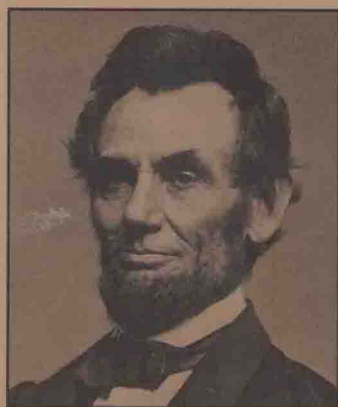


*American
Biographical
History Series*

Abraham Lincoln
and A Nation Worth
Fighting For

James A. Rawley



Abraham Lincoln
and A Nation Worth
Fighting For

James A. Rawley
University of Nebraska—Lincoln

Harlan Davidson, Inc.
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EDITORS' FOREWORD

As biographies offer access to the past, they reflect the needs of the present. Newcomers to biography and biographical history often puzzle over the plethora of books that some lives inspire. "Why do we need so many biographies of Abraham Lincoln?" they ask, as they search for the "correct" version of the sixteenth president's story. Each generation needs to revisit Lincoln because each generation has fresh questions, inspired by its own experiences. Collectively, the answers to these questions expand our understanding of Lincoln and America in the 1860s, but they also assist us to better comprehend our own time. People concerned with preserving such civil liberties as freedom of the press in time of national crisis have looked at Lincoln's approach to political opposition during and after secession. Civil rights activists concerned with racial injustice have turned to Lincoln's life to clarify unresolved social conflicts that persist more than a century after his assassination.

Useful as it is to revisit such lives, it is equally valuable to explore those often neglected by biographers. Almost always, biographies are written about prominent individuals who changed, in some measure, the world around them. But who is prominent and what constitutes noteworthy change are matters of debate. Historical beauty is definitely in the eye of the beholder. That most American biographies tell of great white males and their untainted accomplishments speaks volumes about the society that produced such uncritical paeans. More recently, women and men of various racial, religious, and economic backgrounds have expanded the range of American biography. The lives of prominent African-American leaders, Native American chieftains, and immigrant sweatshop workers who climbed the success ladder to its top now crowd onto those library shelves next to familiar figures.

In the American Biographical History Series, specialists in key areas of American History describe the lives of important men and

women of many different races, religions, and ethnic backgrounds as those figures shaped and were shaped by the political, social, economic, and cultural issues of their day and the people with whom they lived. Biographical subjects and readers share a dialogue across time and space as biographers pose the questions suggested by life in modern-day America to those who lived in other eras. Each life offers a timeless reservoir of answers to questions from the present. The result is at once edifying and entertaining.

The concise biographical portrait found in each volume in this series is enriched and made especially instructive by the attention paid to generational context. Each biographer has taken pains to link his or her subject to peers and predecessors engaged in the same area of accomplishment. Even the rare individuals whose ideas or behavior transcend their age operated within a broad social context of values, attitudes, and beliefs. Iconoclastic radicals, too, whatever their era, owed a debt to earlier generations of protesters and left a legacy for those who would resist that status quo in the future.

Biographers in the series offer readers new companions, individuals of accomplishment, whose lives and works can be weighed and assessed and consulted as resources in answering the nagging questions that the thoughtful in every generation ask of the past to better comprehend the present. The makers of America—male and female, black and white and red and yellow, Christian, Moslem, Jew, atheist, agnostic, and polytheist, rich and poor and in between—all testify with their lives that the past is prologue. Anxious to share his rich experiences with those willing to listen, an elderly Eastern European immigrant living in Pittsburgh boasted, “By myself, I’m a book!” He, too, realized that an important past could be explicated through the narrative of a life, in fact, his own.

When a biographer sees his or her subject in broader context, important themes are crystallized, an era is illuminated. The single life becomes a window to a past age and its truths for succeeding generations and for you.

ALAN M. KRAUT

JON L. WAKELYN

INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Abraham Lincoln has consistently been rated by historians as the nation's greatest president. His reputation rests on saving the Union and freeing the slaves. Many contemporaries glimpsed his stature, amidst the swirl of controversy over him inevitable in any administration, especially one waging a long, bloody domestic war. General James Longstreet, Confederate States of America, putting aside the bitterness that marked many Americans following defeat and military reconstruction, judged, "Without doubt the greatest man of rebellion times, the one matchless among forty millions . . . was Abraham Lincoln."

The White House years of the sixteenth president are, of course, what made his life extraordinary. If Lincoln had died in 1859 he would be a fairly obscure figure in American history. Perhaps some graduate student or writer interested in local history would have picked up his story. The tale would have been of a frontiersman, prairie lawyer, and small-scale politician who served without particular distinction in his state legislature, in the Congressional House of Representatives for a single term, who failed to secure nomination for U.S. senator in 1855 or win a Senate seat in 1858. His gathering of 110 votes for the vice presidency—one of several candidates—at the Republican national convention in 1856 and his debates with Stephen A. Douglas might have gained him a footnote or paragraph in some historical works. He did display hints of future greatness—in 1854 the depth of his hatred of slavery and in 1858 his analytical and political skills. Not until 1860 did he arrive at his rendezvous with destiny, to borrow a phrase from Franklin D. Roosevelt.

First, let us say what the book is not. It is not a study of a master politician, though Lincoln was that and this book will evidence his political skill. It is not a study of the Great Emancipator, though Lincoln was that also. Nor is it the study of a frontier democrat, folksy Westerner, prairie lawyer, rail splitter, Honest Abe, saint, martyr, self-made man, or beleaguered president beset by radicals in his party.

Lincoln's primary task as president was to reunite a nation already severed when he took the oath of office to "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States." He had to cope with a Confederacy that fired the first shot in a war that defined the boundaries of his presidency, beginning soon after his inauguration and persisting until his death. He had to make sure the domestic war did not grow into a foreign war. To win the war between the states he had to maintain Northern unity, prevent the splitting off of the border slave states, cope with a Congress that at the time resisted his encroaching leadership, a public that numbered many who voted against him, and generals who seemed unable to wage a war that would defeat rebel forces.

To Abraham Lincoln, winning the war was his supreme task. A nationalist but not a centralist seeking to concentrate controls in the Union at the price of individual liberty, he believed the Union was more than a central government. To him, it was a republic inspired by the ideals of the Declaration of Independence, standing unique among the world's nations, its life endangered by racial slavery. During the war, he spent more hours—and endured more anxiety—on military matters than on any other concern.

To preserve the nation, he wielded a strong hand as president, largely leaving execution of the laws and administration of the government to his cabinet officers and enactment of laws to Congress, while asserting an unprecedented claim to war power. Without his expansive concept of the war power he would have been a far less effective president. He saw himself as the only elected national officer, with the authority as president and commander-in-chief vested in him by the Constitution.

Lincoln's conception of himself as commander-in-chief was dazzlingly large. He claimed he could be all-powerful as com-

mander-in-chief in wartime. Speaking to a Chicago deputation in 1862, he said, "as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy, in time of war I suppose I have a right to take any measure which may best subdue the enemy."

It is this Abraham Lincoln—war president and commander-in-chief—that I intend to portray in this biographical essay.

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln has provided the climate that nourishes research and writing. History department chairmen Benjamin G. Rader and Lloyd E. Ambrosius; librarians Dean Kent Hendrickson and Gretchen Holten; departmental staff members Joan Curtis, who typed the manuscript, and Sandra Pershing have all been immensely helpful. Staff members at the New York Public Library, the Henry E. Huntington Library, and the British Library have been of assistance.

Colleagues in the historical profession have read and criticized the manuscript. Phillip S. Paludan of the University of Kansas, Herman M. Hattaway of the University of Missouri–Kansas City; and Peter Maslowski and Kenneth Winkle of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln have given their knowledgeable critiques, and at my insistence have been unsparing in their observations. Two anonymous readers for the publisher made valuable suggestions. The manuscript is better for their reading; however, the responsibility for shortcomings is mine. Cullom Davis, Director of The Lincoln Legal Papers, has been helpful in a number of ways.

Special thanks are owed to Hillary Rodham Clinton, who graciously permitted me to visit the private quarters of the White House, and to Rex Scouten, who provided a highly knowledgeable tour of the White House, of which he is the curator.

My editors, Jon L. Wakelyn of The Catholic University of America and Alan M. Kraut of The American University, together with Maureen Hewitt, editor-in-chief of Harlan Davidson, Inc., have been paragons of patience in their long wait for the manuscript.

Lastly, I lovingly dedicate the book to my wife, Ann, my lifetime partner.

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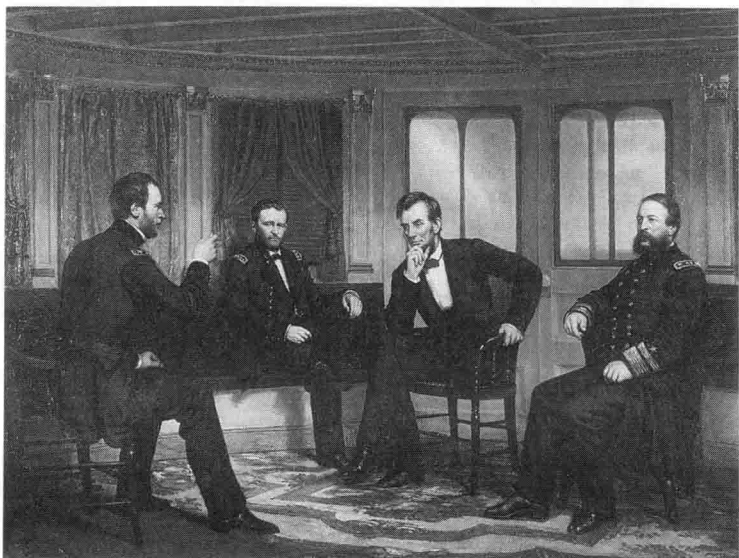
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Left to right, General Sherman, General Grant, President Lincoln, and Admiral Porter at City Point, Virginia, March 27, 1865. Copyright, White House Historical Association

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CHAPTER ONE

The Path to the Presidency

The tall, awkward-looking man, standing under an August 1864 sun in the nation's capital, was speaking in his high-pitched, earnest voice to the men of the 166th Ohio Regiment, who on their way home had called to pay their respects to the president of the United States.

Surveying the soldiers, he sought to impress upon them the meaning of the war: *meaning of war*

It is not merely for today, but for all time to come that we should perpetuate for our children's children this great and free government. . . . I happen temporarily to occupy this big White House. I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father's child has. It is in order that each of you may have . . . an open field and a fair chance for your industry, enterprise and intelligence; that you may all have equal privileges in the race of life, with all its desirable human aspirations. . . . The nation is worth fighting for, to secure such an inestimable jewel.

The 166th Ohio gave him three cheers.

Abraham Lincoln, president of the United States, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, once said of himself that he was the child of parents "of undistinguished families—second families." He had a defective education; "when I came of age, I did not know much." Contrary to legend he was not reared in abject poverty. His restless father, who had known

lean times, ever searching for better homesteads, provided a better-than-average level of living on the moving frontier.

The family had its roots in colonial America, reaching back to the early seventeenth century when Samuel Lincoln, a weaver's apprentice, had settled in Massachusetts, beginning an American ancestry that eventually included Abraham Lincoln's grandfather. Grandfather Abraham Lincoln migrated from Virginia to the Kentucky frontier where he was killed by Indians "when he was laboring to open a farm in the forest." The president's father, Thomas, born in Virginia in 1778, "grew up literally without education . . . a wandering laboring-boy," as his son said. Farmer and carpenter, not a ne'er-do-well, Thomas Lincoln in 1803 bought a 238-acre farm in Hardin County, Kentucky; and in June 1806 he married Nancy Hanks, six years his junior, born in Virginia to Lucy Hanks and an unknown father. Nancy was perhaps illegitimate and by all accounts illiterate.

Nancy Hanks bore three children, Sarah in 1807, Abraham February 12, 1809, and Thomas who died in infancy. By the time of Abraham's birth the family had moved to a farm of three hundred acres on Nolin Creek, where his father had erected a log cabin. Two years later the Lincolns again moved, now to Knob Creek on more fertile land that Thomas rented until he bought it for cash in 1815. There Sarah and Abraham for short intervals attended what he called "ABC schools."

nas Thomas Lincoln deserved a better reputation than his son suggested. Though "he never did more in the way of writing than bunglingly to write his name," as Abraham later observed, he could read to some extent and was active in his community. He served on juries, received a court appointment to appraise an estate, and as a member of Pigeon Creek Baptist Church in Indiana, he interviewed persons not in good standing in the church. A large and strong man, he strove to improve his status in life by successively purchasing farms and moving his family when he saw a better chance. Kentucky land laws gave slippery assurance of titles; after losing land or money

on his three Kentucky purchases, Thomas Lincoln moved his family northward to the newly admitted state of Indiana, where Federal law required land surveys and prohibited slavery—the latter of which Thomas's Baptist faith opposed. *India*

Abraham remembered life in Kentucky, the Knob Creek farm with its three fields in a "valley surrounded by high hills and deep gorges . . . the cabin, the stinted living, the sale of our possessions, and the journey with my father and mother to Southern Indiana." They crossed the Ohio River, which divided slavery and freedom, by ferry in the winter of 1816; and after striking through the woods they settled down only sixteen miles into the interior on Pigeon Creek in present-day Spencer county. Thomas improvised a rude log camp-shelter, three-sided, open to a constant fire to keep the dwellers warm. It soon gave way to a more adequate log cabin.

Here in southern Indiana Abraham Lincoln spent the next fourteen years, from the age of seven to twenty-one. "I, though very young," he recalled, "was large for my age, and had an axe put into my hands at once; and from that till within my twenty-third year I was almost constantly handling that most useful instrument—less, of course, in plowing and harvest seasons." He cleared land, plowed, harvested, hunted, began to think about girls in a romantic sense, frolicked with Dennis Hanks, his mother's cousin who moved in with the Lincolns in 1818, and learned to read, fascinated by Parson Weem's *Life of Washington*, especially the inspiring struggle for liberty illustrated in the battle of Trenton. *good step-mom*

His mother died when he was nine, leaving few known impressions on her son. Within a year Thomas married a widow he had known in Kentucky—Sarah Bush Johnston, slightly younger than Abraham's mother. His stepmother "proved a good and kind mother to me," Abraham recalled of the woman closest to him during his adolescence. She told the story of how he practiced ciphering on boards, erasing figures with a drawing knife. She encouraged his reading, saw eye to eye with him, and never used a cross word to rear her stepson. He again

attended ABC schools “by littles,” as he quaintly said, in all less than one year. “I was raised to farm work, which I continued till I was twenty-two,” Lincoln recalled. Though he had spent little time in school, “Still somehow,” he remembered, at twenty-one, “I could read, write, and cipher to the rule of three, but that was all. I was never in a college or academy as a student. What I have in the way of education I have picked up, from time to time under pressure of necessity.”

When not kept busy, working on the family farm or on neighbors' farms at hard labor as his father hired him out, Abraham was no less intellectually active than physically, avidly borrowing and reading books of lasting influence on him. He early displayed his remarkable gift for self-instruction. In later years this trait stood him in good stead, as he read law, mastered Euclidean geometry, and the art and science of war. Beyond Weems's work, he devoured *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Aesop's Fables*, *Robinson Crusoe*, William Grimshaw's *History of the United States*, and above all the Bible—perhaps the only book the Lincolns owned. He avoided religious services, which were often loud and emotional, and he sometimes mimicked the crude preachers. But his Bible reading shaped his moral outlook and the magical prose of his mature years. At some time he also discovered Shakespeare, reading some but not all the plays, finding a favorite in *Macbeth*. “I think nothing equals *Macbeth*. It is wonderful,” he later told a Shakespearean actor.

Life on the river, not farm work, attracted him and extended his world. He worked on a flatboat, and on one occasion, after earning a dollar in less than a day, reported that “The world seemed fairer and wider before me. I was a more hopeful and confident being from that hour.” He made two trips to New Orleans, early encounters with the Deep South and the rigors of racial slavery, but the story that he then resolved to hit slavery hard, if given a chance, is without foundation.

Just after Lincoln turned twenty-one, his family again moved, following the frontier to Illinois. They transported their household possessions in wagons pulled by ox-teams, the young Lin-