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Book Review by Steven B. Smith

WHISTLING DIXIE

Loathing Lincoln: An American Tradition from the Civil War to the Present, by John McKee Barr.
Louisiana State University Press, 480 pages, \$35.95



IN SURVEYS ASKING WHO ARE AMERICA'S greatest presidents, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln almost invariably end up on top. Washington stands virtually above reproach, but Lincoln, though he routinely ranks as a deeply admired leader, has always had a small, and at times vocal, band of detractors.

In *Loathing Lincoln*, John McKee Barr takes his readers on a walking tour through the minefields—and occasionally the sewers and swamps—of anti-Lincoln sentiment in America. The fight over Lincoln, he rightly notes, is more than an exercise in assessing presidential greatness. It is a struggle over the very meaning of America. This is, above all, because Lincoln's entire political career was founded on a controversial interpretation of America's central idea, but also because the issues that Lincoln faced—issues like the size and scope of federal authority, the role of government in achieving racial equality, and the place of executive power during wartime—are all issues that remain with us today. More than any other president,

our assessment of Lincoln is very much an assessment of ourselves.

THE CASE AGAINST LINCOLN NOW EXTENDS for over a century and a half and has taken a variety of different shapes. The earliest Lincoln-phobes were the defeated Confederates who developed the myth of the Lost Cause. The image of the South as a land of grace, manners, and beauty, known to most Americans from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, was contrasted to a rapacious, capitalist, and materialistic North. Lincoln was depicted by these Southern apologists as an ambitious frontier ruffian who waged a bloody, cruel, and unnecessary war in order to impose his own vision of a United States on the South and its "peculiar institution."

The most significant of the Lost Cause apologists was Alexander Stephens, Lincoln's erstwhile colleague in the House of Representatives and later the vice president of the Confederacy (he plays a significant role in the Stephen Spielberg film *Lincoln*). Stephens

had been a Georgia Whig and a friend who Lincoln hoped would join his cabinet, until Stephens sided with the Confederacy. After the war, in his two-volume *Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States*, he depicted the struggle as a contest between two principles—federation and centralization—with the South as the great defender of localism, and Lincoln as a tyrant and usurper. Slavery he presented as merely incidental to the South's desire to resist an encroaching federal power.

Did the South secede to defend federalism and states' rights, or to protect slavery? Barr, who teaches history at Lone Star College, Kingwood, comments that, on this question, "there is no reason to believe that [Stephens] was not absolutely genuine in all that he wrote." But I think he lets Stephens off the hook too easily. In 1861, in his famous "Cornerstone Address," Stephens declared slavery to be the foundation of the new Confederacy. There is not a word about the limits of federal power in Stephens's speech. He zealously maintained domination over the black race to



be the new cornerstone of all future civilization. Rather than Stephens's being sincere in his convictions, it seems more likely that the Confederacy's defeat and the passage of the Civil War amendments forced him and other Lost Cause apologists to change their tune. Rather than proclaiming white supremacy to be the enduring truth of the human condition, they turned to arguments about federal overreach to justify secession.

STEPHENS'S WORK, THOUGH VIRTUALLY forgotten today, nevertheless had enduring significance in at least one respect. He charged Lincoln with being in the grip of a "mystical" idea of the Union. The idea was that Lincoln went to war, not in obedience to a legal or constitutional duty, but to pursue some private and ultimately incommunicable religious view. If so, his actions would not only be unconstitutional, but treasonable. This idea of Lincoln's mystical unionism, while still widely believed, is, of course, false. There was never anything remotely mystical in Lincoln's conception of the Union. It was built around his idea of self-government. A government ruled by law and changing easily with frequent elections was his definition of a free people. What is mystical about that?

Stephens was hardly the worst of the Lincoln-phobes. In their 1930 manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*, the so-called Southern Agrarians blamed Lincoln for destroying the older Jeffersonian-Jacksonian ideal of a republic of free white farmers. Other Lost Causers accused him of inspiring the growth of the modern expansionist and regulatory state during the Progressive period, not to mention our entry into the two world wars.

Lincoln's name was used by American Communists in the Spanish Civil War, calling themselves the "Abraham Lincoln Brigade," in the fight against General Franco. After World War II, Lincoln was blamed by libertarians for the growth of the welfare state and the expansion of the federal bureaucracy. During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, he was denounced by those on the far Left for being a racist and doing nothing (or not enough) to advance the cause of racial justice. Indeed, the image of Lincoln as at best a half-hearted emancipationist—a "recovering racist" in one formulation—can still be found in the works of Garry Wills

and Henry Louis Gates. Although criticism of Lincoln from the Left was never as consistent or vituperative as from the Right, it more or less dried up with the election of Barack Obama, who invoked Lincoln when he announced his run for the presidency in 2007 and on many, many other occasions.

THE TWO DOMINANT STRAINS OF ANTI-Lincolnism today come from the neo-Confederate school associated with the late Mel Bradford, and from libertarian critics such as Murray Rothbard. Along with Edmund O. Wilson earlier in the 20th century, Bradford was the best of the highbrow reactionary critics of Lincoln. A student of literature, he focused on Lincoln's rhetoric and especially his attempt to fuse Biblical eschatology with military and political goals. He had a point. The Gettysburg Address was for him Exhibit A of Lincoln's effort to forge a new civil religion out of the Declaration of Independence. For Bradford, Lincoln's "four score and seven years ago" already carried a whiff of blasphemy. Most dangerously, the speech appealed not to a conservative appreciation for what is settled, tried, and true, but to an endless quest to achieve equality; Lincoln's goal seemed an invitation to a kind of permanent revolution.

Bradford, who had been President Ronald Reagan's original nominee to head the National Endowment for the Humanities, found himself under attack from fellow conservative Harry V. Jaffa. Jaffa was already the author of *Crisis of the House Divided* (1959), which made the case for Lincoln by appealing to the classic doctrine of natural law. In his essay "Equality as a Conservative Principle," Jaffa went further by reappropriating the Declaration and its equality clause for the conservative movement. Equality, Jaffa argued, was not a revolutionary doctrine, but one based in the conservative philosophical tradition that could be traced back continuously from the American Founders to John Locke, Thomas Aquinas, Cicero, and Aristotle.

Not only did Jaffa succeed in placing Lincoln within an unbroken tradition of natural law, he depicted Bradford's infatuation with the antebellum South as tainted with historicism. Historicism, he had learned from Leo Strauss, is the doctrine that each age or culture has its own organic principles of jus-

tice. On Jaffa's telling, it was the slave-holding apologists for the South who were at the foundation of the modern doctrines of the master race and the master state. Not Lincoln but John C. Calhoun and his epigones were the true precursors of totalitarianism. In his later work *A New Birth of Freedom* (2000), Jaffa connected Calhoun's doctrines to Joseph de Maistre, Martin Heidegger, and the European reactionary tradition.

MURRAY ROTHBARD WAS NEITHER a Lincoln scholar nor a neo-Confederate but a self-proclaimed "anarcho-capitalist" who saw all the evils of contemporary life as descending from the modern state. His libertarian attack focused on the myth of Lincoln as the "great centralizer," the creator of the Leviathan state. Rothbard's peculiar libertarianism involved a defense of the right of secession: every people has a right to its own form of government. Didn't the American Revolution begin with an act of secession from the British Empire? Whether the secession was for the sake of freedom or slavery was a purely tertiary issue. Rothbard's views were extreme even in the libertarian circles in which he traveled, yet they have come to have real cultural currency. Thomas DiLorenzo, author of *The Real Lincoln* (2002), argued that the 10th Amendment affirmed the right of secession. Ron and Rand Paul and Texas Governor Rick Perry have all patronized secession. It makes one wonder how a philosophy that proclaims the liberty of the individual to be the highest value can turn a blind eye to the slavery that secessionism sought to protect.

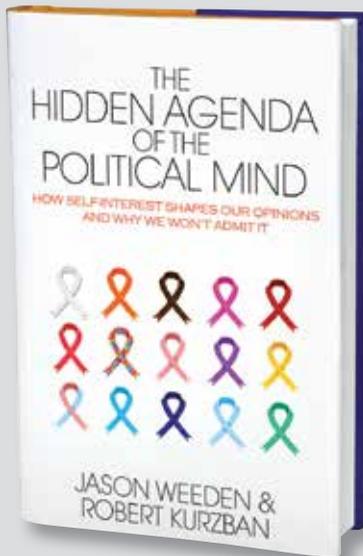
The debate over Abraham Lincoln has always been less about what he did than about what he came to represent. He has become a kind of political Rorschach test on which Americans of all political stripes pin their hopes and fears. The struggle over Lincoln's legacy has therefore never been just about the past, but also about America's future. John McKee Barr's *Loathing Lincoln* reminds us just how uncertain that future is. For those concerned to preserve Lincoln's vision of a more just, fair, and inclusive America, the struggle to secure his legacy is far from over.

Steven B. Smith is the Alfred Cowles Professor of Political Science at Yale University.



cartoon by Frederick Burr Opper, from the New York Evening Journal, 1900

Changing the Conversations that Change the World



The Hidden Agenda of the Political Mind

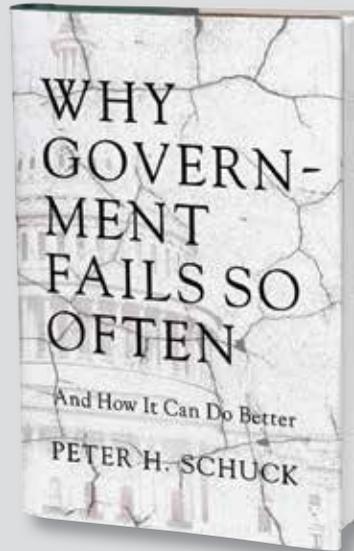
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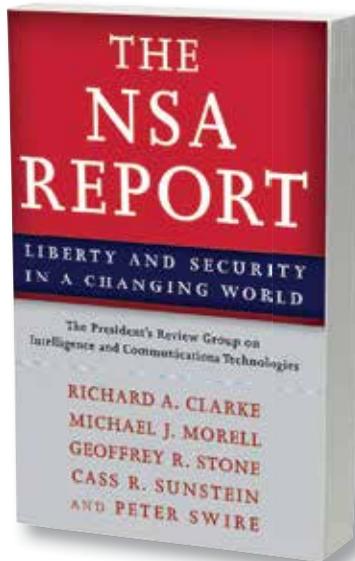
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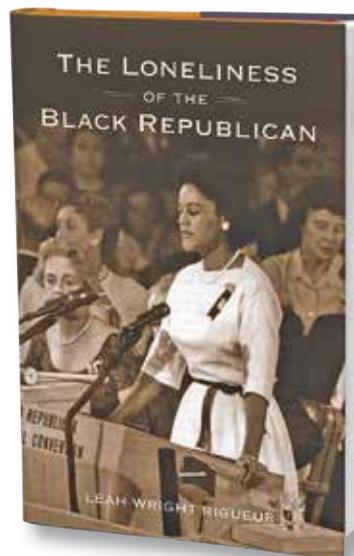
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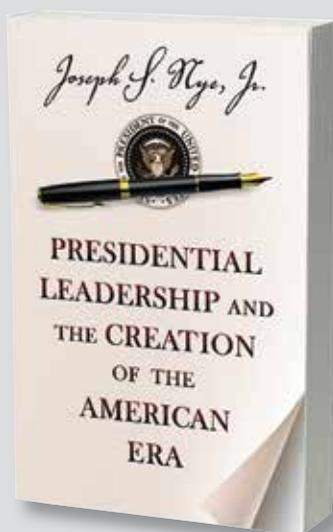
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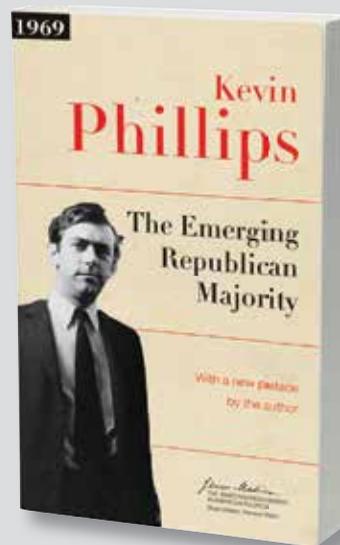
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