Book Review: The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln, by Phillip Shaw Paludan

Allen C. Guelzo
Gettysburg College

Book Review: The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln, by Phillip Shaw Paludan

Abstract
Americans have had a highly complex love-hate relationship with politics, especially with political ideology. Recent books on the state of American politics underscore the resentment Americans feel at governments that have grown bloated and indifferent. And the groundswell of complaints about congressional "gridlock" and budgetary "train wrecks" seems to show that Americans are particularly impatient with political ideologues who insist on letting their philosophies, economics, or values get in the way of consensus and problem solving. Yet tumbling out of every newspaper, radio, and television, now as never before in this generation, is evidence of Americans' possession by political polarizations defined by some as "culture wars" and by others as "diversity," by some as "pluralism" and others as a "dictatorship of virtue."

The truth is that despite our supposed contempt for politics we are a passionately political people and derive our identity as a nation from not a single race, religion, ethnicity, or even language but from a set of political documents (the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution) and political principles (a highly democratic form of republic). Almost as if we fear the potentially destabilizing effect of ideological conflict on a nation held together only by ideas, we take refuge in a paradoxical denial of our passion for politics. We pretend, as Louis Hartz pretended in his memorable The Liberal Tradition in America (1955), that all Americans are really united in a common liberal consensus. Or, if we are historians of antebellum America, we pretend, following the lead of Lee Benson in The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy (1961), that American political conflicts have been the product of ethno-cultural considerations rather than ideology. [excerpt]

Keywords
Abraham Lincoln, Civil War, president, biography

Disciplines
History | Political History | United States History

This review is available at The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College: http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cwfac/30
Review Essay

ALLEN C. GUELZO


Americans have had a highly complex love-hate relationship with politics, especially with political ideology. Recent books on the state of American politics underscore the resentment Americans feel at governments that have grown bloated and indifferent. And the groundswell of complaints about congressional “gridlock” and budgetary “train wrecks” seems to show that Americans are particularly impatient with political ideologues who insist on letting their philosophies, economics, or values get in the way of consensus and problem solving. Yet tumbling out of every newspaper, radio, and television, now as never before in this generation, is evidence of Americans’ possession by political polarizations defined by some as “culture wars” and by others as “diversity,” by some as “pluralism” and others as a “dictatorship of virtue.”

The truth is that despite our supposed contempt for politics we are a passionately political people and derive our identity as a nation from not a single race, religion, ethnicity, or even language but from a set of political documents (the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution) and political principles (a highly democratic form of republic). Almost as if we fear the potentially destabilizing effect of ideological conflict on a nation held together only by ideas, we take refuge in a paradoxical denial of our passion for politics. We pretend, as Louis Hartz pretended in his memorable *The Liberal Tradition in American* (1955), that all Americans are really united in a common liberal consensus. Or, if we are historians of antebellum America, we pretend, following the lead of Lee Benson in *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy* (1961), that American political conflicts have been the product of ethno-cultural considerations rather than ideology.

There is hardly a better example of how this paradoxical denial has been applied retroactively to the American past than Abraham
Lincoln. Despite the fact that the Civil War was the most violently divisive political event in American history, Lincoln’s biographers through most of this century have cast him as a political thinker in little except the broadest and most unexceptionable generalities. Albert J. Beveridge, a career politician himself, saw Lincoln’s Whig Party merely as a collection of issues and observed that its members relied on the “popular idolatry” of Henry Clay as “their chief practical asset.” Ida Tarbell, who knew what politics was from a career in muckraker journalism, also decided that politics in Lincoln’s case was purely a matter of issues rather than ideology, with political contests being “almost purely personal.” In the hands of J. G. Randall (who in 1940 described both Republicans and Democrats as “a blundering generation” of political morons who stumbled into a “needless” war), Lincoln was reborn as a “liberal statesman” after the model of Woodrow Wilson, thus adroitly but ahistorically reincarnating Lincoln as a Democrat.

All of this would have come as a surprise to Lincoln, to whom politics (as William Herndon remarked) was “heaven,” whose contempt for Jacksonianism and the Democratic Party was deep and long-standing, who admired Henry Clay to the point of hero worship, and who threw four-fifths of Democratic federal patronage holders out of their jobs in 1861 to replace them with Republicans. It would also have surprised the Lincoln whose domestic policies—the Republican recreation of a “monster” central bank, a paper currency, and subsidization of the national rail system—clashed at every point with sixty-odd years of Jefferson-Jackson dominance of the presidency. On those terms, it becomes apparent that Lincoln’s administration would have been the most stormy and ideological since Jefferson’s, even if there hadn’t been a civil war. Only during the last generation—beginning with David Donald’s marvelous essay on “A Whig in the White House” (1956) and running through the work of Gabor Boritt, Daniel Walker Howe, Joel Silbey, Olivier Frayssé, and David Greenstone—has the political Lincoln begun to resurface. Even then, only in Donald (and, to a limited extent, Gabor Boritt) has that reconsideration extended to Lincoln as president. As Donald remarked ruefully, interpreting Lincoln as a Whig/Republican political ideologue is not an avenue to accolades: “So to interpret Lincoln’s course is to give more significance to the Whig party and its ideology than is fashionable among historians today.”

All of this is what makes Phillip Shaw Paludan’s The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln, the twenty-ninth volume in the University Press
of Kansas’s American Presidency series, such an important moment in the current revival of Lincoln studies. Paludan recognizes that the conventional estimates of Lincoln’s presidency have ignored political ideology and have revolved instead around an image of Lincoln as a compassionate political problem-solver trying to balance his desire to save the Union with his desire to free the slaves, with neither the importance of the Union nor Lincoln’s ideas about slavery having any more context than a noble sentimentality.

As Paludan sees Lincoln, preserving the Union and ending slavery were complementary rather than conflicting goals because both were embedded in Lincoln’s larger ideological reverence for the American “political-constitutional system.” Constitutional government, or “the constitutional process” (a term Paludan uses as a sign for both the Constitution and the democratic ethos by which it functions at numerous levels in American politics), required the Union for its survival. By the same token, slavery contradicted the inherent egalitarianism of the process and therefore had to be contained and eliminated from American life to prevent its taint from corrupting that process.

“Lincoln was not either a constitutionalist or an egalitarian. He believed that equality would be realized only through the proper operation of existing institutions—and slavery threatened that orderly evolution. Lincoln always believed that slavery was wrong and that its wrongness lay in its corruption of the realization of ideals of equality as they were manifested and given life within the entire economic-constitutional-political process” (19).

This is not only an ideological but also a deeply conservative version of Lincoln. Rather than the stealth liberal of Garry Wills’s *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (1992) who subverted the Constitution in order to prod us toward equality, Paludan insists on a Lincoln who gloried in the “process” and confidently expected that equality would be the inevitable result if the Union were given a chance to survive intact. And Paludan is willing to make this argument passionately; it is as much his conviction as that of the Lincoln he describes that “the political-constitutional system, conceived of and operated at its best, inescapably leads to equality.” He has no time for those—and he names Thurgood Marshall as a prominent example—who complain that “the system” was corrupted by such evils as “institutional racism” from the start and that it “obstructs the struggle for equality” (xv). “The system’ too often has been [made] the villain,” Paludan ob-
serves. By contrast, the Lincoln presidency presents modern skeptics with a political morality play in which Lincoln can demonstrate not only his devotion to the “process” but also how one can make it work, even under the severest political stresses imaginable.

Paludan’s book is organized much like a conventional narrative of the Civil War era, moving Lincoln year by year from his election in 1861 through his brutal assassination. But each chapter and each major incident is crafted to yield a dovetailed succession of illustrations of Lincoln’s skill in winning a war for the Constitution by the constitutional system’s own rules. In the first four chapters Paludan identifies the principal tools Lincoln used within the “process”: manipulation of the patronage (35–36), beautifully honed public rhetoric to “recapture the initiative” when disagreement and obstruction arose (52), the formation of the cabinet (39–41), presidential control of the military (101), and the management of Congress and the Supreme Court (73–87).

Paludan is aware that it is on the last of these tools that he will have to work the hardest in justifying his portrait of Lincoln as a constitutional loyalist. Lincoln effectively commenced military action in 1861 without congressional approval (Congress was not in session, and the House had not organized itself), and he suspended the writ of habeas corpus not only without congressional consultation but also in the face of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney. Chapter 4 is devoted to demonstrating that Lincoln’s unilateral actions were in defense rather than defiance of the Constitution. Congress, far from taking umbrage, endorsed them at Lincoln’s request as soon as possible. Then Paludan turns to Taney. Far from seeing Lincoln (as Taney did in ex parte Merryman and Prize Cases) as a would-be dictator bent on tearing up the Constitution, Paludan views Taney as the real threat to the Constitution, sticking his unjustified nose into parts of the constitutional process where popular will had already declared he ought not to go. In a constitutional system, remarks Paludan, in tones reminiscent of Robert Bork, elected officials “should trump appointed judicial obstructionists” (80).

But Paludan is aware that he has an only slightly less formidable hurdle before him in Lincoln’s perversely hesitant path to the Emancipation Proclamation, where neither the Constitution nor equality but raw expediency seemed to be the guiding star. Beginning in chapter 6, he patiently insists that commitment to the constitutional process, not faintheartedness or racism, ruled Lincoln’s progress toward emancipation. His gestures toward colonization are seen as a placebo offered to appease the disgruntled “even as
he was moving toward emancipating the slaves” (132). Even the ill-fated Cow Island project was supported only half-heartedly by Lincoln as a means of proving that he had actually tried colonization and found it wanting. All of this is proof for Paludan that “Lincoln wanted emancipation to be a process more than an event” and wanted it firmly imbedded “within the existing constitutional process” (127). And this, in turn, explains for Paludan the peculiar ineloquence of the final Proclamation. Lincoln was writing a lawyer’s brief not a revolutionary ultimatum and “placing the great deal of freedom within the constitutional fabric” (188). As such, Lincoln’s decision to issue and then stand behind the Proclamation demonstrates his determination to promote equality, but “within conservative contexts” (189).

Doing so, as Paludan notes in detail in chapters 7 through 9, meant dealing with the imprecations of some of his most radical friends, as well as with the cool indifference of some of his most important allies. Paludan finds no better illustration of Lincoln’s skill in dealing with these contending energies and pushing them back into the overall constitutional process than his handling of the cabinet, one of the major institutions of the “process” Lincoln had to use as well as defend. Salmon P. Chase and William Seward become the avatars of the two greatest internal threats to “process egalitarianism,” radicalism and indifference.

Chase, the overserious evangelical radical, was the greatest and most impatient voice for equality in the Republican Party, and Paludan sees Lincoln’s selection of Chase as an accommodation to those who championed the Declaration of Independence and its promise of equality as the heart of American republicanism and saw the Constitution as little better than a covenant with death, or at least slavery (39–40). Seward, in Paludan’s portrait, was a consummate politician committed alongside Chase to the principle of equality but too at ease with the world as a man of affairs to lose sleep over whether equality ought to be delivered tomorrow (40–41). It was Lincoln’s genius to yoke them together—to keep Seward’s instinct for power from running away with him and to keep Chase’s malevolent intriguing with congressional radicals from stampeding Seward out of the cabinet and Lincoln out of office—and create from their rancor a consensus for plans that Lincoln had formulated already (180).

“Lincoln used cabinet meetings as a sounding board to discuss the timing or the language of statements for actions he was about to take or messages he was about to issue. The real business of gov-
President Lincoln and his cabinet.
ernment occurred when the cabinet members worked in their own domains and when Lincoln consulted with them one-on-one and then acted. Because the major business was fighting the war, the president made policy predominately either with Stanton and his generals or alone. Cabinet government was an illusion."

And yet, despite his contention that “fighting the war” was Lincoln’s “major business,” Paludan acknowledges that Lincoln was at his “most unprepared” in dealing with the military. The U.S. Army had been, for most of its history since independence, so ridiculously inconsequential a force, in terms of both size and funding, that there were few precedents for the gargantuan role it was called to fill during the war or for the places its generals were expected to fill. As with the cabinet, it became Lincoln’s chief labor to force the generals into the constitutional process, or, as in the case of George McClellan, to prevent them from subverting it. Bending the generals to the constitution, however, required that Lincoln also bend a little to the generals and learn enough about the problems of strategy, tactics, and logistics to be able to distinguish genuine complaint from truculent whining. Especially in the case of Ulysses Grant, Lincoln had to distinguish as well between an independent military thinker and a disobedient one. And, if Alexander McClure was not exaggerating Lincoln’s fears about Grant’s political ambitions in 1864, he also had some struggle in establishing that distinction. Paludan feels that “Lincoln’s tactical understanding remained flawed” but “his larger strategic ideas were sound” (207), whereas his use of generals was consistently shaped toward subordinating them to his goals and timetable.

More often than not, the chief weapon Lincoln wields in defending the process is rhetoric. Paludan reads Lincoln’s major addresses and state papers—the First Inaugural, the December 1862 message to Congress, the Corning and Conkling letters, and the Gettysburg Address—as Lincoln’s means for defining the nature of the constitutional process and why it must be defended, even at the expense of Jacksonian notions of popular sovereignty. They are, for Paludan, transparent revelations of Lincoln’s intentions, and the Corning letter in particular provides evidence of Lincoln’s determination to use the bully pulpit of the presidency for “public persuasion” of the North and intimidation of the South. “He thus reached out to persuade a Constitution-respecting public whose opinion was very much a factor in the outcome” (201).

Paludan’s path to his conclusion is clear. When Congress once again threatened to overstep the restraints of the process (in the
form of Chase’s surreptitious bid to dump Lincoln in 1864 and in the challenge of the Wade-Davis bill to presidential authority over reconstruction), Lincoln successfully faced them down and had his action ratified in the ultimate affirmation of the constitutional process—the election of 1864. Even the successful conclusion of the war is a tribute to the process because Lincoln had sternly subordinated the energies of the Union Army to the implementation of civilian policies rather than to the politics of the generals. There is no sleight-of-hand, no revolution of thought, at Gettysburg or elsewhere. What guided Lincoln’s presidency is a straightforward, ideological commitment to the constitutional process, with Lincoln taking as his task the preservation of the process and safeguarding it so that in due time it could bring forth the promised child of freedom and equality. “The triumph and irony of his administration resided in Lincoln’s commitment to the Constitution; without that there would have been no promises to keep to four million black Americans” (318).

What Paludan therefore strives to demonstrate is that Lincoln was neither an amoral tyrant nor a pragmatic fixer. He was a political idealist guided by an overriding vision of the constitution and its promise of equality. To the extent that this provides a Lincoln of real political substance, Paludan has accomplished what almost every other Lincoln biographer in this century has fallen short of. And Paludan seems more than a little aware that this substance has genuine ideological overtones. Lincoln’s direction of the war “made the Constitution Hamiltonian, not Jeffersonian” (221), and the wartime congressional program of land grants, homestead legislation, and railroad sponsorship “illustrated the free soil Republicanism that spotlighted the free, self-sufficient individual of the nation’s Founding” (116). The principal problem, however, is that nowhere is a connection firmly established between the process and the ideology. Love of the constitutional process is, at best, a mechanical love, an admiration of how the system works. Unfortunately, nearly everyone in the Early Republic (save perhaps Aaron Burr) could claim to be a constitutionalist, including Jefferson Davis and Alexander Stephens, who labored long and hard to demonstrate with unrelenting sincerity that they were constitutionalists who promoted equality, at least for white males. What made Lincoln unique, and made him a political ideologue as well, was not his constitutionalism or even his expectations of equality. It was what that equality meant.
On that point, Paludan is only half-right in casting Lincoln’s policies as Hamiltonian; Hamilton’s federalism was a dead letter in the Early Republic after the election of 1800 and never surfaced again except as an insult to throw at those who strayed from the Jeffersonian orthodoxy. It was Clay who was Lincoln’s idol, and what Clay represented was a deep rethinking of the standard Jefferson-Jackson line that insisted that the American Republic needed to avoid any degree of social or economic volatility that might upset the balances of class because that would lead to corrupting indulgences of foreign luxuries by the newly rich and, eventually, to moral decay and civil war. For Clay, American independence depended on commercial development—on banking, trade, and industry—rather than on agricultural senescence. America, he felt, must enter the market revolution in order to survive future challenges.

Lincoln embraced the Whig ideology from his earliest political moments. He left agriculture as soon as he achieved his majority and never tried it again. He became a lawyer—the profession Charles Sellers has called the “shock troops of capitalism” in the Early Republic—and protector of the chief emissaries of the market network, the railroads. And he also looked on Democrats, especially Southern Democrats and their commitment to slavery, as a symbolic threat to the dynamism of the markets that had allowed him to scamper up the ladder of capitalist success. When during the great debates of 1858 Stephen Douglas pressed him to define equality, Lincoln at once cast it in economic terms: the right of everyone to eat whatever bread they have earned by the sweat of their brow.

It is this larger ideological context that is missing from Paludan’s appraisal of Lincoln’s affection for the constitutional process and that might otherwise give it a larger sense of urgency. Moreover, Paludan is so taken up with the theme of Lincoln and the process that he fails to focus clearly on the mechanical details of party management in Congress and the functions of the cabinet and White House staff that are integral to any presidency. Chase, for instance, ran a patronage network through the Treasury Department that rivaled Lincoln’s, and it was a critical element in insulating him from punishment by Lincoln for his outrageous insubordination as a Republican and an administration officer. Yet little or nothing of this surfaces in Paludan’s treatment of Chase. Both he and Seward suffer too much at Paludan’s hands from being typecast as symbols of extremes on either side of Lincoln, where-
as other members of the cabinet—Bates (far more a party hack than Seward), Smith, Usher, Speed, and Blair—hardly garner a mention and neither does Stanton’s remarkable political conversion from Democrat to Republican.

A number of other vital nuts-and-bolts issues of the “process” are missing as well. Paludan is certainly correct in describing Lincoln’s relationship to Congress as distant and sometimes confrontational, but what is missing is an estimate of why Lincoln was able to let Congress out on such a long leash and still retain control of the war’s direction. How did the Republican Party caucus in the House and Senate and the critical committee chairs (especially Banking and Ways and Means) relate to Lincoln, and how did they function on their own? How, too, did Lincoln’s personal staff operate in channeling his political contacts, his reading, his mail, and his state papers? John Nicolay and John Hay hardly surface at all in Paludan’s narrative. In that light, Paludan’s view of Lincoln’s presidency is constricted. Lincoln alone fills the screen, and throughout the book no reference is made to the Washington newspapers, that great treasure-trove of political insights and infights, or to the letters and papers of members of Congress, administrators, or to the corps of political horse-holders. Almost all the citations in the notes are to already published sources.

Most fundamental of all, however, is the question of Lincoln’s notion of the constitution, or rather its symbolic place in his world of political values. There is a strong case to be made for the priority of the Declaration of Independence not the Constitution in Lincoln’s mind, in part because prewar democrats had made a fetish of the Constitution’s protections for slavery and in part because exalting the place of the Declaration offered Republicans a means for appealing to the original intent of the Constitution and dodging the accusation (especially after Dred Scott) that they were defying the law of the land. The Declaration also had a ringing announcement of equality that Lincoln came to identify with the “right to rise” in an economically dynamic society. The Declaration was, in Lincoln’s appropriation of the biblical simile, the apple of gold, with the Constitution serving only as the picture of silver.

The Declaration spoke the American gospel to the hearts of immigrants and made them a new people. “Half of our people . . . have come from Europe,” Lincoln commented in 1858, and for most of them the Constitution was little more than a procedural document. “But when they look through the old declaration of independence,” he added, people find principles that put American nation-
identity on a plateau transcending race, culture, or national origin. “They feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men [the American revolutionaries] . . . and that they have a right to claim it as though they were . . . flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration.”

Although that certainly did not demean the Constitution or abate the force of Lincoln’s promise in the First Inaugural to regard his oath to preserve and defend it as “registered in heaven,” it did mean that the Constitution and its “process” was a means, not always elegant and not an end. Paludan does not necessarily disagree about the order of that relationship, and yet the process all too often threatens to swallow the ideological substance Lincoln based on the Declaration.

Still, even with these hesitations registered, this is clearly an engaging and iconoclastic work. Paludan has skillfully synthesized the sprawling jumble of Lincoln scholarship. He has resuscitated a conservative Lincoln from not only the hands of J. G. Randall and Garry Wills but also from such pseudo-conservative boll weevil Lincoln-haters as Wilmoore Kendall and M. E. Bradford. Paludan has deftly performed the considerable task of harmonizing his basic thematic developments with a chronological narrative of the war years. Most important of all, he has forced upon the new generation of Lincoln scholars (even now emitting a new flood of Lincoln biography and research) an imperative to consider Lincoln as a politician and man of political ideas. We may, with no little relief, retire Randall on Lincoln’s presidency at last. On that subject, for at least the present, Paludan’s The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln must hold the seat of honor.