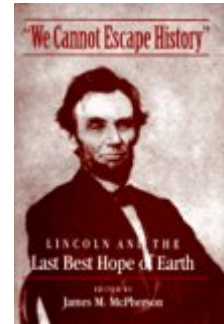


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James M. McPherson, ed. *"We Cannot Escape History": Lincoln and the Last Best Hope of Earth*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995. viii + 176 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02190-9.

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In October 1993 the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, opened a thirteen-month exhibition of the largest collection of original Lincoln documents and memorabilia ever brought together for display. The exhibition, entitled "The Last Best Hope of Earth: Abraham Lincoln and the Promise of America," drew upon the collections of the Huntington Library, the Illinois State Historical Library, and the private collection of Louise and Barry Taper. Its title and theme were suggested by a quotation from President Lincoln's December 1, 1862, annual message to Congress, "We – even we here – hold the power, and bear the responsibility. In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free –honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best, hope of earth."

The chief scholarly consultant for the project was James M. McPherson, Henry George Davis Professor of History at Princeton University. McPherson had much influence on the publication of Mark E. Neely Jr.'s *The Last Best Hope of Earth* (1993), which was a companion publication for the exhibit. He also was involved in the publication of a series of essays, sponsored by the Civil War Round Table of Long Beach, California, on February 19, 1994, at the Huntington Library: Richard Rollins, ed., *A Day With Mr. Lincoln* (1994).

This new volume, edited by McPherson and entitled *"We Cannot Escape History,"* includes an introduction and nine essays by eminent historians of Lincoln, presented at a symposium that marked the opening of the exhibit on October 15-16, 1993. Using the "last best hope of earth" theme, the papers open many new perspectives on Lincoln's thoughts about slavery, nationalism, democracy, equality, war, and peace. The papers are grouped in three parts: Lincoln's America, Lincoln's Leadership, and Lin-

coln's Legacy.

McPherson's introduction, entitled "Last Best Hope for What? ", discusses the implications of the international impact of Lincoln and the goals of the Civil War during the 1860s. In McPherson's own words, "This is pushing things too far;... But perhaps it was more than coincidence that within five years of that Union victory the forces of liberalism had expanded the suffrage in Britain and toppled emperors in Mexico and France" (p. 12).

Kenneth M. Stamp, in the first essay, entitled "Lincoln's History," examines Lincoln's evolving view of American history as related to the preservation of the Union and the abolition of slavery. Stamp here identifies "a conflict in Lincoln's history between individual responsibility and historical determinism, dictated either by the secular environment or by the will of God" (p. 30). Stamp admits that this conflict is still troublesome to modern historians.

"Lincoln's Narrative of American Exceptionalism" is the title of the next paper, written by Jean H. Baker. She believes that Lincoln ultimately came to see the Civil War as a narrative whose outcome God would determine. This narrative, traced through his actions and writings, "remained comparative and unremittingly committed to the Union's superiority 'as a means to inspire the hearts of men everywhere in the world'" (p. 42). Baker decries the fact that these principles of American uniqueness and exceptionalism, in later years, deteriorated into an arrogance, notably in foreign policy.

Philip Shaw Paludan completes this first part with his paper, "Emancipating the Republic: Lincoln and the Means and Ends of Antislavery." Paludan pleads that

Lincoln “was equally committed to the political constitutional system and to the idea of equality. Both mattered profoundly to him, and he believed that one could not be achieved without the other. He fashioned a connection between them, not during the war years, but before” (p. 48).

The second group of papers begins with William E. Gienapp’s, “Abraham Lincoln and Presidential Leadership.” This paper is a review of Lincoln’s leadership at all levels during the war. Gienapp states openly that, “In every regard, Lincoln was a superior president” (p. 79). This may be true, but the argument is weakened by his subsequent discussions of Lincoln’s contemporary critics.

“The Civil War and the Two-Party System” is an offshoot of research conducted by Mark E. Neely Jr. for his book, *The Fate of Liberty: Abraham Lincoln and Civil Liberties* (1991). Here Neely questions the value and consequences of the continuance of a two-party system in the North during the war. He suggests that it was “a great inconvenience when the country was ‘pressed by. . . common danger,’ as Lincoln once suggested” (p. 101). Neely believes his argument warrants a book-length study.

A most interesting look at Lincoln’s changing attitude toward giving extemporaneous speeches after being elected is presented by Harold Holzer in “Avoid Saying ‘Foolish Things’: The Legacy of Lincoln’s Impromptu Oratory.” While Lincoln made his early reputation on the strength of his impromptu delivery, he chose while president to issue only carefully written statements and speeches whenever possible. Through this, however, Lin-

coln’s real talent as a writer emerged, and we are much the richer for it.

In the spirit of “We Cannot Escape History,” the last three papers in the volume discuss Lincoln’s legacy to America and the world. Richard N. Current’s, “What Is an American? Abraham Lincoln and Multiculturalism,” is the most thought-provoking essay of the group. It analyzes the attitudes of both pluralistic and particularistic multiculturalism upon our way of looking at Lincoln. While Current believes in Lincoln’s warning to America that “a house divided against itself cannot stand,” he also sees wisdom in Lincoln’s question, “Is there any better, or equal, hope in the world?”

Frank J. Williams, “Abraham Lincoln—Our Ever-Present Contemporary,” is a reduced version of his extensive display of examples of the cycle of attitudes toward Lincoln during his life and the passing years.

Merrill D. Peterson winds up the book with, “The International Lincoln,” which documents the role of England during and after World War I in spreading the international fame of Lincoln.

There is much in these essays that trained historians or experts in certain phases of Lincoln’s philosophy might chew on, but all-in-all, it is a fine set of essays to dedicate a landmark event in Lincoln scholarship.

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