

David Herbert Donald. Lincoln. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995. \$35.00

To many Abraham Lincoln followers, the assassinated President has become almost a saint. To some historians the "Lincoln Cult" has become "almost an American religion." Roy P. Basler, who has compiled the Lincoln papers, believes that as time passes, Lincoln "becomes more and more a national mythos. The certainty with which this mythos will continue to live depends on how much Lincoln is able to stand reinterpretation."

Even though this prediction was made over fifty years ago, the evidence indicates that the Lincoln legend will always be with us. Basler's conclusion is more than supported by David H. Donald's Lincoln, which is reaching a wide reading audience and has received superlative reviews by many historians such as James M. McPherson.

In writing this book, Donald states that he is not writing a general history of the United States during the mid-nineteenth century but strictly a history of Lincoln himself, with most of it concentrated on the war years, years upon which his greatness depends. In focusing closely on what Lincoln knew, "when he knew it, and why he made his decisions, I have, I think, produced a portrait rather different from that of other biographers." Donald gives attention to Lincoln's high ambitions, Lincoln's early years, his brain-numbing law practice, his tempestuous married life, and his many defeats in politics and other endeavors. Donald points out how often chance, or accident, played a determining role in Lincoln's life. He emphasizes Lincoln's enormous capacity for growth. More importantly, this biography highlights a basic trait of character evident throughout Lincoln's life--the essential passivity of his nature. Lincoln reacted to events rather than initiating them. From Lincoln's earliest days, he believed that his destiny was controlled by some Higher Power, i.e., if something happened, it was supposed to happen.

Lincoln's essential passivity may be questioned. For example, in his Freeport, Illinois debate with Senator Stephen A. Douglas, he made Douglas admit that the Dred Scott decision of 1857 meant nothing in practice--that slavery could be kept out of any territory. This went a long way toward splitting the Democratic Party along North-South lines. This is not a reaction to something Douglas said. Lincoln was initiating something that aided greatly in his nomination for the Presidency by the Republican Party in 1860.

Another example of Lincoln the activist is his position on the slavery question. In 1861 Lincoln attempted to protect the Union by assuring the South that he had no intention of ending slavery. Even after eleven Southern states left the Union, Lincoln continued to talk this way to loyal border states that were slave-holding. He needed to keep Missouri, Kentucky, and Maryland in the Union.

However, after the Battle of Antietam, Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation. He was initiating action to end a system of labor that had existed since the earliest Colonial period. This position was a part of his radical activism.

Donald also maintains that Lincoln straddled the issue of racial equality and favored colonization as the remedy for race relations in this country. He favored colonization as Henry Clay did, but on racial equality Lincoln minced few words. For example, in his debates with Senator Douglas, Lincoln flatly stated that he favored the white race as the superior race--that he did not favor social or political equality for the black man. Also in a White House meeting in August of 1862, Lincoln told a group of free black leaders that he favored free blacks' colonizing outside the United States. Going further, he told them that there was not a single black man that was equal to a single white man in this country.

Donald's Lincoln contains a wealth of detail on every aspect of Lincoln's life and especially on the four years and one month of his administration. It took great ability to keep the diverse elements of the North together during the greatest trial through which this nation has gone. Lincoln was a superb Commander-in-Chief, and he did lead the Union to victory. This work is highly recommended for all libraries and especially to Lincoln and Civil War scholars.

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