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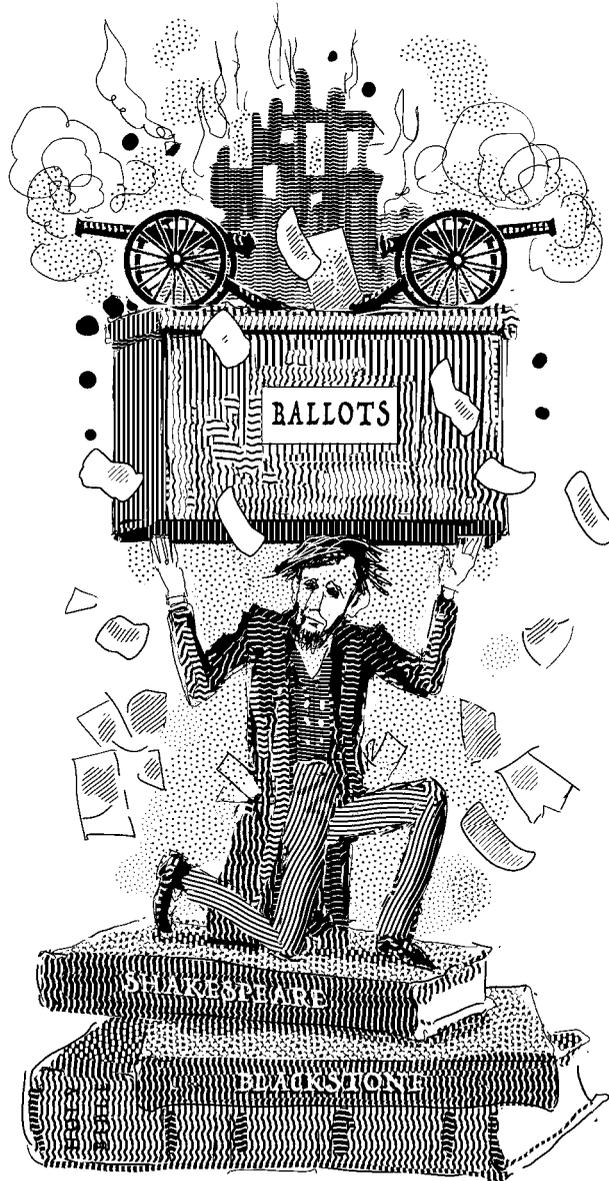
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## UNDERSTANDING GREATNESS

*Abraham Lincoln: Philosopher Statesman*, by Joseph R. Fornieri.  
Southern Illinois University Press, 248 pages, \$34.50

THE VISAGE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN we see in the photographic portraits, whatever our particular view of him as Civil War president, projects thoughtful endurance and penetrating acuity. When one attribute, then the other, predominates, we have the ambivalence that pervades many of our civic and scholarly commemorations. In one of his aspects, Lincoln is a master of principled restraint, a leader who takes risks some have deemed extra-constitutional, for the sake of preserving the Constitution and the Union. The other Lincoln is an ends-oriented realist who readily employs non-constitutional means to pursue moral imperatives or his own ambitions, or both, while remaking the Union. The first is closer to the traditional ideal of the philosopher-statesman, the second to the modern man of deeds, the enlightened Machiavel.

In its beginnings, the Republican Party reflected some of these ambiguities in its restive synthesis of high-mindedness and ambitious practical politics. Its principled coalition settled the struggle for the 1860 presidential nomination with a far-sighted and shrewd compromise. Once nominated and elected, Lincoln extended himself to Union-backers whose votes he had not won. He invited rivals into his cabinet, where the Union could benefit from their contributions while their opposition to Lincoln himself was neutralized. For the sake of a stronger Union effort, he entered into a fraught alliance with the "War Democrats." As the war grew, he gave tender treatment to the slave-owning Border States and even at times to the South. His suspension of habeas corpus and his proclamation of a strategically limited emancipation roiled his alliances, too. But all these actions, and Lincoln's explanations of them, manifested a willingness to act for principle as well as advantage. He met his opposition with a rhetoric honed by contests for justice and dominance in



the courtroom, a rhetoric elevated by his capable grasp of high office. He prevailed, whether by force or principle or both, by spelling out his highest purposes with daring clarity and penetrating imagination.

Interpreters of Lincoln's legacy have understandably taken different views of its meaning and purposes. But that division has long been exacerbated by a greater one: the divide between those who focus on Lincoln's well-turned thoughts, words, and actions only partly bounded by the context of his time, and those who think of him as a creature of history, ultimately overshadowed by far larger forces of history, economics, race, and class. The first group must cope with its own tendency to underrate or ignore historical context. The second group must resist the temptation to let the memory of Lincoln fade into the levelling self-assurance

that his so-called greatness did not and could not change the course of history.

IN HIS NEW BOOK, ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY political scientist Joseph R. Fornieri takes on this divided interpretive tradition with an unwavering defense of the greatness of Lincoln's character as a statesman and philosopher whose qualities played a crucial role in the outcome of the Civil War. In character and deed, his Lincoln incorporates the great-souledness described by Aristotle as well as the "biblical magnanimity" defended by Saint Thomas Aquinas. Lincoln is great and "humble before God," the genuinely chivalrous embodiment of William Tecumseh Sherman's praise for him as the man possessing "more of the elements of greatness, combined with goodness, than any other" Sherman had known. The theme-setting passage that Fornieri places before his preface suggests something higher still: that the 16th president's leadership had an uncommon affinity with the suffering service of the Son of Man. Jesus' rejoinder to his disciples about the true greatness of leadership in the new Christian faith sets the theme for much of this book: "[W]hoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:26-28).

In our cynical, credulous era it is too easy to dismiss Fornieri's entire approach as hagiography; but that would be a mistake. *Abraham Lincoln: Philosopher Statesman* does not labor to make Lincoln a Christ figure or a man of "biblical magnanimity." What it does is amass and analyze, in a concise set of pages, evidence enough to prove it is at least worth taking these claims seriously. This close study of Lincoln's thought, words, and deeds reveals

a depth and coherence to them that demand explanation, yet remain hard to explain.

FORNIERI IS STRUCK BY THE AFFINITY between Lincoln's character and the cardinal virtues, which he examines to support his case that Lincoln is a statesman-philosopher of the highest order. He focuses on six virtues, one for each chapter, but his six are reformulations and combinations of the traditional seven. The four natural and three theological virtues (prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude, crowned by faith, hope, and charity) become Fornieri's wisdom, prudence, duty, magnanimity, rhetoric, and patriotism. Three of the chapters emphasize the qualities of wise political leadership; the other three concentrate on effective governance. Magnanimity, which includes "biblical greatness," presides over both series, showing forth Lincoln's greatness as both statesman and self-sacrificing philosopher.

In this account, character, political action, and philosophical opinion interact. The perpetuation of our political institutions depends, in Lincoln's view, on policy that is based upon philosophical truths: "No policy that does not rest upon some philosophical public opinion can be permanently maintained" (Speech at New Haven, March 6, 1860). What can be perpetuated is what has a basis in philosophical opinion, and those opinions are by their nature not equal. They find their ranking in exposition, dialogue, and debate leading to higher truths. Lincoln repeatedly points to the formative power of the self-evident truths set forth in the Declaration—formative because they animated not only the Constitution but the process of lawmaking that followed its framing, including, for example, the Northwest Ordinance, which barred slavery from the Northwest Territory. Union and liberty were preserved and strengthened, not simply by means of the founders' ideas but through their legislation, the product of their political and moral prudence, which Fornieri argues is embodied in turn in Lincoln's character and actions: "The question for Lincoln was how to best advance the principles of the Declaration under the circumstances so as to preserve both the Union and liberty."

Lincoln's prudence presupposed, then, a moderate or temperate understanding of "the limits of politics," the demands of time, place, and imperfect human nature. In Fornieri's apt phrasing, Lincoln's temperance "yoke[s] interest to principle." It takes account of vagaries of right and justice without abandoning principle, distinguishing itself from those types of pragmatism that slide toward expediency in accord with the chief practical principle—advantage. Lincoln's prudence also sets up a

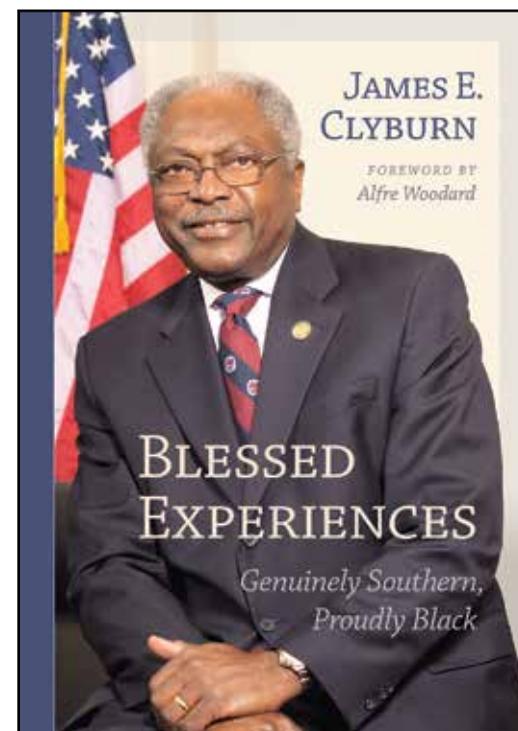
standard to strive for, most notably the principles of the Declaration, without equating virtue with perfection.

IN ITS BEST SECTIONS, THE BOOK PURSUES these elusive and competing qualities into some of the dark forests and upland meadows of Lincoln's statesmanship. But the success of Fornieri's argument is not as complete as it might have been if he had paid more attention to the paradoxes of Lincoln's leadership. Perhaps all students of Lincoln must cope with this problem. We do not see all the dimensions of his achievements because much of their success—and their depth—eludes philosophical formulation. The chief strength of this book is its accumulation and ordering of important evidence; it meets ill-informed skepticism head-on. But that strength sometimes leads to a listing of Lincoln's attributes—a formula, rather than a genuine grasping of his greatness.

Fornieri discusses Lincoln's affinity for Shakespearean drama in a single brief paragraph. His book makes his readers thirst for more. After all, Lincoln himself turned again and again to the poetical resources of Shakespeare's history plays and tragedies as he moved through the fiery trials of the Civil War. The work of Harry Jaffa and others suggests some of the ways this might be done. Shakespeare's plays routinely dislodge and recast modern assumptions about human nature and the possibility of human greatness. Scene by scene, the dramas enlarge our capacity to assess Lincoln's statesmanship because they widen the horizon of virtue and tyranny, and keep open the possibility of greatness under circumstances that call forth and challenge a variety of human types. When Shakespeare's Richard II famously taunts Bolingbroke by greeting him as "Good king, great king, and yet not greatly good," his words preserve and forecast the possibility that the two might be joined.

The histories show the difficulties leaders face when they attempt to combine religious and classical understandings of political life. The tragedies reveal, above all, the infectious power of tyranny in the human breast. Lincoln's virtues as a statesman derive not only from his character and his encounter with circumstances; they arise at least partly from his immersion, by his own account, in Shakespeare's plays. There he found versions of all-too-human, sometimes great-souled characters, both admirable and repellent, caught up in the dramas that mold and test them. There he found himself.

*John Channing Briggs is professor of English at the University of California, Riverside, and the author of Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered (Johns Hopkins University Press).*



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