue letters.

It’s unknown how large the Wide Awake movement was: Mr. Grinspan gives us a rough range of between 100,000 and half a million participants. Regardless of the numbers, the Wide Awakes generated outsize excitement wherever they appeared. Violence sometimes followed, as groups of proslavery Democrats assaulted the Republican Wide Awakes with stones and brickbats, while the Wide Awakes were summoned to the fray with the cry: “Do your duty!”

When the Civil War came, many of these young men traded torches for rifles. Mr. Grinspan tells us that most of the former Wide Awakes participated in the war, including the African-American Wide Awakes of Boston. This group formed the core of the famous Massachusetts 54th Infantry Regiment, which made a heroic but doomed effort to take the Confederate Fort Wagner in South Carolina in July 1863. After the war, black men who had formerly been Wide Awakes advocated for the expanded rights made possible under the 14th and 15th amendments. For these African-Americans, Mr. Grinspan writes, “politics led to warfare, and warfare back to politics.”

Which reminds us again of the original Wide Awakes. Torch-bearing marchers with an agenda summon up uncomfortable memories of Berlin in 1933 and Charlottesville in 2017. But Mr. Grinspan’s excellent book makes us realize that public zeal in support of a worthy cause can have positive results—in this case, the election of America’s greatest president.

Mr. Reynolds is a Distinguished Professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His latest book is “Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times.”