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A Becoming and Unbecoming Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln’s final law partner, William H. Herndon, called him “the most secretive—reticent—shut-mouthed man that ever lived,” an exaggeration reflected in the limited number of Lincoln’s personal papers (Lincoln’s papers have appeared in published and online versions and include little that historians would describe as revealing his “interior life”). Lincoln left no diary and few letters, which gives historians ample room for interpretation of anything secret or shut-mouthed.

If the historian is William W. Freehling, the reader has reason to expect a different or provocative interpretation and way of presenting it. Freehling’s quest to divine how Lincoln went through the process of “becoming Lincoln” is no different. He traces Lincoln’s life as akin to a graph tracking a particularly volatile stock market or a seismograph tracing aftershocks: a series of “epic prewar rises and falls,” and “plummets and comebacks,” all of which made for a saga of “human becoming” (pp. 1-2).

Ultimately, Lincoln became, according to Freehling, an antislavery conservative who turned into an emancipator out of necessity and, to be fair, growth. This is redolent of Adam I. P. Smith’s recent work on the importance of conservatism in shaping politics before and during the Civil War (*The Stormy Present: Conservatism and the Problem of Slavery in Northern Politics, 1846-1865* [2017]), and it runs counter to the arguments of scholars like James Oakes, who see Republicans, especially Lincoln, as much more strongly or vocally antislavery than Smith and Freehling do (*Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* [2012]). In the process, Freehling stakes out some new ground and traverses old ground in his own way.

Freehling adds no particularly new information about Lincoln’s early years, but his analysis takes a slightly different approach than many of his predecessors’ has. “During his multiple plunges before rising to the presidency, Abraham Lincoln knew that previous Lincolns had significantly climbed,” he writes. “That understanding helped him psychologically balance an American anomaly: currently plummeting Lincolns” (p. 7). Without going too deeply into psychohistory, Freehling argues that Lincoln’s relationship with his father was as bad as, or even worse than, other historians have posited, and makes the case for Thomas Lincoln motivating him. “When the son became an adult, his secret life generated a visible tower of non-Tom Lincolns: nonhunter, nonfisher-
man, nonilliterate, nonfarmer, noncarpenter, nonmanual laborer, non-husband of an uneducated, penniless bride, non-demanding parent, non-Democrat, non-church member, and especially nonwanderer,” Freehling notes before turning to a non-usual analysis. “Non-Tom Lincoln soon became non-Stephen A. Douglas. Throughout the pre-Civil War years, Abraham’s almost every political move battered Douglas’s latest initiative,” he argues, suggesting that one of Lincoln’s lodestars for much of his life was to be different than someone he disdained (p. 26).

Nonetheless, Freehling points to events in the 1840s—in particular, a pair of political plummets—that drove his subject toward conservatism. His legislative efforts on behalf of state funding of a bank, a railroad, and a canal, and their failures hurt him politically and “epitomized extremists who would not bide their time” (p. 61). Freehling points out that Lincoln ran last on the Whig legislative ticket in 1840 and gave up his seat after that, and the experience made him leery of going too far and too fast on politics and policy. His next plunge came in Congress, where opposing the Mexican-American War hurt his career and his party’s reputation, and his legislative attempt to end slavery in the District of Columbia overreached in proposing to free any slave in Washington “or now owned by any person or persons now resident within said District,” thus potentially emancipating slaves outside the federal jurisdiction (p. 116, emphasis in original).

When Lincoln emerged from the political wilderness in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Freehling contends, he had learned from earlier mistakes. Freehling notes how he refrained from attacking southerners over slavery, including using biblical imagery without questioning their religiosity. Concluding his analysis of the Peoria speech in which Lincoln emerged as an antislavery force, Freehling argues, “his rookie defensive program trailed far behind Radical Republicans’ coercive strategies.... After going too far for comfort in 1849, Abraham Lincoln recommenced in 1854 where he would end in 1865, as an evolving connoisseur of how to revive and lead the incrementally moving dead center of northern antislavery inclinations” (p. 165).

But when he diverged from those conservative inclinations, Freehling concludes, he suffered politically. Freehling said the Dred Scott decision inspired “the first and only time” he “indulged in radical abolitionists’ scurrilous language” by referring to Douglas as “‘delighted’ when the Supreme Court doomed the Scotts’ two daughters to perpetual enslavement, ‘subject to the forced concubinage of their masters, and liable to become the mothers of mulattoes in spite of themselves’”—thus making the key point that Lincoln refrained from personally insulting masters but without clarifying what was so “scurrilous” about abolitionist language (pp. 196-97). Freehling also condemns Lincoln more than most historians do for the section of his House Divided speech in which he described a conspiracy between Douglas, Franklin Pierce, Roger Taney, and James Buchanan. He refers to Lincoln’s “rants” and “serious distortion,” rooted in being “desperate” to defeat Douglas in the 1858 Senate election (pp. 203-4).

When Lincoln then sought the presidency, he avoided what Freehling considered his earlier radical errors. In 1859 and 1860, Lincoln shied away from any hint of radicalism by not discussing equality, eventual emancipation, or conspiracies. Instead, he emphasized how northern society enabled people like him to rise. His movement to and in the Republican middle helped him win the nomination in 1860, from the Cooper Union speech through the election.

But then Lincoln lapsed. Freehling is both traditional and untraditional in his view of what he calls “The Erratic Interregnum” between the election and inauguration—and extends the term to include the weeks between the inauguration and Fort Sumter. Like many historians, he finds Lincoln sounding uncertain in his public appearances
from Springfield to Washington. He argues that Lincoln became less compromising during the secession winter and sought to build up his party in slave states, and that what radicals sought would have made victory in 1860 impossible, all of which either is true or makes sense. But he also contends that impending power “unsettled a fledgling crisis manager,” as demonstrated by the number of letters that requested privacy or confidentiality—which could well be, but he neglects to take into account the length of that interregnum, the difficulty in being president-in-waiting, and Lincoln’s care not to be too public, all while dealing with a new cast of characters (p. 273). Although all of these factors, along with newness to executive administration, caused problems once he became president, Freehling finds he adapted well, and adopted the views of the right people, after some struggles.

In the end, Lincoln finally did what Freehling saw him as previously trying to avoid. Over three decades in politics, Lincoln shifted from gradualism and mostly silence to “defensive strategies against further slaveholder advances,” then to a quest for compensated emancipation for slaveholders. As Freehling writes, “The noncoercive emancipator’s quarter century ended abruptly” with the Emancipation Proclamation, despite his “regret that a horrendous war had exploded a devout dream” of peaceful abolition. “Transition moments do not come more convoluted than Lincoln’s at the dawning of 1863” (p. 319).

At times Freehling’s writing and interpretation become convoluted or questionable. When Lincoln told a New Salem resident that he was studying law, according to Freehling, the reply was “Great God Almighty!” Then Freehling added, “New Salem folks had so exclaimed ever since Lincoln arrived,” including, “Great God Almighty, the relic of Denton Offutt’s folly aspires to be our Black Hawk War captain” (p. 65). But the evidence suggests Lincoln was nominated for militia captain, not because he campaigned for it, although he already was running for the state legislature. Similarly, referring to a program that cost Illinois dearly, he writes of Lincoln’s early career, “His legislative mission, establishing state-aided canals and railroads, crashed so painfully that six years would pass before he again achieved political office” (p. 47). But that argument neglects how Lincoln left the legislature amid his up-and-down relationship with Mary Todd and weariness with serving in the minority; further, winning political office in the one Whig congressional district in Illinois was no simple task.

Similarly, Freehling’s analysis of Lincoln’s views of slavery is both illuminating and vexing. In tracing Lincoln’s antislavery trajectory as a Whig, Freehling critiques his first major antislavery statement, a response to a legislative resolution criticizing abolitionism; but in criticizing Lincoln’s comments, Freehling underemphasizes the political risk he took in making them. Yet Freehling pays more attention than most historians to the importance of how, in a temperance speech in 1842, Lincoln went so far as to say that when a “Reign of Reason shall be complete,... there shall be neither a slave nor a drunkard on the earth” (p. 109).

Once Lincoln becomes a Republican, Freehling posits him as conservative, or at least moderately conservative, which it is possible to argue that he was within the Republican spectrum. But Freehling says less about how the Republican Party was less conservative or moderate on the topic than the Democratic Party. The effect, even if unintended, is to make Lincoln look like a political conservative, which was not the same as being a Republican conservative. While Freehling delves into what he considers Lincoln’s less moderate and less wise moments, some of those criticisms are debatable. When he correctly accuses Lincoln of overstating the conspiracy between “Stephen and Franklin and Roger and James,” Freehling underplays James Buchanan’s role in the Dred Scott decision: he is right that Lincoln knew nothing
about it, but the incoming president’s lobbying of fellow Pennsylvanian Robert Grier to become the only northern justice who fully concurred in Taney’s opinion was part of an effort to reduce the ruling’s sectional character (p. 207). Here Buchanan seems more ethical and honest than he actually was.

Freehling is correct about Lincoln tacking to the center and right during the 1858 Senate election, but he makes no use of evidence that could have bolstered his argument. He never mentions the endorsement that Douglas received from John Crittenden, the Kentuckian widely considered Henry Clay’s protégé. For another former Whig to endorse the Democrat in that race underscored the radicalism that Lincoln inched toward in the House Divided speech and his party represented to conservative Whigs.

Freehling also makes a couple of unforced errors in analyzing the 1860 campaign. He properly stresses the importance of the Cooper Union speech. But when he says that the New York Tribune’s Horace Greeley and the New York Evening Post’s William Cullen Bryant “wished to identify the best Republican alternative presidential candidate, if New York’s favorite, U.S. Senator William H. Seward, should trip over his supposed radicalism,” he neglects Greeley’s break with Seward and the dislike and distrust that Bryant, a free-trade former Democrat, felt for the former Whig (p. 232). In mischaracterizing Norman Judd as David Davis’s “chief campaign lieutenant” (when Davis despised Judd) at the 1860 convention, he ignores the deep personal divisions among Illinois Republicans that Lincoln superbly navigated and eased, and gives Lincoln less credit for bringing the convention to Chicago than he may deserve (p. 247).

The case that Freehling makes for coincidence may be better than his case for conservatism. Lincoln’s rise to the White House and place in history involved an endless number of ifs—as in, if Thomas Lincoln had been more successful or if southern secessionists had not blundered. And how conservative he was can be endlessly debated. Earlier in his career, Lincoln pushed Whigs to be more Jacksonian in politics but not in policies, and descriptions of the party as the more conservative tend to lose sight of whether Democrats or Whigs preferred an expansive federal government; the answer is the Whigs and suggests the complexity of such definitions. Lincoln once said, “I have always hated slavery, I think as much as any abolitionist” (p. 217). An abolitionist might have disagreed, but Lincoln clearly did not put himself at the conservative end of the spectrum, and no conservative seems likely to have been able to convince Charles Sumner a year before the Emancipation Proclamation that “the only difference between you and me on this subject is a difference of a month or six weeks.”[1] Becoming Lincoln was not easy, and the path often included what Lincoln himself called a stumble but not a fall. Freehling’s book includes some stumbles and gives us much to debate, and much that is worth debating.

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