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James M. McPherson. *Abraham Lincoln: A Presidential Life.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 96 pp. $12.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-537452-0.

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Lincoln in Brief

James M. McPherson, the eminent historian of the American Civil War, has prepared this very brief (only sixty-five pages of text) biography of Abraham Lincoln for those who do not want to wade through the many longer descriptions and assessments of the great president's life. In an essay divided into nine brief, unnumbered sections, he largely succeeds in his goal of capturing "the essential events and meaning of Lincoln's life without oversimplification or overgeneralization" (p. xi). By its nature, however, such an essay cannot deal with the many complexities or ambiguities that arise in any consideration of Lincoln, and only rarely does McPherson even mention historiographical controversies, much less try to resolve them. This is as true of legal and constitutional controversies of special interest to subscribers of H-Law as it is of all the others. Citations are limited to giving the source of quotations rather than the sources of general information or evidence to sustain conclusions.

McPherson's approach is conventional. He addresses character formation in the first two sections, alluding to Lincoln's life-long tendency to depression and mentioning his marriage to Mary Todd Lincoln and its strains. He never mentions Mary again, and alludes to his depression again only once in passing in his short, celebratory final assessment. The rest limns Lincoln's public life, especially his presidency, which takes up thirty-four of the essay's sixty-five pages.

McPherson alludes to Lincoln's career as a lawyer in a couple of paragraphs, with no attention to how it may have shaped his approach to public problems or processes. He notes that from the beginning of his public career, Lincoln argued that the framers of the Constitution conceived slavery as inconsistent with American liberty and thought it was on the road to ultimate extinction. McPherson also makes clear that the argument over extension of slavery in the U.S. territories was essentially one of constitutional interpretation. Briefly noting Lincoln's commitment to free-labor ideology, McPherson describes how his debates with Stephan A. Douglas in 1858 catapulted him to national prominence. The desire for brevity precludes attention to Lincoln and Douglass's divergent views about federalism, and McPherson describes their disagreement of slavery as essentially moral, without discussing constitutional implications. The account of how and why Lincoln secured the Republican presidential nomination is perhaps the most overcompressed part of the essay, attending only to the perception of Lincoln as more moderate than William H. Seward.

Discussing Lincoln as president, McPherson stresses his remarkable acumen as a strategist and his equally remarkable willingness to defer once he found capable generals. Of particular concern to legal/constitutional historians, he offers an overview of Lincoln's record with regard to civil liberties without taking a position other than the conventional observation that restrictions were relatively mild compared to those imposed in later American wars. McPherson describes Lincoln's attitude toward slavery and emancipation without going into the countervailing pressures public idealism, racism, anger at the South, and desire for long-term reconciliation placed upon him. Nor does he convey the degree to which the United States had become in law what Donald E. Fehrenbacher called *The Slaveholding Republic* (2001). The paragraph on the Emancipation Proclamation is simply too brief for clarity.

McPherson presents Lincoln's defense of his exercise of presidential war powers, but he offers no analysis. His account leaves unclear whether Lincoln viewed his actions as constitutional or extra-constitutional. His discussion of Lincoln as a politician is also attenuated, alluding to his confrontation with congressional radicals over the makeup of his cabinet and Reconstruction, his expectation that he would be defeated for reelection, and

the political change wrought by Union victories in the fall of 1864. There is nothing about the nuts and bolts of politics.

The short, celebratory conclusion credits Lincoln with saving the Union and emancipating the slaves. It does not grapple with any of the ambiguities of Lincoln's presidency, the disjuncture between how he was perceived before his death and afterward, historiographical controversies, nor the ongoing constitutional issues his presidency illustrates.

In sum, McPherson has provided a creditable, brief biography of Lincoln that raises more questions than it answers. For this very reason, it serves as a useful introduction to Lincoln's life and to the great issues of the Civil War, including constitutional issues to some degree. Teachers might make it a useful exercise in developing students' abilities to discern and frame historical and constitutional questions. Anyone looking to know a bit more about Lincoln can turn to this slim volume. If they are inspired to go further, there is a brief (of course) bibliography to help them along, but it does not mention those attending especially to constitutional issues, with the exception of Mark Neely's study of wartime civil liberties in the North, *The Fate of Liberty* (1991).

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