Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President

Abstract
An enlightening "intellectual biography" of Lincoln, Allen Guelzo's peerless account of America's most celebrated president explores the role of ideas in Lincoln's life, treating him as a serious thinker deeply involved in the nineteenth-century debates over politics, religion, and culture. Written with passion and dramatic impact, Guelzo's masterful study offers a revealing new perspective on a man whose life was in many ways a paradox.

Keywords
Abraham Lincoln, Civil War, presidents

Disciplines
History | Political History | United States History

Comments
Attached is the introduction to Dr. Allen C. Guelzo's book, Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President.

Introduction: The Strife of Ideas

It had taken a good deal of trawling through old, downstate newspapers, but during the first week of September, 1860, the Chicago Times finally found something from the past that could embarrass Abraham Lincoln.

It was a speech the Times' editors exhumed from a dusty 1844 issue of the obscure Macomb Eagle, when Lincoln had been campaigning for Henry Clay's last presidential bid, a speech that dared to attack the father of American independence, Thomas Jefferson. "The character of Jefferson was repulsive," the speech declared, and the chief evidence of Jefferson's degradation was the long-whispered story of Jefferson's liaison with his slave, Sally Hemings, and the slave children he had sired by her. "Continually puling about liberty, equality, and the degrading curse of slavery, he brought his own children to the hammer, and made money of his debaucheries."

This was not usually the stuff out of which serious political embarrassments are made, but when Anson Chester passed a copy of the article to Lincoln, the tall Springfield lawyer's reply crackled with irritation. Lincoln was now in the midst of his own campaign for the presidency of the United States, and over the last six years, he had made Jefferson's Declaration the moral touchstone of his argument against
the extension of slavery in the American republic. He had gone out of
his way to praise Jefferson as one of “those noble fathers — Washing-
ton, Jefferson, and Madison,” and in 1859 he had pinpointed “the prin-
ciples of Jefferson” as “the definitions and axioms of free society.”

All honor to Jefferson — to the man who, in the concrete pressure of
a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the
coolness, foresight, and capacity to introduce into a mere revolution-
ary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times,
and so embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall
be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-ap-
ppearing tyranny and oppression.

Lincoln’s response to the Chicago Times accusation was a sharp, harsh
denial, published in the Illinois State Journal on September 6, 1860.
“This is a bold and deliberate forgery. . . . Mr. Lincoln never used any
such language in any speech at any time.”

Oddly, the denial was not signed by Lincoln. “I wish my name
not to be used,” Lincoln wrote back to Chester, “but my friends will be
entirely safe in denouncing the thing as a forgery, so far as it is ascribed
to me.” And he may have had good reason, for in fact, as William
Henry Herndon (Lincoln’s law partner and biographer) wrote years
later, “Mr. Lincoln hated Thomas Jefferson as a man” as well “as a politi-
cian.” In Jefferson, Lincoln saw a compound of hypocrisy and arist-
cracy, a commitment to freedom in words but not in deeds, the
champion of an agrarian order that concealed an elite class agenda
within a fog of solidarity with farmers and laborers. At the same time,
though, Jefferson by the 1850s had become an American icon, and it ill-
behaved Lincoln to air his “hatred” too publicly. Besides, icons can be
used for more purposes than their designers plan. Lincoln upended
the Jeffersonian icon by embracing Jefferson’s words on freedom and
equality, and then using them as a way of highlighting how Jefferson’s
own party now seemed to be deserting them in favor of protecting the
political interests of the slaveholding South. During the great debates
he held in 1858 with his Democratic rival, Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln
delighted in drawing as vast a gulf as he could between Jefferson’s
declarations and the justifications Jefferson’s political heirs were now
weakly uttering in defense of slavery, as if to make the founder of the
Democratic party a useful convert to Lincoln’s anti-slavery Republicanism. But behind the tactical shrewdness of wrenching Thomas Jefferson out of his opponents’ hands, the editors of the Chicago Times had been right to see Abraham Lincoln as sitting far from Jefferson’s seat, and shrewd in their own way in digging up old speeches that would prove it.

Lincoln was born only three weeks before Jefferson finished his second and last term as the third president of the United States. But for all of his life, Lincoln would stand uneasily in the shadow of the great Virginian. His life was entwined around a pattern of cultural values that parted sharply from Jefferson’s. Jefferson carefully pared apart his political principles from his personal life, demanding public virtue from office-holders but pursuing his own hedonistic satisfactions in private, lauding liberty but holding between 150 and 200 African-Americans in slavery during his lifetime. By contrast, Lincoln was a moral rigorist who made a fetish of his own sincerity and honesty, who endured a difficult political marriage without ever arousing the slightest imputation of faithlessness, and who claimed that he was so “naturally anti-slavery” that “I can not remember when I did not so think, and feel.” Jefferson was also notorious for his religious unorthodoxy. Lincoln, on the other hand, started in the 1830s from a position of unorthodoxy not much different from Jefferson’s, but throughout his life he increasingly wrapped his political ideas around religious themes, appealing at the very end to a mysterious providence whose inscrutable and irresistible workings both baffled and comforted him. The moment the focus shifts from Thomas Jefferson the icon to Thomas Jefferson the political man — the anti-Federalist, the critic of Washington and avowed enemy of Alexander Hamilton, the patrician republican and slaveholder, the agrarian opponent of cities, of industry, of any form of wealth not tied to land — then it has to be said that Abraham Lincoln grew and matured as an American political thinker into an adversary of almost every practical aspect of Thomas Jefferson’s political worldview.

When Jefferson spoke about freedom and equality, he spoke for a generation of classical patrician republicans who hoped to replace the artificialities of monarchy with a “natural” gentry aristocracy and a broad base of independent yeoman farmers who worked the land to provide for themselves rather than working for others, as dependents,
for wages. Lincoln spoke for a later generation of middle-class Northern and Western merchants and professionals who came to see “natural” aristocrats as no different from any other kind. It was not the stability of a benign gentry-ruled republic that Lincoln prized, but the mobility of a self-interested liberal democracy. Like the great English liberals — James Mill, John Stuart Mill (whom Lincoln read and admired), Jeremy Bentham, Richard Cobden, John Bright — Lincoln glorified progress, middle-class individualism, and the opportunities for economic self-improvement which the new capitalist networks of the nineteenth century were opening up across the Atlantic world. “I hold that while man exists, it is his duty to improve not only his own condition, but to assist in ameliorating mankind,” Lincoln said in 1861, and promptly explained this amelioration in terms of Bentham’s famed utilitarian tag: “I am for those means which will give the greatest good to the greatest number.”

To Jefferson and the Jeffersonians the opposite of stability was simply instability, not opportunity. Part of this fear grew from Jefferson’s own desperate yearning for settledness, which in his case meant a world without creditors in which all republican citizens would plant themselves under their own vines and fig trees without fear of taxes or debt, free of manipulation and refusing all temptations to make themselves greater at someone else’s expense. Nothing symbolized this more in Jefferson’s mind than the image of the virtuous farmer. In one of his most famous bon mots, Jefferson rhapsodized on the link between political virtue and the life of the rural republican farmer:

Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar depository of substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example.

This was not merely a matter of rural sentimentality. In the 1790s, the United States was still overwhelmingly a nation of small-scale farmers, and unlike England, where by 1800 only 36 percent of the population was engaged in agriculture, the American republic had anywhere between 75 to 90 percent. What was more, the extraspecial after the Revolution westward across the American aristocracy meant that outright, with no feudal tradition. In rural Massachusetts of all taxpayers owning land was owned — not what indebtedness for borrowing of small surety works, with interest.

Since land, taxation, or fees were household, a farm grew or produced what they required and that for their own and rather high walls for distance, was sealed off from falls and was home and tools. Few lived in greystones.

Such a way of life was no longer.
anywhere between 75 to 90 percent of its population still on the farm. What was more, the extraordinary availability of cheap land (especially after the Revolution had removed imperial restraints on settlement westward across the Appalachians) and the absence of an American aristocracy meant that American farmers usually owned their land outright, with no feudal obligations and only the most minimal taxation. In rural Hampshire County in western Massachusetts, 65 percent of all taxpayers owned their own land, and 92 percent of all the housing was owned — not rented or leased — by the people living in it. What indebtedness there was usually involved the widespread borrowing of small sums back and forth along kinship and neighbor networks, with interest often neither asked for nor given.

Since land titles were not usually jeopardized by indebtedness, taxation, or fees, the American farmer’s chief incentive for production was household or local consumption. American farm households grew or produced by themselves as much as three-fourths of what they required, and then purchased the remainder with the surplus of their own agricultural production. In regions close to major seaports, a rather higher percentage of agricultural output was clearly intended for distant markets. But farmers in Hampshire County, who were sealed off from Boston by land distance and from Old Saybrook by falls and rapids on the Connecticut River, produced crops first for home consumption, and then for barter for goods — liquor, tea, farm tools — which a local storekeeper or another farmer might produce. Few farmers, except those within five miles of a river or coastline, grew single “staple” crops intended solely for sale or export.

The absence of large-scale commercial interests in the United States was, in Jefferson’s mind, exactly what guaranteed the survival of liberty. Jeffersonian liberty was local rather than national, and its deadly enemy lay in too-great concentrations of power at the center — liberty, in fact, thrived only in inverse proportion to the presence of power, and so the more power could be broken up and distributed round to localities, the less danger there was to liberty. This meant that the great political Satan was either a central government, or big commercial centers, or a lethal combination of both. Big governments required big taxation, and taxation undermined the security of landholders in their property; big cities were sinkholes of corruption, influence-peddling, and suspicious forms of illusory wealth, like bank
ABRAHAM LINCOLN

notes, bonds, mortgages, and other symbols of debt that threatened the independence of the property holder. "I am the holder of no stock whatever, except livestock," boasted the most sharp-tongued of the Jeffersonians, John Randolph of Roanoke,

and am determined never to own any, because it is the creation of a great and privileged order of the most hateful kind to my feelings and because I would rather be the master than the slave. If I must have a master let him be one with epaulettes, something that I could fear and respect, something I could look up to — but not a master with a quill behind his ear.

Not only liberty, but virtue was most likely to be found in the healthy atmosphere of rural agriculture. To Jefferson's fellow-Virginian, John Taylor of Caroline, "the ideal of a republican statesman" is "a skillful, practical farmer, giving his time to his farm and his books, when not called by an emergency to the public service — and returning to his books and his farm when the emergency was over." Let loose the genie of self-interest, and corruption was precisely what could be expected, as the pursuit of luxury would lead to competition and accumulation on the part of the successful, dependence and misery for the failures, and the end of stability in the republic. "I consider the class of artificers as the panders of vice," wrote Jefferson, "and the instruments by which the liberties of a country are generally overturned."

Stability, however, does not pay its own bills, which is why Jefferson's distaste for markets, manufacturing, and mobility was inextricably bound up with race. The agricultural wealth Jefferson relied upon (and spent his life vainly trying to shore up) was sustained by the coerced labor of black slaves, who may have constituted as much as 25 percent of the English-speaking population of North America on the eve of the Revolution. The number of people who actually owned these slaves and profited directly from their labor was always comparatively small in the American republic, but the Jeffersonians could always rally large numbers of nonslaveholding farmers and urban workers to their side with the whispered threat of what might happen to them if freedom and mobility were extended to blacks. The success of the Jeffersonian vision depended on the debasement and exploita-
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in 1800, when Jefferson was elected president in a triumphant land-
slide over the Federalist John Adams, the perspective had looked very
different. Jefferson’s defeat of Adams and the Federalist ascendancy in
the early republic was interpreted by him as a mandate to bring the
United States back onto the course he believed it had been created to
follow in 1776. Curiously, there was less difference between Jefferson’s
“Democratic-Republicans” and the Federalists than there would later
be between Lincoln and the Democrats of 1860. Both Jefferson and his
Federalist enemies, Hamilton and Adams, agreed rather broadly that
the American republic ought to be ruled by an enlightened, benevo-
ent and gentlemanly elite. Hamilton, as a landless bastard with no
family connections to rely upon, had a far higher estimate than Jeffer-
son of commerce and merchandising as a means to wealth and independence, and for that reason Hamilton, as the first Secretary of the Treasury, offered a comprehensive economic blueprint to Congress which called for the establishment of a national bank (for federal funding of development projects), the full funding of the republic's Revolutionary War debts (which meant a windfall for Hamilton's financier friends who had held United States government securities since the 1780s, but bad news for landowners who would have to pay the taxes to fund the debts), and federal support for manufacturing interests.

But if to Jefferson this looked like selling the republic back to British commercial interests, it would be unwise to overdraw the distance between the Federalists and Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans. Hamilton's notion of a commercial economy was small-scale, and he ridiculed any notion of turning the United States into a free-trade zone; Jefferson, especially after the War of 1812, found moments to be friendly to various forms of manufacture and hoped that the products of American agriculture could be aggressively marketed in Europe. "He, therefore, who is now against domestic manufacture, must be for reducing us either to dependence on [Great Britain] or to be clothed in skins, and to live like wild beasts in dens and caverns," Jefferson wrote in 1816.

There was also a good deal of cultural common ground between Jefferson and Hamilton. Both read the same books and admired the same political theorists, and neither of them made any attempt to link virtue with Christianity or any other form of religious morality. Jefferson was a deist who believed that traditional Christianity was little more than "an engine for enslaving mankind . . . a mere contrivance to filch wealth and power," while Hamilton was a milk-and-water Episcopalian. Unlike more radical American deists in the 1790s like Thomas Paine and Ethan Allen, Jefferson at least professed some respect for Jesus of Nazareth as an ethical thinker of great value, and twice proceeded to assemble an edition of the New Testament from parts of it that he thought worth salvaging. But such differences as there were between Jefferson and Tom Paine's crude but effective attacks on the Bible as "a book of lies, wickedness and blasphemy" were lost on pious observers in the new republic, and when Jefferson was put forward as the Democratic-Republican nominee for president, New England divines prophesied that should America "impiously de-
merchandising as a means to wealth and independence reason Hamilton, as the first Secretary of the Treasury, promulgated his comprehensive economic blueprint to Congress. His recommended establishment of a national bank (for federal funding of the war and post-war debts), the full funding of the republic's Revolutionary war bond indebtedness, and the establishment of United States government securities since the end of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, found moments to be unwise to overdraw the distance between Hamilton’s Democratic-Republicans. The American economy was small-scale, and the United States into a free-trade economic bloc, of 1812, found moments to be unwise to overdraw the distance between Hamilton’s Democratic-Republicans. The American economy was small-scale, and he hoped that the products manufactured in the United States could be effectively marketed in Europe. If they are to be manufactured, must be for the United States by the United States or to be clothed in the hands of persons, Jefferson wrote.

Jefferson took ground between Hamilton and his admirers and admirers of the Democratic-Republicans. He attempted to link the economy with morality. Jefferson feared the “morality was little better than that of the intrivance to the British Empire.”

The home government in England, which was supposed to support and foster the establishment of Christianity through the Church of England, might have done more to straighten out these irregularities, but regulation was an expensive proposition. For almost a century the British government, in order to save administrative costs, preferred to let the colonial governments run their own shows; it was just as inclined to continue the savings by letting the colonial religious dissenters do what they liked. This meant that in the better-developed colonial settlements, the Church of England installed only a few token outposts. In other places, where English colonists had settled with no particular religious motive in view at all, there was liable to be little or no formal Christianity.

Not until the 1690s did British imperial planners decide to end this era of benign neglect and begin the strategic organization of Church of England parishes in the colonies. But it turned out to be too
little, too late. In 1739, a major revival of religion known as the Great Awakening swept through large parts of New England and the mid-Atlantic colonies, preaching a hard-hitting but radically personalized "new birth" of spiritual transformation and redemption through Christ. It lasted only a comparatively short time — it was effectively over by 1742 — but it successfully managed to reawaken all of the most radical, individualistic, and anti-authoritarian urges of the radical religion that the colonies had started out with.

Then, in 1775, came the Revolution, which completed the religious disruptions the Awakening had begun thirty years before. The Anglican churches, torn by their loyalty to the mother country, fell to pieces; but the "New Lights" of the Awakening were too preoccupied with their own brands of spiritual radicalism to have much hope of claiming the allegiance of the gentleman revolutionaries who populated the Continental Congress. New Lights might support the Revolution, but their support was received without enthusiasm and without much reward. The new federal Constitution of 1787 made no provision for public funding or even recognition of any Christian church. Everywhere, the "natural" religion of Enlightenment deism seemed a more appropriate religion for the natural aristocracy of the new republic, and in state after state — New Jersey in 1776, New York in 1777, Jefferson's Virginia in 1785 — all public support for Christian churches was eliminated. As late as 1822, Jefferson did not hesitate to predict that in his agrarian republic, every young man then alive would die a unitarian.

But this was not what happened. In the first place, no one doubted that Jefferson was a great writer and talker, but his mismanagement of his own financial affairs at Monticello suggested that he had substantially fewer gifts as an administrator. Although he promised that the "revolution of 1800" would be "as real a revolution in the principles of our government as that of 1776 was in its form," reversing the tide of Federalist government proved much harder than he had thought. He struggled from the first to pay off the remaining federal debt from the Revolution so that he could cancel the taxes Hamilton imposed for funding the debt, but not even Jefferson's scrimping and saving could reduce the debt by more than a third. Jefferson also hesitated to tamper with Hamilton's pet creation, the federally chartered Bank of the
major revival of religion known as the Great Awakening and the mid-eighteenth-century hard-hitting but radically personalized movement for transformation and redemption brought all of the anti-authoritarian urges of the radicals who had started out with.

The Revolution, which completed the religious war that had begun thirty years before. The early years fell to the mother country, fell to their gathering in the Bible, were too preoccupied with the need to have much hope of persuading the Americans to support the Revolution enthusiasm and without any exception of 1787 made no mention of any Christian church. The church of the Enlightenment deism of the French enlightenment and aristocracy of the American revolution in 1766, New York was a harbor for Christian merchants. Not even Jefferson even a blind eye to the outrages of Bonaparte. So, in the absence of an effective American navy to fend off interference by the British and French, Jefferson proposed a universal boycott: the United States would break off all trade with the warring powers and sell American farmers would simply keep their produce for themselves. In December, 1807, an overwhelmingly Jeffersonian Congress approved an Embargo Act, and sat back to applaud the results.

The results were anything but worthy of applause. American exports plunged from $108 million in 1807 to $22 million in 1808, in the process bankrupting seaport merchants, then flattening the banks that lent them money, and flinging dock workers, artisans, and the trades that depended on them into unemployment. Jefferson thus learned that, whatever the virtues of rural agriculture, the American economy was more dependent on the international web of imports and exports than he had thought. Although he would not admit it, by the time he left office, in the early spring of 1809, the embargo was a dead letter. “We can never get rid of [Hamilton’s] financial system,” Jefferson moaned. “It mortifies me to be strengthening principles which I deem radically vicious, but this vice is entailed upon us by the first error.”

What Jefferson thought he was encountering was a corruption of American virtue. What he was actually encountering was the leading edge of an economic transformation that was only just beginning to impact the American republic in a large way as he was leaving office and as Abraham Lincoln was born. And that transformation was itself only part of the far larger story of how European-based capitalism emerged in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the most successful pattern in the world for creating and exchanging goods. Unhappily, defining capitalism can be a very slippery business, since it
forms a pattern involving four disparate factors: the entrepreneurial drive for profit, the use of cash as the means of exchange (so that all economic relationships can be painlessly converted into paper, and made rational, impersonal, and long-distance), markets (any location, literal or abstract, where goods and services are exchanged), and governments (which could, after all, shut down all forms of capitalist exchange if they wished).

What gave capitalism its luster was how neatly its claims for being a natural economic order gelled with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment’s passion for rational and natural orders of things. Capitalism also thrived on how perfectly its valences suited the political shape of liberalism, so that capitalism (as an economic theory) and liberalism (as a political one) became a potent engine for mutual promotion throughout Western Europe. Commerce, wrote Richard Cobden, was “the great panacea” for political oppression, and he could not sympathize in the slightest with those who “seem bent on destroying manufacturers in order to restore the age of gothic feudalism.”

Looked at in this way, the dramatic expansion of capitalist patterns of exchange involved more than merely rewriting the rules of the economic game. It amounted to a transformation of human relationships in which cash, merchandising, and markets could open up vast new personal alternatives to the agrarian economy, and even transform the agrarian economy itself into a competitive, mobile enterprise. Land, the source of all wealth for the Jeffersonians, would cease to be the prime factor in social and economic relationships, and be replaced by markets.

This kind of transformation was what the Jeffersonians dreaded. Although Jefferson was himself a man of the Enlightenment, it was not the liberal Enlightenment of Locke and Adam Smith he espoused so much as the critical Enlightenment of Rousseau. The liberal Enlightenment prided itself on reason’s conquest of nature, including the various forms of traditional “natural” society; the critical Enlightenment replied that conquering nature also alienated humanity from it, and that the only solution to this experience of alienation was a lapse back into nature. This endowed agrarianism in the Jeffersonian mind as a quasi-religious axiom as much as an economic idea, and it undergirded the Jeffersonian contempt for economic rationalism as a kind of disease. The ideal society was an exercise in unity and stability, the free
play of the passions, the glorification of culture rather than commerce as a form of community (a glorification which for the Jeffersonians only further underscored the impossibility of considering whites and blacks as political or economic equals). Even though Jefferson himself never once cited Rousseau in his vast assemblage of writings, he hardly needed to. As Conor Cruise O’Brien writes, “The intellectual inheritance here is quite clear, and it is a heritage of awesome import.”

But at least economic transformation represented the kind of threat the Jeffersonians could recognize and understand, even as they deplored it. There was another kind of transformation at work in the early republic, and this one would have surprised Jefferson beyond telling, and that was the extraordinary revitalization of evangelical Protestant Christianity in the decades after the Revolution. Instead of fading into a unitarian future, the trinitarian Christian denominations embarked on a voyage of evangelistic expansion and empire building that easily outstripped the overall growth of the entire American population, building 10,000 new churches between 1780 and 1820, quadrupling that number again by 1860, and making church building into “a ubiquitous feature of the early national and antebellum landscape.”

The most obvious reason for this astonishing growth was the resiliency of evangelical revivalism, based on the model of the colonial Great Awakening. Between 1812 and 1830, a second Great Awakening erupted in New England, only this time the revivalist heirs of the “New Lights” spilled over into upstate New York and Ohio, and joined hands with evangelical Baptists from the upper South and a new wave of imported evangelical fervor in the form of John Wesley’s Methodists, and carried the preaching of the new birth across the Appalachians.

In numbers alone, the second Great Awakening was a formidable achievement: one revivalist, Asahel Nettleton, was credited with the conversion of “above thirty thousand souls.” But what made the revivals culturally formidable was the extent to which the temperamental profile of the revivals coincided with the new economic language of liberal capitalism. Both were based on the promise of personal self-transformation: in the market of exchanges, personal identities became fluid and could be adopted or shuffled off as the demands of a cash economy dictated, while in the fires of revival old sinful identities could be regenerated by the power of the Spirit and all things made.
new. "These two programs, the improvement of the nation and that of the individual," writes Daniel Walker Howe, "were mutually reinforcing."

The revivalists were not the only ones at work to redeem the republic. The remnants of the old Congregational and Episcopal church establishments, and their near-kin among the "Old School" mid-Atlantic Presbyterians looked almost as dimly on "New School" revivalism as they did on Jefferson. But they had been pulled back at almost all points by the impact of the revivals from the pre-revolutionary dalliance with deism and unitarianism to create a "rational" synthesis of confessional orthodoxy and Enlightenment epistemology which could talk about the new birth but without the emotional radicalism of the revivalists. They, too, sought to turn the flank of Jeffersonian infidelity by criticizing the weakest link in the liberal ideology, virtue. Every good liberal knew that republics were politically fragile and, unlike monarchies, depended for their existence on the virtue of their peoples. But the excesses of the French Revolution had demonstrated that the ethical formulas of Jefferson's deism did not offer much protection from anarchy and the guillotine. The alternative, as proposed by John Witherspoon and Samuel Stanhope Smith (two presidents of Old School Presbyterianism's intellectual citadel, Princeton), was to define religion as the necessary virtue-component of the republic: "to promote religion as the best and most effectual way of making a virtuous and regular people."

In making religion synonymous with virtue, Witherspoon was not so unwise as to insist that religion was also synonymous with Presbyterianism or even revivals, and for that reason Old Schoolers who shared Jefferson's suspicion of instability and accumulation tended in the nineteenth century to gravitate toward the Democratic party, while the New School revivalists went elsewhere. But if it was true, as Samuel Stanhope Smith insisted, that virtue was best secured when religion was publicly supported by "laws for the punishment of profanity and impiety," then Old Schoolers and New Schoolers alike could hardly miss garnering precisely the public sponsorship of Christianity that Jefferson hoped to avoid. This, then, became the refrain sung through the American republic's colleges (which were mostly church-owned) and through the high intellectual discourse of its moral philosophy textbooks: that new public order required virtue,
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The great danger of this Protestant return was that it might choke on the very virtues that had made it so irresistible. This was especially true of the New Schoolers. The great moral demand of the revivalists, based upon the strenuous Calvinist scheme of Jonathan Edwards, was for a religion of absolute submission to a sovereign God, in which everyone was understood to be helpless and in need of redemption, but which everyone was obliged to seize for themselves as an expression of their own moral responsibility. The tension between these two ideas was artfully framed by Edwards’s heirs to promote an atmosphere of almost unbearable tension, leading to a shattering emotional conversion of purpose and intention, even to the point of embracing absolute "disinterested benevolence." "Pure, disinterested, universal benevolence is a plain and infallible criterion, by which men may determine whether they truly love God, or not," preached Nathanael Emmons. To do anything less than this suggested that in fact one’s claim to conversion was a hypocrisy, and the slightest tinge of hypocrisy leavened the whole lump.

This was all well and good for the morally heroic, and it gave the republic Charles Finney, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and John Brown. But for those who, after self-searching, found themselves in any way shy of the mark, it produced devastation and alienation. Emily Dickinson, who tried to put herself in the way of conversion and failed, could only mourn the distance that separated her and God. "God’s Hand is
amputated now/And God cannot be found,“ she would write, and her mingled sense of loss and inability to put the loss to rights would chart an eerie parallel to Abraham Lincoln’s half-antagonistic, half-wistful loss of his own youthful Calvinism.

But the Old Schoolers also were in danger of promising more than could be easily delivered. Just as New School moralists set the bar of expectations higher than many people could hurdle, so too the moral philosophers rashly predicted that virtue was a matter of paying attention to self-evident intuitions. This seemed to offer no problem, until the problem was slavery, at which point the moral philosophers fell to quarreling and hesitating, and the whole enterprise of a common-front of liberal virtue began to flunk. Even the American Bible Society could not be persuaded to sponsor a program of free Bible distribution to slaves for fear of alienating Southern contributors to the society. But for the time being, the Protestant return made the United States the most apparently Christianized polity in the world, the nation with the soul of a church. “Never afterward,” writes Alfred Kazin, “would Americans North and South feel that they had been living Scripture.”

These were not the only surprises American society could have offered Jefferson, but they were the ones that were already starting to cut through Jefferson’s confidence as he left office in the spring of 1809. They were also the ones that would most decisively distance Lincoln from the Jeffersonian legacy. Abraham Lincoln would become, personally and publicly, one of the most determined and eloquent apostles of liberal capitalism, and a stalwart of the Whig party, the enemies of the Jeffersonian legacy. At the same time, Lincoln would also become the president best known through the nineteenth century for pouring public policy into the moids of religious thought, the one most often claimed after his death as "the Christian president"; and he would conduct a lifelong dalliance with Old School Calvinism which attempted to acknowledge the significance of religion in a republic’s character without surrendering to the fiery agenda of New School evangelicalism.

Yet, his place in these contexts was complex, shifting, and not always consistent. His life was a pursuit of transformations in his rise from the son of a Baptist dirt-farmer to a cultured corporate lawyer, but he sought transformation while all the while denying that he had sought anything, that he was “an accidental instrument, temporary"
and "a piece of floating driftwood." While liberal capitalism was supposed to expand the horizons of one's choices and opportunities, Lincoln insisted all through his life that he did not believe in free choice, but rather in a "doctrine of necessity." Intellectually, he was stamped from his earliest days by the Calvinism of his parents. But he rebelled vigorously against that influence in adolescence, declined to join his parents' church, and turned instead toward the Enlightenment as his intellectual guide, toward "infidelity," "atheism," and Tom Paine in religion, to Benthamite utilitarianism in legal philosophy, and to "Reason, all-conquering Reason" in everything else.

Taking these as the principal guideposts for understanding Abraham Lincoln asks that we do something with Lincoln which virtually no modern Lincoln biographer has managed to do, which is to read Lincoln seriously as a man of ideas. As Mark Neely has complained, Lincoln biography tends to travel either the road of personality-history (as blazed by William Henry Herndon) in which Lincoln's achievements are explained in terms of temperament or genealogy; or else the road of public-history (the model for this being the ten-volume biography by Lincoln's White House secretaries, John G. Nicolay and John Hay) in which Lincoln is lauded mostly for his public management skills as a president, a politician, or a commander-in-chief. The fruits beside these roads are not inconsiderable; nor is it going to be claimed here for the sake of difference that Lincoln was a philosopher, a theologian, a mystic (all of which have been tagged on Lincoln for reasons that have more to do with self-interested authors than with Lincoln). In particular there is no intention here to add to the delusive mythology that seeks to baptize (literally or figuratively) Abraham Lincoln as an evangelical Protestant (which he was not) or as a devout believer in Swedenborgian Protestantism, Universalism, Presbyterianism, or even Freemasonry (he was not any of those, either).

What is sought here is to take Lincoln at his own word when he declared in the spring of 1860 that great political questions could not be answered by mere political solutions. "Whenever this question shall be settled," Lincoln wrote about slavery, "it must be settled on some philosophical basis. No policy that does not rest upon some philosophical public opinion can be permanently maintained." For Lincoln, a "philosophical basis" was not a school-philosophy; but it was certainly a coherent intellectual scheme of things which transcended mere policies.
ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Lincoln, it is true, was a professional politician, and not an intellectual; but he was not a mere politician. Poorly schooled (by his own definition) and too poor in his youth to afford either college training or even the law-office tutoring which educated most of his fellow lawyers in the 1830s and 1840s, he was gifted with an amazingly retentive memory and a passion for reading and learning. "A capacity, and taste, for reading, gives access to whatever has already been discovered by others," Lincoln believed, and his reading provided three large-scale contexts for his intellectual maturation. The first of these was the rigid Calvinism in which he was raised during his early years in Kentucky and Indiana. It was, as William Barton once wrote, "a Calvinism that would have out-Calvinied Calvin." It was also a Calvinism which Lincoln rejected, partly because it was his father's religion, partly because he could make no ultimate intellectual sense of it; and yet it was ingrained so deeply into him that his mental instincts would always yield easily to any argument in favor of determinism or predestination, in favor of the helplessness of humanity to please God, in favor of melancholy as the proper estimate of the human condition.

The second of these contexts was the Lockean Enlightenment, which made Lincoln religiously skeptical, suspicious of the Rousseauian passions (he confessed that he had never read a novel, and failed to get more than halfway through that paragon of Romantic novels, Ivanhoe), convinced of the supremacy of individual rights over community conventions. And yet, whatever skeptical nourishment Lincoln derived from reading religious "infidels" like Tom Paine and Robert Burns, he also arrived chronologically at the very end of the "long Enlightenment" and lived most of his life as a Victorian. This meant that, like Carlyle and Mill and George Eliot, the loss of faith was not for Lincoln a triumphant emancipation but instead the source of what A. N. Wilson calls a "terrible, pitiful unhappiness" and a wearying sense of "metaphysical isolation" that could be stanched only by submission to "impersonal and unrecompensing law."

The last of these contexts was classical liberalism, especially the economic liberalism which in Lincoln's decades seemed so full of promise of liberation and mobility for the talented and morally self-restrained, and the Benthamite utilitarianism which he accepted as finding a rational — and thoroughly deterministic — cause for human conduct in self-interest. And yet he would come at the end of his lib-
eral's progress to see that liberalism could never achieve its highest
\[\text{goal of liberation and mobility without appealing to a set of ethical,}
\text{even theological, principles that seemed wholly beyond the expecta-
tions and allowances of liberalism itself. While he would hold organ-
ized religion at arm's length, he would come to see liberalism's pre-
occupation with rights needing to be confined within some public
framework of virtue, a framework he would find in a mystical rehabili-
tation of his ancestral Calvinism and an understanding of the opera-
tions of divine Providence.}
\]

Looking at Lincoln in this way, we may address Neely's complaint
about the bifurcation of Lincoln biography by understanding
Lincoln's ideas, and the cultural scaffolding that emerged around
them, as the bridge by which we can reunite the mysterious fascina-
tion we have with Lincoln's inner personality with the public life that
guided the republic through its direst political crisis.

Part of our difficulty in beholding Abraham Lincoln as a man of ideas
is that he wrote nothing more sustained than a speech or a lecture or a
public letter. (A small book or essay on "infidelity" which he wrote in
his youth was destroyed by well-intentioned friends who feared the
trouble it would make for him.) But a larger part stems from the diffi-
culty we have had in conceding that the American republic has any in-
tellectual history at all. We are too numbed by fanfares for the Com-
mon Man, by Ralph Waldo Emerson's sniffing laments about the
absence of American scholars, by Hollywood glorifications of sharp-
shooting hillbillies in coonskin caps, to hear the frantic solemnity with
which the most isolated patriarch on the most godforsaken acre of
wiregrass would sit up all the night alongside a wandering evangelist
to discuss the intricacies of predestination and free will, or to hear a
Scottish free thinker and an itinerant elder hold two thousand people
in Cincinnati spellbound for a week in 1829 debating the possibility of
intelligent design in the universe. From our images of hard cider and
log cabins, we have assembled an impression of the American mind as
the ultimate exercise in pragmatism, unconcerned with larger realms
of ideas and deficient in any culture but popular culture, the Sahara of
the Bozarts. Within this, Lincoln appears only as the Great Fixer, the
political moralizer, the policymaker who made it his policy to have no
policy.
The antebellum United States would scarcely recognize itself in this mirror. In the English-speaking world of the new republic, writes John Brewer, "There were not only more books in circulation than ever before, but new and more varied means by which the reader could secure them . . . Even those who could not read lived in an unprecedented degree in a culture of print." Although the United States was still an intellectual province of Western Europe after the Revolution, it was a self-conscious and vital province all the same; and even if it lacked its own philosophical tradition, it developed what Bruce Kuklick has called a "speculative tradition," especially in moral and intellectual philosophy, which was shared impartially among college presidents, divines in their parishes, and public professionals. "Drank Tea," wrote a New England lawyer, "and spent the whole Evening, upon original sin, Origin of Evil, the Plan of the Universe, and at last, upon Law." And its colleges, for all their ties to religious denominations and their dominance by clergy with theology at the forefront of their concerns, teemed with commentary on the same epistemological questions that animated Kant, Berkeley, Reid, and Hutcheson over the "dead-end of British empiricism."

Despite the absence of great universities and an established literary tradition, republicanism infected Americans with the conviction that "everyone should have access to learning," while the commodification of writing and printing which the markets made possible presented Americans in the early republic with a varied range of intellectual choices. Over Lincoln's lifetime, writes David Newsome, "The Victorian consumption of books reached a peak never even contemplated before and probably never exceeded since." The riotous urban theaters where workers and artisans lounged, guffawed, and argued with the stage players also produced more Shakespeare than any other playwright in the 1830s, to the point where James Fenimore Cooper named him "the great author of America." "When foreigners accuse us of extraordinary love for gain," wrote an irritated Josiah Royce twenty years after Lincoln's death, "they fail to see how largely we are a nation of idealists."

Wherever you go, you find the typical American sensitive to ideas, curious about doctrines, concerned for his soul's salvation, still more concerned for the higher welfare of his children, willing to hear...
about great topics, dissatisfied with merely material objects, seeking even wealth rather with a view to more ideal uses than with a mere desire for its sensuous gratifications... He pauses in the midst of the rush of business to discuss religion, or education, or psychical research, or mental healing, or socialism... In our country it is extraordinarily easy, and as one may at once admit, it is too easy, to get a hearing for any seemingly new and large-minded doctrine relating either to social reform or to inspiring change of creed.

Even as Lincoln was first establishing himself in law practice, cheap pirated editions of Dickens, Bulwer-Lytton, Wilkie Collins, Thomas De Quincy, George Eliot, and Frederick Marryat were regularly serialized in urban weeklies, alongside a series of new literary quarterlies like *The Knickerbocker* (1833), the *North American Review* (1823), the *Southern Literary Messenger* (1834), the *Southern Literary Journal* (1835), the *Boston Quarterly Review* (1839), *The Dial* (1840), the *Western Literary Messenger* (1835), *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine* (1839), and *DeBow’s Review* (1846). American science already had long roots into the eighteenth century, and it supported publication of the *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, the *American Journal of Science and the Arts* (1818), the *New England Journal of Medicine* (1812), and the *American Farmer* (1819). Behind the journals stood the scientific institutions, including the Sheffield Scientific School at Yale, the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard, the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, the American Geological Society, the New York Lyceum of Natural History, and even, in 1831, the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio (which had only become a state in 1803). English ballad opera was supplanted on New York stages by Rossini as early as 1818, Weber in 1825, and a complete *Don Giovanni* in 1826, not to mention Meyerbeer, Flotow, Balfe, and (by the 1850s) Verdi. In 1855, *Musical World* editor Richard Willis boasted that his magazine was read by the president, vice president, members of the cabinet, and seventy members of Congress.

Those who lacked science, the arts, or philosophy at their doorsteps could get it on wheels. The 200 newspapers printed in the United States in 1800 rocketed to over 2,500 by mid-century (subsidized by free exchanges of newspapers and free local delivery of weeklies through the post office), magazine circulation rose from 125 in 1825 to
600 in 1850, and the American book trade exploded from $2.5 million worth of books in 1820 to $16 million by 1856, and by 1850 employed 22,000 men. Private book collections of over a thousand volumes became frequent rather than rare. Touring soloists like Louis Moreau Gottschalk traveled over 50,000 miles to give over 900 concerts in three years, while popular collections of parlor piano music featured bel canto operatic arias — Rossini, Donizetti — side-by-side with “The Wood-Up Quickstep.”

In 1826, Josiah Holbrook launched a plan for an “Association of Adults for Moral Education” in the pages of the American Journal of Education, and ended up creating a system of 3,000 lecture associations across the republic known as the American Lyceum, with Daniel Webster and Ralph Waldo Emerson as the star attractions. Holbrook’s Lyceum was only the largest of these associations: in 1828, even a village as small as Utica, New York, with only 8,000 inhabitants, contained forty-one “Benevolent and Charitable Institutions.” A young Philadelphia law student in 1841 could be a member of “The Washington Library, the Henry Institute, and the Camden Literary Association.”

By paying four dollars a year to the last of these I have access to about twenty-five of the best periodicals of this country and England. The newspapers which are taken by our family of three, are The Saturday Courier and Pennsylvanian; the Trenton Emporium; and the Mail and Democrat, of Camden: weekly; Kendall’s Expositor, Washington: irregularly; and The Spirit of the Times, Philadelphia. In addition to these I receive every few days from some old schoolmate papers from all parts of the country.

And none of this begins even to touch the mania for social experimentation staged at Brook Farm, New Harmony, Hopedale, Northampton, and elsewhere by “come-outers and community-men” like Robert Owen, George Rapp, and John Humphrey Noyes. This is, enthused Yale professor Benjamin Silliman in 1821, “the intellectual age of the world.”

Without in any way trying to obscure other ways of stating the case of Abraham Lincoln, the work we have to do here is an intellectual biography about a man not usually thought of as an intellectual in an era which, unfortunately, is not often thought of as an arena of
ideas. Modern Americans, standing on this side of pragmatism, are not used to seeing antebellum America as a cornucopia of ideologies, and modern American pragmatists like Richard Rorty reinforce that prejudice by suggesting that ideas may actually be dangerous for democracy. "A liberal democracy," wrote Rorty in 1988, "will not only exempt opinions on such matters from legal coercion, but also aim at disengaging discussions of such questions from discussions of social policy."

Or else, what is more likely, we are too afraid now to think of what ideology might do if we let it loose across the land the way it was let loose between 1800 and 1860. The conventional genealogy of American ideas, which runs us from Franklin to Emerson to Dewey, is ipso facto a confession of failure, an "American evasion of philosophy" (in the words of Cornel West). But it has this virtue: it provides a conveniently harmless backdrop to a bland and undisturbing secularism, shorn of religious debate and principled acrimony, and oblivious to its connections to the world at its margins. We know, however dimly, that once in the past the strife of ideas brought us civil war, and it is not comfortable to reflect on what it might bring us in the future in the form of "culture wars."

But then again, the strife of ideas also brought us Abraham Lincoln.