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A Springfield Education

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Abstract

Politicians have never been shy about writing about themselves, even when it seemed that all they could expect from the public was a polite nod. The Civil War era abounded in such political selfies, among them George W. Julian's *Political Recollections 1840 to 1872*, John Sherman's *Recollections of Forty Years in the House, Senate and Cabinet*, David Turpie's *Sketches of My Own Times*, Albert Riddle's *Recollections of War Times: Reminiscences of Men and Events in Washington, 1860–1865*, Alexander McClure's *Recollections of Half a Century*, and, of course, Ulysses S. Grant's *Complete Personal Memoirs*. [excerpt]

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Comments

Book Reviewed: *The Political Life of Abraham Lincoln: A Self-Made Man, 1809-1849*.
by Sidney Blumenthal, Simon & Schuster, 576 pp.

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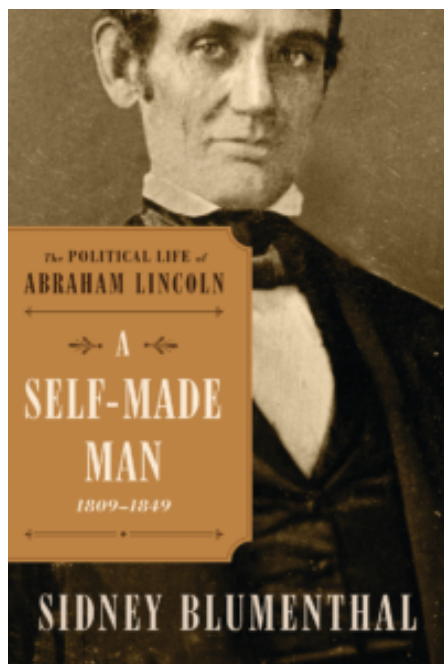
A Springfield Education

Sidney Blumenthal's elegant chronicle of Abraham Lincoln's political apprenticeship

by Allen C. Guelzo

Politicians have never been shy about writing about themselves, even when it seemed that all they could expect from the public was a polite nod. The Civil War era abounded in such political selfies, among them George W. Julian's *Political Recollections 1840 to 1872*, John Sherman's *Recollections of Forty Years in the House, Senate and Cabinet*, David Turpie's *Sketches of My Own Times*, Albert Riddle's *Recollections of War Times: Reminiscences of Men and Events in Washington, 1860–1865*, Alexander McClure's *Recollections of Half a Century*, and, of course, Ulysses S. Grant's *Complete Personal Memoirs*.

But from Abraham Lincoln, the central figure of nineteenth-century American politics, nothing autobiographical could be extracted except for two brief campaign sketches he grudgingly produced for John Locke Scripps and Jesse Fell. "There is not much of it, for the reason, I suppose, that there is not much of me," he explained. So, in Lincoln's case, the formula was reversed: he wrote next to nothing about himself, but the politicians wrote an abundance of volumes about *him*—Isaac Arnold's *The History of Abraham Lincoln, and the Overthrow of Slavery* (1866), Indiana Senator Albert J. Beveridge's *Abraham Lincoln: 1809–1858* (1928), the Pennsylvania power broker Alexander McClure's *Abraham Lincoln and Men of War Times* (1892), the member of Parliament Lord Charnwood's *Abraham Lincoln* (1916), Congressman Paul Simon's *Lincoln's Preparation for Greatness: The Illinois Legislative Years* (1972), and the presidential candidate George S. McGovern's *Abraham Lincoln* (2008). The ongoing attraction of Lincoln for the political class is a remarkable phenomenon, especially



***The Political Life
of Abraham Lincoln:
A Self-Made Man, 1809-1849.*
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considering that few political figures from a century and a half ago can hold out much in the way of practical political lessons. After all, Lincoln presided over a government that allotted him a White House staff of just six, functioned on a budget that (even at the height of the Civil War) consumed only 1.8 percent of GDP, employed only thirty-three people as the entire staff of the State Department, and was informed by only fifteen specialized bureaus (as opposed to 513 in 2010). The average American's exposure to the operations of national politics in 1860 tended to occur at just two times --

elections and mail delivery.

Nevertheless, the story of Lincoln has never seemed to have so powerful a hold, or to command the devotion of so many students and biographers, as today. And continuing the tradition of politicians, and not just academics, attempting serious Lincoln biography, Sidney Blumenthal presents us with a book (the first of a planned three-volume project) that takes the political Lincoln as its single, reoccupied theme.

Blumenthal will be best recognized as the onetime tiger of the Clinton administration—personal confidante to President Clinton during the Monica Lewinsky scandal, then senior advisor to Hillary Clinton during her 2008 bid for the Democratic nomination, and a paid consultant for the Clinton Foundation. This may seem like an odd fit for writing about the politics of the first Republican president. But the skeptical should drop their shields. This is a splendid book, and on a Lincolnian theme—the political Lincoln—that was in sagging need of a facelift.

Ever since Lincoln's death, Lincoln biography has followed two paths: the first, pioneered by Lincoln's law partner, William Herndon, looks to find a "real" Lincoln in the inner man. This has been no small task, for not only was Lincoln stinting in his autobiographical essays, he was also an intensely private man who kept no personal diary and limited his personal correspondence almost entirely to business matters. But Herndon had a treasure trove of personal

observations of Lincoln to draw upon, and he assiduously acquired a wealth of reminiscences from more than 200 Lincoln contemporaries whom he tracked down and interviewed in the years after Lincoln's death. This has provided ample material for a host of studies of Lincoln's psyche, culminating in the vast and marvelous two-volume *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, by Michael Burlingame.

The other path in Lincoln biography has been the pursuit of the political Lincoln, the man for whom (as Herndon wrote) “[p]olitics were his life, newspapers his food, and his great ambition his motive power.” However, the political life these biographers (from Ida Tarbell to David Donald) were after was the grand politics of the presidency—emancipation, preservation of the Union, management of the Civil War. The small-scale political life Lincoln led from 1832 until 1860 was usually treated as only a prelude to the grander things to come, and little attention was paid to the question of how an Illinois lawyer with such meager political visibility on the national stage could have morphed into a president whom his private secretary described as “a backwoods Jupiter” who wielded “the bolts of war and the machinery of government with a hand equally steady & equally firm.”

Blumenthal has no illusions that Lincoln sprang fully formed from his law office to the presidency, and he is right. Politics requires long apprenticeships, and even though those apprenticeships do not make for the most spine-tingling storytelling, Blumenthal both understands their importance and also manages to give them the sort of rip-roaring warmth that we might otherwise expect from a gunfight at the O.K. Corral. Lincoln was by no means a suddenly manufactured political item in 1860; he had put long years of nuts-and-bolts activism into politics. And, what was more, he had loved every minute of it. “Politics was not for Lincoln a grudging necessity,” Blumenthal writes. Lincoln “thought of politics as both a vast theater and an intimate society,” and it was a theater with which “he was stage-struck from an early age.”

Lincoln's politics began within his own family, because (as Michael Burlingame has illustrated) Lincoln's hatred of slavery really began with the way his brutal father, Thomas, used his son as hired-out labor in the Indiana backwoods. This drove the teenage Abraham Lincoln in search of work where he could keep the pay for himself. “I was once a slave,” he remarked—by which he meant a slave to his father—and his distaste for that experience allied him with the proponents of

“free labor,” in which the “prudent, penniless beginner in the world labors for wages for a while, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land for himself, then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him.” Once he turned twenty-one, he left his father’s farm and never looked back; he went into business (and failed twice) and then turned to law (which was a profession swiftly turning into the chief enforcer of commercial contract).

But at every point, Lincoln also hungered after political success, running for the state legislature in 1832, when he was only twenty-three, serving four terms in the Illinois House of Representatives, and then finally securing election to the U.S. Congress. He became an advocate for railroads, canals, and banks—any means by which prudent, penniless beginners could transform themselves—and for the Whig Party, which had become the champion of these measures. Along the way, Lincoln learned the skills of political maneuvering: strategic alliances, cut-and-thrust oratory, grassroots organization, and convention management, all of which culminated in his successful run for the 7th District congressional seat in 1847.

Blumenthal’s narrative of Lincoln’s boot-camp political education rides as bumpily and vigorously as the railroads he represented. But Blumenthal never loses sight of the larger national picture, since that picture itself was developing in the 1830s and ’40s with what amounted to a Lincoln-sized hole in it. An entire chapter is devoted to John Calhoun, another to John Quincy Adams, and still another to the Illinois “Mormon War” of 1844–45 (where, it has to be said, Blumenthal is fully as severe on Joseph Smith and the Mormons as Lincoln was when he signed the Anti-Bigamy Bill in 1862).

Even Lincoln’s tempestuous marriage to Mary Todd blossoms from the soil of politics. Not only was politics the tie that bound them (the Todd family was solidly Whig), but Lincoln was unusually indulgent of Mary’s political interests. “He was remarkably egalitarian for the standards of the time,” Blumenthal insists. “He accepted her speaking on subjects that other men would actively disapprove of any woman voicing” and defended her “publication of harsh political polemics, even anonymously.”

The importance Blumenthal attaches to Mary Lincoln's political activism is so much of a departure from Lincoln biography as a whole that it triggers speculation about who Blumenthal is, ultimately, writing about. Blumenthal's description of the rise of the rawboned but talented Lincoln, and the grooming provided by the wellborn Mary, brings to mind nothing so much as another famous political marriage with more or less the same characteristics, and that is the Clintons.

And perhaps it is no accident, either, that when Blumenthal turns to the ideological core of Lincoln's politics—which was political economy—he makes the only significant stumble in over 400 pages. Blumenthal understands that Lincoln “carefully studied the economic” issues, reading Francis Wayland's *Elements of Political Economy* (1835) and Henry Carey's *Essay on the Rate of Wages* (1837). But then he suggests that Lincoln, “casting aside Wayland[,] . . . argued forcefully against the idea that scarcity was a natural condition produced by the impersonal laws of the market . . . and that government properly could and should do nothing.” Blumenthal believes that Lincoln “openly castigated laissez-faire economics, the Manchester School,” and believed in “a free society, not an idealized free market.”

In fact, an “idealized free market” was *exactly* what Lincoln espoused. “I don't believe in a law to prevent a man from getting rich,” Lincoln said in 1860; “we do wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with everybody else.” Far from laying aside Wayland, Herndon insisted, “Lincoln ate up, digested, and assimilated Wayland's little work,” and even in Lincoln's earliest speeches, chunks of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill bob to the surface like apples in a barrel.

Nor did Lincoln imagine government as a Keynesian resource for “priming the fiscal pump of demand.” “The legitimate object of government, is to do for a community of people, whatever they need to have done, but cannot do, at all, or can not, so well do, for themselves—in their separate, and individual capacities,” Lincoln wrote in 1854. But that meant, for him, punishment of “crimes, misdemeanors, and non-performance of contracts,” along with “public roads and highways, public schools, charities, pauperism, orphanage, estates of the deceased, and the machinery of government itself”—which is a very long way from a Keynesian, not to say a Clintonian, concept of government.

The idea that “government properly could and should do nothing” was precisely what he prescribed in 1859 when he recommended that those who were the victims of “improvidence, folly, or singular misfortune” should just suck it up. “To such, let it be said, ‘Lay it not too much to heart.’ Let them adopt the maxim, ‘Better luck next time;’ and then, by renewed exertion, make that better luck for themselves.” In that respect, Lincoln so closely resembled the Manchester school of Richard Cobden and John Bright that people spoke of Cobden as the British Lincoln, and Lincoln kept on his office mantelpiece a lithograph of Bright. Lincoln had had entirely too much of governmental intervening, over and over again, to protect the interests of slaveholders to find much charm in a government-directed economy.

Balanced against this misstep, however, must be the detail with which Blumenthal follows the career of Lincoln in the years before he became the man in the great chair in the marble temple on the Mall. Blumenthal’s work of building the context for Lincoln’s political activism in the presidential elections of 1836 through 1848 is a miracle of detail, and his six chapters on Lincoln as a congressman in antebellum Washington are worth the price of the book alone.

Blumenthal continually reminds us of what happened next door, as in this single ominous sentence: “Eight days after [Charles] Sumner was bludgeoned nearly to death, Lincoln stood on the stage at Bloomington to found the Illinois Republican Party.” Never have we had such an exquisite warp of the ins and outs of political life in the 1830s and ’40s laid across the weft of Lincoln’s individual trajectory.

Rarely has a Lincoln biographer come to his task with such elegance of style. Lincoln’s advice to Joshua Speed on marriage was, says Blumenthal, the means by which “Lincoln walked himself down the aisle of his anxieties,” which sums up the Lincoln-Speed friendship nearly as accurately as nine words ever can. He speaks of Lincoln’s “respectability” as “the sign of his revolt against his past,” which captures Lincoln’s entire career in even fewer words. His pen portrait of William Henry Seward—“ironic rather than earnest, witty rather than self-righteous, pursuing high morality without sanctimony, strikingly objective in his assessment of friends and foes”—grasps the complexities of Seward’s character better than entire tomes.

And Blumenthal makes clear in three lapidary sentences the crux of Lincoln's hatred for slavery: "Lincoln long understood that free labor could remain free only by breaking the bonds of the slave-owning oligarchy. He knew that his father had been subjugated as a free man within a system of slavery. He knew that slavery not only oppressed the slave, but also through political power dominated the free man."

Here is a great book, on a theme that too many people disdain to regard as great. That they are wrong about the theme, and wrong about Lincoln, is the burden of Blumenthal's labor, and no one can come away from reading *A Self-Made Man* without understanding that, or without eagerly anticipating the ensuing volumes.

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