

# Lincoln Reconsidered

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I am neither an Abraham Lincoln scholar nor a biographer, and I find I have little interest in new findings about Lincoln's youth, his inner private life, his religious views, his sexuality, or his relationship with his wife. However, as a longtime student of nineteenth-century political life and partisan competition and as a historian of the Whig party to which Lincoln loyally adhered until its demise, I am interested in what the new Lincoln literature tells us—and fails to tell us—about him as a politician before and during the Civil War. This preference for the public, rather than the young or private Lincoln, shapes my comments that follow.

Let me start with those aspects of Matthew Pinsker's analysis with which I agree, if sometimes only guardedly, and then move on to quibbles with his argument, if not outright dissent. I have read the Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis edition of *Hernndon's Informants*. Therefore, I heartily agree with Pinsker's assessment that one of the most important developments in Lincoln scholarship since the appearance of David Herbert Donald's *Lincoln* in 1995 has been the willingness of Lincoln scholars to give credence to oral and written testimony about Lincoln given after, and often long after, Lincoln's assassination. I studied as a graduate student with Donald a quarter of a century before Pinsker did, but at that time we were trained to regard such post hoc testimony as toxic.<sup>1</sup>

In this regard, however, I am puzzled by Pinsker's assertion that Michael Burlingame's massive new two-volume biography—I confess I have made my way through only one-third of the first volume as I write—"will force scholars to confront their increasing reliance on recollected material in ways that might alter the ongoing reinterpretation of Lincoln's private life." Burlingame does reject some recollections as spurious, but as I read him, say, on the controversial Ann Rutledge affair, his *modus operandi* is not to reject recollected evidence but rather to pile quotation upon quotation from these posthumous witnesses. The implicit rule of evidence implied here, as I see it, is that if eight or ten "witnesses," as opposed to only two or three, recall essentially the same thing, then it must qualify as historical fact.<sup>2</sup>

To return to Pinsker's stimulating essay, I applaud his singling out of Michael W. Kauffman's brilliant biography of John Wilkes Booth, *American Brutus*, that began as an undergraduate senior thesis under my direction.<sup>3</sup> More important, I agree that there is

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., *Hernndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana, 1998); David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (2 vols., Baltimore, 2008); Matthew Pinsker, "Lincoln Theme 2.0," *Journal of American History*, 96 (Sept. 2009), 427.

<sup>3</sup> Michael W. Kauffman, *American Brutus: John Wilkes Booth and the Lincoln Conspiracies* (New York, 2004).

much about Lincoln's political career that bears further scrutiny. Pinsker cites Lincoln's role in the nitty-gritty, behind-the-scenes nomination of candidates and subsequent campaigns those candidates ran as well as the election of 1860 as in need of further investigation. I agree, but other aspects of his political career strike me as equally in need of reconsideration.

In getting to that list, I should now mention the few parts of Pinsker's analysis with which I disagree. Pinsker asserts that the proliferation of books and articles about Lincoln since the appearance of the Donald biography in 1995 "does not just come down to profiteering."<sup>4</sup> In one sense, this assertion is surely valid. Yet just as surely it seems a mistake to ignore, as Pinsker does, the stimulus given to Lincoln scholarship by the annual \$50,000 Lincoln Prize awarded by the Gilder-Lehrman Institute since the early 1990s.

Far more important, I disagree with the argument with which Pinsker begins and ends his essay—that the further digitization of evidence provides the key to future breakthroughs in the study of Lincoln. As he puts it at the end of his essay, because "Lincoln the politician remains elusive [a conclusion with which I wholly agree] . . . the most obvious path ahead is digital."<sup>5</sup> There can be no doubt that the digitized reproduction of manuscript collections, newspapers, public documents, and other kinds of primary sources has made research physically easier and financially less taxing than it once was. Still, I am skeptical that further digitization is the magic bullet that Pinsker appears to believe it is. Pinsker seems to argue that the greater accumulation of factual knowledge might—and it is not certain that more facts necessarily would—lead to revised interpretations of aspects of Lincoln's life and political career. He seems to say, in short, that fresh interpretation depends on more information about Lincoln and the people closest to him. I disagree for three reasons. First, factual information is not necessarily evidence for any interpretation; the historian must make that case. Second, what can be digitized depends on what can still be retrieved, and key information on Lincoln and his political times, I think, simply does not exist. I give one such example below. Third, and by far most important, Pinsker seems to believe that fresh and compelling interpretations of Lincoln depends on as-yet-unrecovered evidence rather than on rethinking what we already know, even though we may not have looked at the already available information as closely as we should have. The reinterpretation of Lincoln as politician, then, might benefit more from a reconsideration of the context in which he operated politically than from an examination of a text of what Lincoln and his various observers said, whether recorded contemporaneously or posthumously. Let me offer six examples in support of this contention.

Two derive from his single term in Congress. Why, I wonder, did Lincoln devote his first significant speech in the House—the "spot resolutions"—to the disputed origins of the Mexican War when virtually all other Whigs for almost all of 1847 had been primarily concerned with the war's possible consequences, insisting that no territory be taken from Mexico as a result of the war? Lincoln offered his resolutions on December 22, 1847, and defended them in a speech in January, at a time when no one in Congress knew about the forthcoming treaty ending the war. Indeed, at that time virtually all Whigs believed that the questions of war or peace, all Mexico or no territory would be the central issues of the 1848 presidential campaign. In letters to Illinois allies, Lincoln later defended his speech, but he gave no explanation about why his focus on the war's beginning was so different

<sup>4</sup> Pinsker, "Lincoln Theme 2.0," 419.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 439–40.

from his fellow Whigs' obsession with its consequences. Lincoln's decision is especially curious, for we know that he was in Lexington, Kentucky, on November 13, 1847, when Henry Clay, supposedly Lincoln's ideal statesman, delivered his famous "Lexington address" against the war, territorial acquisition, and the extension of slavery westward. My guess is that the politically savvy Lincoln recognized Clay's address for precisely what it was—an attempt to jump-start Clay's campaign for the Whig presidential nomination in 1848—and that Lincoln dared not endorse his idol's stance because he already preferred the nomination of Zachary Taylor, whose stance on territorial acquisition, like almost everything else, was then utterly unknown.<sup>6</sup> Inference from the political situation, not newly digitized information, shapes this interpretive stab.

Lincoln's involvement in the so-called Young Indians, initially a group of seven House Whigs who began in December 1847 to gain support from their House Whig colleagues for Taylor's nomination in 1848, also could stand some fresh thinking. What makes this group so interesting is that five of its members, including Alexander H. Stephens and Robert Toombs of Georgia, were southerners. Moreover, one of the three Virginia Whigs in the group, William Ballard Preston, would, in early 1849, propose a bill to admit virtually the entire Mexican cession as the free state of California, a proposal that Toombs at least then supported. The remaining member of this group was by far the most important, if now the most forgotten, the Connecticut Whig Truman Smith, who was the de facto national chairman of the Whig party in the 1840s. How, I wonder, did the freshman Lincoln ever get mixed up with these people? More important, what was his relationship with the five southerners? Could he have influenced Preston's subsequent proposal to bar slavery from most of the Mexican cession? What exactly was his working relationship with those slaveholders, and could that relationship have influenced his well-known misreading of southern support for the Union during the secession crisis and the first two years of the Civil War?<sup>7</sup>

So where, whether digitized or not, might one find additional evidence about the internal relationships among members of the Young Indians? Lincoln apparently never corresponded with the five southerners after the 1848 presidential campaign, save for the well-known exchange between Lincoln and Stephens during the secession crisis.<sup>8</sup> Correspondence between the members and Smith may be especially revealing, but, alas, no extant collection of Smith's correspondence is known to exist. In other words, one cannot digitize what is not there, so more digitization may not hold the key to all unanswered questions about Lincoln.

Limitations of space force me to be much briefer on four questions about Lincoln as a Republican that I think worthy of further reflection, although further digitization of relevant material might indeed make such reflection easier even for historians who have the time and resources to make extended research trips. First, was Lincoln, during the last half of the 1850s, the archetypal Republican as some historians consider him, the man who

<sup>6</sup> Donald W. Riddle, *Congressman Abraham Lincoln* (1957; Westport, 1979); Paul Findlay, *A. Lincoln: The Crucible of Congress* (New York, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> On Henry Clay's Lexington address, Whigs' anger at James K. Polk's justification for going to war with Mexico, and Abraham Lincoln's involvement with the Young Indians who were pushing Zachary Taylor's nomination, see Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York, 1999). On Whig opposition to the war, see John H. Schroeder, *Mr. Polk's War: American Opposition and Dissent, 1846–1848* (Madison, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> Roy P. Basler, ed. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (8 vols., New Brunswick, 1953–1955), IV, pp. 160–61.

best bridged the ideological divisions within the early Republican party? To answer this question I think we must pay far more attention to what other Republicans, and not Lincoln, were saying in those years. My own brief survey of what other Republicans said suggests that Lincoln was far from being a typical Republican. Other Republican campaigners and newspaper editors were far more overtly antiblack than Lincoln and far, far more overtly antisouthern and antislaveholder than he. That Lincoln apparently never once used the terms “slave power” or “slave power conspiracy” says volumes about his purported typicality as an antebellum Republican.<sup>9</sup> Here, that is, further research is necessary.

Second, while I have read neither of the two recent books on Lincoln as president-elect referred to by Pinsker, I consider as the absolute nadir of Lincoln’s political career his stubborn refusal as president-elect to throw any bones to the South, although many of his fellow Republicans (not to mention southerners themselves) begged him to do so.<sup>10</sup> Whatever the reason—a colossal misunderstanding of sentiment in the South or a fear, which he subsequently outgrew, of offending Republican hardliners—I think his stance between November 1860 and March 1861 was a profound mistake, one that he could have easily remedied even without compromising his strong opposition to allowing the extension of slavery into the Southwest. It begs further interpretation, but again, I have not yet read the two new books that may provide it.

Third, although I am not yet convinced by Don E. Fehrenbacher, Donald, and now Burlingame that Lincoln had nothing to do with the nomination of Andrew Johnson as his running mate at the Union party national convention in June 1864, I believe that other questions concerning that convention and Lincoln’s role in orchestrating actions that occurred there require further investigation. At the time of the convention, congressional Republicans were becoming increasingly hostile to Lincoln’s famous “10 percent plan” for Reconstruction (which would have mandated that [among other conditions] when at least 10 percent of voters of an ex-Confederate state vowed their allegiance to the United States, that state would be readmitted to the Union). Thus, perhaps the most significant decision made by that convention, one absolutely essential to the subsequent nomination of Johnson, was the admission of delegations from Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee to the convention, an act that seemed to recognize the legitimacy of the new state governments Lincoln was so eager to hatch. That Republicans in the U.S. Senate passed a resolution a week after Johnson’s nomination denouncing the new state government of Arkansas as illegitimate was hardly a coincidence. The fate of Reconstruction policy was at stake in 1864, and we need further research on what, if anything, Lincoln did to prod the convention to admit delegations from those three “10 percent” states.<sup>11</sup>

Fourth, and finally, I think we need to rethink or reinterpret Lincoln’s overall political strategy during the Civil War. Twenty-five years ago at a symposium on Lincoln at Brown

<sup>9</sup> For the foremost example of an interpretation that portrays Lincoln as the archetypal Republican, see Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1970). Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978); Michael F. Holt, “Making and Mobilizing the Republican Party, 1854–1860,” in *The Birth of the Grand Old Party: The Republicans’ First Generation*, ed. Robert F. Engs and Randall M. Miller (Philadelphia, 2002), 29–59.

<sup>10</sup> Harold Holzer, *Lincoln President-Elect: Abraham Lincoln and the Great Secession Winter, 1860–1861* (New York, 2008); Russell A. McClintock, *Lincoln and the Decision for War: The Northern Response to Secession* (Chapel Hill, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> On Lincoln and the wartime Union party movement, see Michael F. Holt, “Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Union,” in *Abraham Lincoln and the American Political Tradition*, ed. John L. Thomas (Amherst, 1986), 111–41. For the best study of Lincoln’s Reconstruction policies, see William C. Harris, *With Charity for All: Lincoln and the Restoration of the Union* (Lexington, Ky., 1997).

University, I gave a paper arguing that Lincoln, after the firing on Fort Sumter, embarked on a campaign to replace the exclusively Northern and ferociously anti-Southern and anti-Democratic Republican party with a broader, differently constituted Union party that incorporated pro-war northern Democrats, border state Unionists, and pro-reunion residents of Confederate states. That political strategy, I further argued, explained the feuds between Lincoln and congressional Republicans over various wartime and Reconstruction policies. Upon its publication in 1986, the essay drew scoffs when it was not utterly ignored by my fellow historians. I believe that the publication of Adam I. P. Smith's *No Party Now: Politics in the Civil War North* (2006) gives new life to the theory that Lincoln was out to build a new Union party to replace the Republican party, although, as I admitted in 1984, there is no "smoking gun" in Lincoln's own words to connect him to the attempt to build it.<sup>12</sup> Nor, whatever the increases in the digitized evidence available to historians, do I think that one will ever be found. The argument rests on my evaluation of the political situation in which Lincoln operated, not on what he may have said or written.

<sup>12</sup> Holt, "Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Union," in *Abraham Lincoln and the American Political Tradition*, ed. Thomas; Adam I. P. Smith, *No Party Now: Politics in the Civil War North* (New York, 2006).