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The Nancy R. Dreux Professor of Political Science Emeritus at the University of Notre Dame, Michael P. Zuckert has published his interpretation of Abraham Lincoln’s most fundamental political and self-motivating ideas and ideals. While critical readers of nineteenth-century political thought and action and those steeped in the Lincoln canon may profit from this book and its deep arguments about Lincoln’s driving political “vision,” this work is not for the faint-hearted or general reader. Zucker proposes a tough thesis and presents a tough argument and a tough read.

Published as part of the Constitutional Thinking series at the University Press of Kansas, one of the coeditors of the series, Sanford Levinson, signals in his foreword” that Zuckert brings to the Lincoln studies a “Straussian” approach to American political thought. Better known to political scientists than most historians and Lincoln scholars, Leo Strauss (1899-1973) spent his career as a scholar of political philosophy and an interpreter of classical and German political philosophies. Strauss’s method consisted of a close reading of the texts in order to tease out from them the subtle meanings of the author. Historians are more comfortable labeling this sort of approach “thick description.” As Levinson explained, the Strauss method as employed in Zuckert’s work involves “a willingness to read discrete texts with great care and a devotion to extracting from their sometimes elusive messages lessons of deep import to those looking for insight in the nature of political reality over time” (p. xi). Reading the sources carefully and skeptically and not trusting that the sources are revealing all of their meanings are values inculcated in graduate students in advanced studies and research programs in professional history, so this approach is not that foreign for scholars professionally trained in the discipline. But the philosophical search undertaken in this work to find, identify, and then test the one or two guiding principles that constituted Lincoln’s internal political philosophy and his driving political vision makes for hard work, even for the most analytical reader.
Zuckert's use of jargon does not aid the student or reader. At the book's core Zuckert argues that the notion of what he calls “democratic sovereignty” lies at the heart of Lincoln's stable and constant political philosophy. Yet what Zuckert called “democratic sovereignty” is what Illinois senator Stephen A. Douglas called “popular sovereignty,” a term that Zuckert eschews because of its ties to Douglas and his compromise over the issue of slavery's expansion into the federal territories. Thus, “democratic sovereignty” becomes a term of art for Zuckert. And embedded in those two words are what Levinson termed “the central theme” that provided Lincoln's political philosophy its coherence and stability (p. xii). Democratic sovereignty, in turn, can be traced to Lincoln's understanding of the July 4, 1776, Declaration of Independence, the nation’s mission statement, with its phrase of “all men are created equal” and self-government under law. Providing both the ideal and the structural tension in Lincoln's thought, the problem of defining and implementing concepts of “equality,” “liberty,” and “freedom” challenged the deep-thinking Lincoln in Zuckert’s analysis.

To trace Lincoln’s thought over time, Zuckert examined two of Lincoln's speeches delivered long before the 1860 election, the crisis of secession, and the presidential years. First, Zuckert chose Lincoln's January 1, 1838, speech to the Springfield, Illinois, Young Men’s Lyceum entitled, “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions” for his close reading and analysis. For his second speech to unpack its obvious and hidden meanings, Zuckert chose the February 22, 1842, speech, the “Address to the Washington Temperance Society of Springfield Illinois.” Zuckert devote a chapter to each speech, finding the Lyceum speech to be less confident about the future than previous scholars have argued and reflecting more tension and anxiety about the young nation—and Lincoln's place in that nation. In the Temperance Address, Zuckert argues, Lincoln found a more mature intellectual footing for his ideas about the nation, political democracy, and his vision for the nation going forward. Zuckert then applies the insights he teases out of the text over the next fourteen chapters to see continuity in Lincoln's political thought and philosophy over time and little, if any, change in Lincoln's political thought, as scholars have argued about him.

In the process of analyzing Lincoln's continuity in political thought, Zuckert plumbs the ideals and ideas of Henry Clay and Stephen Douglas. He also applies his insights to Lincoln and the 1857 United States Supreme Court decision in Dred Scott v. Sanford before moving on, inch by inch, to the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates and his response to the Harper Ferry incident of October 1859. In one of his shorter chapters, chapter 13, “And the War Came,” Zuckert tackles the difficult, confusing, and for the time, fast-moving issues during the Secession Winter of 1860-61 and the Ft. Sumner crisis. Surprisingly given that Zuckert has been trying to take Lincoln and his political thought and personal sentiment seriously, he arrives at a Lost Cause/Neo-Confederate interpretation of Lincoln's decision to hold Ft. Sumter, arguing, “Many historians have hypothesized the Lincoln's chief goal in holding the fort was to provoke the Carolinians to make the first move and thus shoulder the blame for the outbreak of violence. The analysis here accords with the hypothesis” (p. 277). Yet the extant historical evidence is not clear and that evidence can be read in many valid manners. For a modern interpreter to adopt the post-Civil War southern interpretation of those events is jarring.

Zuckert continues his mental gymnastics in his conclusion. Annoyingly employing the first-person voice, Zucker explained his purpose with this work, arguing, “My chief and primary aim in this book was to present the central theme that gives Lincoln's thought the remarkable overall coherence and stability that it has. That theme is captured in my subtitle: ‘democratic sovereignty’” (p. 350). Yet, as Zuckert pointed out and as Lincoln understood, democratic/popular sovereignty con-
tains within it a paradox: he 1776 Declaration of Independence ideal of governance by “the people”; yet, “the people” can, and do burst out of the normal channels of politics and become the “mob” so feared by Lincoln—and feared by Zuckert, who refers to the 2021 riot at the US Capitol as an “invasion” (p. 352). Both Lincoln and Zuckert fear disorder by the populace unless that populace is led by cooler heads such as Lincoln’s or, presumably, Zuckert’s.

As just suggested, this work has its limitations. Zuckert is a political scientist, and thus he is more present-minded in his approach and arguments than historians may be comfortable with. Taking two of Lincoln speeches and then applying insights from those speeches through a political and personal life and career as litmus tests for continuity of thought and action can be done, but one suspects it generates more smoke than fire. Zuckert’s writing style and use of the first-person construction in writing makes reading this work seem like reading someone’s lecture notes for an advanced undergraduate class or graduate seminar. Many, if not most, historians will find that writing construction more off-putting than enlightening. While the work has limited footnotes, a full bibliography is lacking. A full bibliography allows critical readers to gauge the depth and breadth of Zuckert’s reading in the primary and secondary works. This decision not to include a bibliography may have been a decision made by the press, but numerous important historians and scholars such as Michael Les Benedict, Michael Burlingame, Richard Carwardine, David A. Farber, Timothy S. Huebner, Harold M. Hyman, Mark E. Neely Jr., and Cynthia Nicoletti, to name a few, do not appear in the footnotes, and an appreciation of their works would have enriched this thick work. Lastly, only a limited audience for this work exists. Perhaps Lincoln specialists and political philosophers might find this approach, use of labels, and conclusions interesting, but this work cannot be recommended for undergraduate students, and even graduate seminars will struggle with this work. Zuckert’s paradox of supporting a government of the people, but not allowing the people to descend into mobocracy challenged Lincoln and Lincoln’s generation, as Zuckert reminds readers in this thick description.
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