
General George McClellan called him an "idiot," a "well-meaning baboon," and "the original gorilla." Edwin M. Stanton, the attorney general held over from the Buchanan administration, dismissed him as "a low, cunning clown," an "imbecile."

Abraham Lincoln fooled them. We now know him through a tableau of heroic images: "Honest Abe," a rail-splitter who studied by firelight; the “Great Debater,” locked in combat with Stephen A. Douglas; "Father Abraham," who led the nation through the bloody, fratricidal Civil War; "The Great Emancipator," who freed African-American slaves; and the martyred leader, assassinated on Good Friday, soon after he promised "malice toward none and charity for all."

Thousands of books have been written about Lincoln. And yet, he remains an enigma. When Lincoln became the sixteenth president of the United States in 1861, he was less experienced than any of his predecessors, having served in the Illinois legislature and but a single term in Congress. How, then, did he become a giant in the annals of American politics? In *President Lincoln*, William Lee Miller, a scholar in Ethics and Institutions at the University of Virginia, and the author of *Lincoln's Virtues* (2002), takes the measure of the man by examining his "moral performance" in office.

Miller respects—and even reveres—his subject. And who can blame him? Nonetheless, he seems, at times, overly eager to endorse virtually all of Lincoln's actions as necessary means to noble ends. Even the most moral leaders, Miller maintains, must apply their ideals to "concrete realities" and make compromises. As president, he argues, Lincoln interpreted his oath of office as a duty to preserve the Union and mobilized the coercive machinery of the government, with “formidable resolve” and "existential immediacy," to suppress the rebellion.
"I hope to have God on my side," Lincoln is said to have said, "but I must have Kentucky." To secure the border states, Lincoln suspended habeas corpus, quashed emancipation decrees, and encouraged "secession" by anti-slavery West Virginia. His motives, surely, are beyond reproach. His methods, however, deserve more searching scrutiny than Miller gives them.

Although Lincoln believed that his oath forbade him to act "in mere deference to my abstract judgment and feeling on slavery," Miller does demonstrate, his commitment to end human bondage did not waver. The president found a way to link abolition to preservation of the Union. The Confederates, he argued, had betrayed the most fundamental American value—"a free government, where every man has a right to be equal with every other man." Applying this principle to African-Americans, he could then use his "war powers" to issue the Emancipation Proclamation—and make this "new birth of freedom" a condition of peace. If he returned blacks to slavery, he came to recognize, "I should be damned in time and eternity for so doing."

Lincoln was great, Miller reminds us, because he was good. Although he was discriminating in dispensing pardons, he regarded the execution of deserters as "butchery," refused to order anyone under eighteen to be shot, and sympathized with young soldiers whose legs betrayed them in combat. Although he "hardened" the war, telling Grant and Sherman to "hold on with a bull-dog grip, and chew and choke as much as possible," Lincoln never demeaned or demonized secessionists. He recoiled at systematic cruelty perpetrated on individuals. And he did not let his ego—or personal resentments—influence his decisions. "What I deal with," he wrote, "is too vast for malicious dealing."

In his Second Inaugural, the greatest public address in American history, Miller notes, Lincoln allowed himself neither a hint of vindication nor a trace of condemnation. Alone among presidents, before and since, he refused to claim Divine approbation for the actions of his
government. Northerners and Southerners, the president proclaimed, "read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other." But "the Almighty has His own purposes." With "firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right," this wise and humble man concluded, "let us strive to finish the work we are in" and forge "a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."

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