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# CLAREMONT
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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

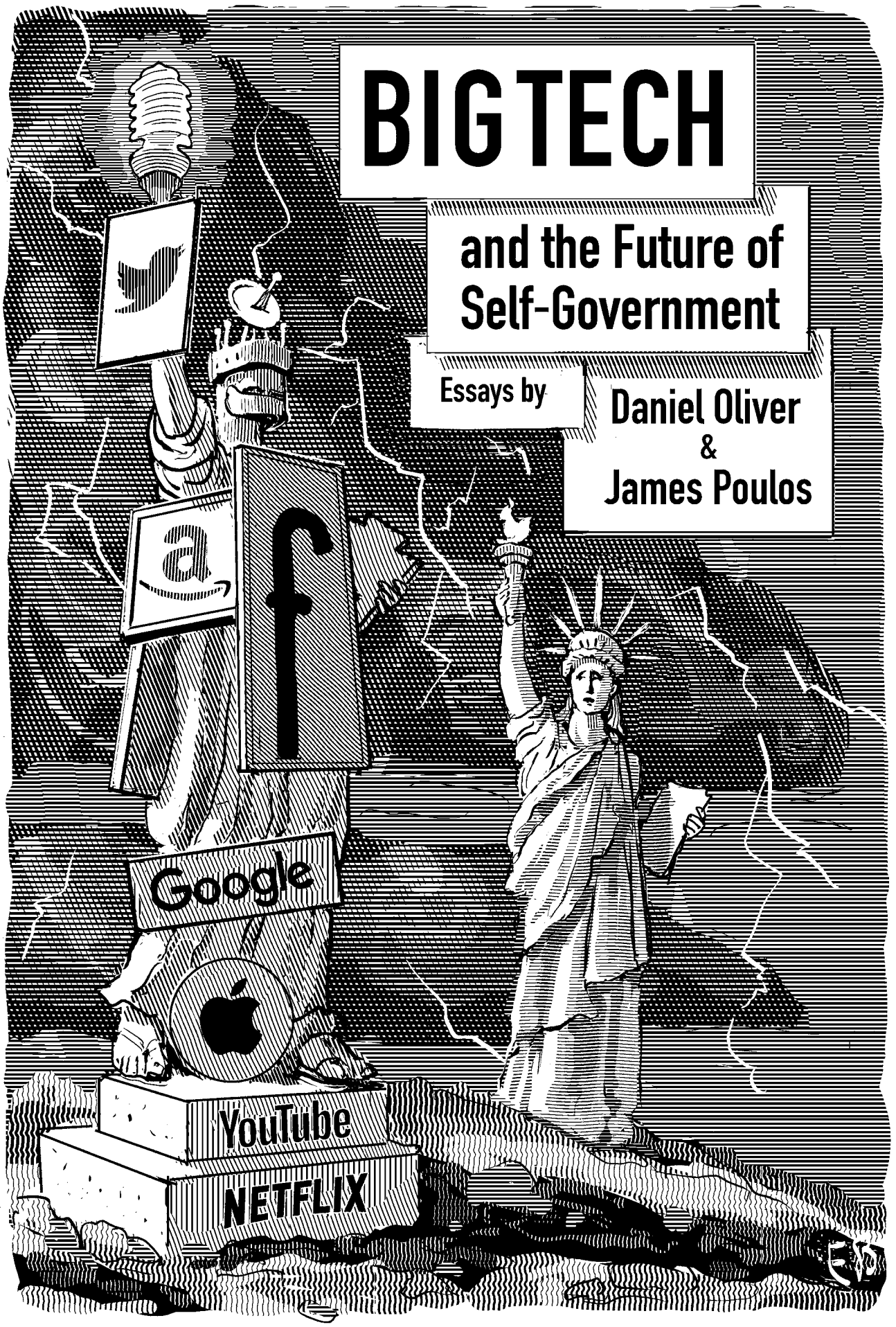
Joseph M. Bessette: Obama's Promised Land

William Voegeli: Californicating America

James Bowman: Eminent Boomers

Christopher Caldwell: Robert E. Lee

Robert Royal: Rod Dreher's Survival Guide




James Hankins: Our Age of Conformity

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Book Review by Michael Burlingame

# Lincoln's World

*Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times*, by David S. Reynolds.
Penguin Press, 1,088 pages, $45


*Abraham Lincoln and his Democratic opponent in the 1864 presidential election, George McClellan.* Harper's Weekly, *September 17, 1864*

David Reynolds's thousand-page "cultural biography" of Abraham Lincoln is a work of immense erudition and vast scope that calls to mind a line by Walt Whitman: "I am large, I contain multitudes." Unlike conventional life-and-times presidential biographies, which provide military, political, economic, and social contexts, *Abe* offers a cornucopia of information about the cultural milieu in which Lincoln lived. Readers learn much about antebellum spiritualism, humor, religion, journalism, entertainment, race relations, abolitionism, frontier life, feminism, mobbing, nativism, theater, music, railroads, temperance, and especially literature. Prominent among those subjects are ones about which Reynolds, a Bancroft Prize recipient and Distinguished Professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, has published notable books, including John Brown, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville. The result is a biography that roots Lincoln firmly in his culture.

The strength of this approach is evident in the book's brilliant treatment of Lincoln and race, the most controversial aspect of the rail-splitter's life. Reynolds notes that the "issue of Lincoln's racial attitudes is hotly contested, because of his occasional use of the N-word and certain hidebound statements he made in speeches," causing some to argue that "racism was the center and circumference of his being." Reynolds, however, maintains that readers may see "the utter falsity of this statement when we place Lincoln's attitudes toward race in their cultural contexts."

The most relevant context is the deep-seated, widespread Negrophobia infecting both the antebellum North and South. Lincoln's Illinois, arguably the most bigoted of the Free States, forbade blacks to settle within its borders, vote, hold office, testify in court against whites, serve in the militia or on juries, or intermarry with whites. When compared to most of his countrymen, Lincoln emerges as an "abolitionist who loathed racism" and a "radical anti-racist" whose "underlying radicalism on race" made him "just as progressive,"

Reynolds argues, as Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner, the foremost congressional champions of racial egalitarianism.

Reynolds quotes Frederick Douglass's 1865 eulogy of Lincoln (a speech shockingly absent from editions of Douglass's works, including the five thick volumes of speeches published by the Yale University Press) in which the great black orator called him "emphatically the black man's president, the first who rose above the prejudice of his times, and country." Reynolds is especially impressed with Lincoln's interviews with Douglass and Martin Delany, the father of black nationalism: "The combination of interracial respect and black-centered militancy that Lincoln displayed in his dealings with Douglass and Delaney suggests that there was validity in proslavery comparisons between Lincoln and John Brown, one of the least racist white people in American history."

The most telling evidence of Lincoln's purported racism cited by critics is his oratory during the 1850s. Taunted by his opponent, the egregious race-baiting Senator Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln felt compelled to deny support for black citizenship. But at the same time he insisted repeatedly that the Declaration of Independence's assertion that "all men are created equal" applied to blacks as well as to whites, both of whom were entitled to enjoy "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" to the full. For saying so, the "Little Giant" time and again called Lincoln an "amalgamationist," a mid-19th-century term for a supporter of race-mixing. In response, Lincoln did offer an "obligatory disclaimer"—stating that he supported some provisions of Illinois's infamous Black Code—but he denounced Senator Douglas's flagrant appeals to racial prejudice and urged Illinoisans to "discard all this quibbling about this man and the other man—this race and that race and the other race being inferior, and therefore they must be placed in an inferior position" and instead to "unite as one people throughout this land…declaring that all men are created equal."

As Reynolds astutely notes, when Lincoln did occasionally make "brief, perfunctory racist sounding pronouncements" designed "to appeal to certain groups of Illinoisans whose votes he needed," he "carefully regulated his word choice to leave open the possibility that he would promote [equal] rights in the future" and "cunningly surrounded" seemingly racist pronouncements "with phrases that pointed in a radically abolitionist direction." While he "loathed the race-baiting that his Democratic opponent utilized to whip up the public," Lincoln understandably felt it was politically necessary to pay lip service to the prevailing racism of his time and place.

During Lincoln's 1858 debates with Douglas, he employed the N-word now and then but never as a means to belittle blacks but rather to mock the Little Giant's egregious demagoguery by paraphrasing his appeals to Illinoisans' deep-dyed Negrophobia. As Reynolds puts it, Lincoln "impersonated the enemy in order to debunk him."

Despite the enormous amount written about Lincoln and race, surprisingly little attention has been paid to his interactions with blacks. Reynolds argues that only by examining his "personal interchange with black people" can "we see the complete falsity of the charges of innate racism that some have levelled at him." Lincoln's "personal bonding with African-Americans such as Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, Sojourner Truth, and Elizabeth Keckly," Reynolds writes, "reflected the genuine humanity behind his anti-slavery activism." In Springfield he had resided in an ethnically and racially mixed neighborhood, treated black servants cordially and respectfully, represented black legal clients like his barber and friend William Florville, and knew black activists who served as conductors on the underground railroad, like his near-neighbor Jameson Jenkins and his bootmaker, William K. Donovan.

Because Lincoln was so deeply devoted to the principles of the Declaration of Independence, his well-honed logic impelled him to pursue what Reynolds calls a "long-term goal of citizenship for black people." Those efforts culminated in his last public address, given two days after Robert E. Lee's surrender in April 1865. He openly supported black voting rights for the first time, a reform that he had been promoting behind the scenes in Louisiana. This speech enraged John Wilkes Booth, who was in the audience that day. "That means nigger citizenship. Now by God I'll put him through!" the actor told his companions. "That is the last speech he will ever make." Three days later at Ford's Theatre, Booth carried out his threat, making Lincoln in effect a martyr to black citizenship rights, as much as Martin Luther King, Jr., and the others who were murdered during the civil rights revolution of the 20th century.

Reynolds's book has many other strengths, including a sensitive analysis of Lincoln's taste in literature, music, and humor. He emphasizes heavily the significance of the president's fondness for the writings of journalist David Ross Locke, "a one-person battering ram against racial prejudice." Locke invented the satirical character Petroleum V. Nasby, a bibulous Democrat whose over-the-top anti-black rants tickled Lincoln's funny bone. His "enjoyment of Locke's humor reveals that below his veil of moderation and caution lay a radically progressive self," Reynolds concludes.

The author is at his best in analyzing the public rather than the private Lincoln. His characterization of Lincoln's youth as happy is widely off the mark, based mainly on the reminiscence of one friend and contradicting the testimony of innumerable others. That flaw is especially evident in Reynolds's depiction of Lincoln's father, Thomas, as a positive force shaping Lincoln's character. In fact, Thomas was someone young Abe determined not to emulate. His indolence, lack of ambition, and disdain for education put him at odds with his smart, ambitious, intellectually curious, and enterprising son who loved to read, and resented his father for yanking him out of school to rent him to neighbors as a laborer. His father, Lincoln said, "never did more in the way of writing than to bunglingly sign his own name."

Reynolds similarly paints far too rosy a portrait of Mary Todd Lincoln, who belittled her husband, physically abused him, humiliated him, nagged him, and made his domestic life "a burning, scorching hell," as "terrible as death and as gloomy as the grave," according to his law partner of 16 years, William Herndon. A close friend, Orville H. Browning, recalled that Lincoln "several times told me there [in the White House] that he was constantly under great apprehension lest his wife should do something which would bring him into disgrace." She did so by accepting bribes and kickbacks, padding expense accounts and payrolls, extorting favors and money, peddling influence as well as state secrets, overspending on White House redecorating, and consorting with disreputable characters.

Despite those glitches, David Reynolds's *Abe* is an invaluable addition to the Lincoln literature, ably supplementing more traditional biographies.

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