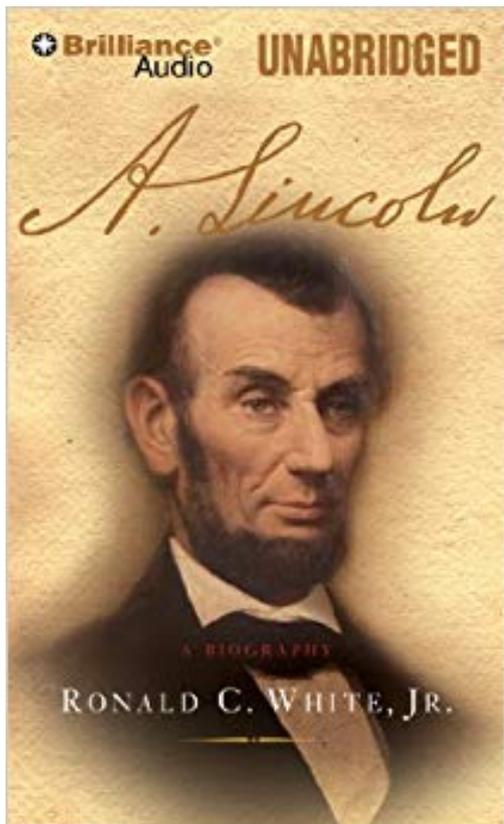


A. Lincoln: A Biography by Ronald C. White Jr., Bill Weideman



ISBN: 1469278685

ISBN13: 978-1469278681

Author: Ronald C. White Jr., Bill Weideman

Book title: A. Lincoln: A Biography

Publisher: Brilliance Audio; Unabridged edition
(October 1, 2012)

Language: English

Category: Leaders & Notable People

Size PDF version: 1483 kb

Size ePUB version: 1505 kb

Size FB2 version: 1524 kb

Other formats: azw lit docx lrf

In this important new biography, Ronald C. White, Jr. offers a fresh and fascinating definition of Lincoln as a man of integrity—what today’s commentators are calling “authenticity”—whose internal moral compass is the key to understanding his life. Through meticulous research, utilizing recently discovered Lincoln letters, legal papers, and photographs, White depicts Lincoln as a person of intellectual curiosity, comfortable with ambiguity, and capable of changing his mind. The reader is treated to an exploration of Lincoln’s compelling words, his changing ideas on slavery, the shaping of the modern role of Commander-in-Chief, and his surprising religious odyssey. *A. Lincoln*, so titled for the way Lincoln signed his name, sheds an innovative and profound light on our nation’s most beloved leader for a new generation of Americans.

“Ronald C. White’s *A. Lincoln* is the best biography of Lincoln since David Donald’s *Lincoln* (1995).... Amid all the books on Lincoln that will be published during the coming year, this one will stand out as one of the best.” —James M. McPherson, author of *Battle Cry of Freedom*, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize



Reviews of the [A. Lincoln: A Biography](#) by Ronald C. White Jr., Bill Weideman

Wतिकालते

There are a lot of biographies of Lincoln and many are very good. I am not certain but this biography by Ronald White seems unique in two ways. One is the emphasis on Lincoln's personal writings to himself. I had not known of Lincoln's tendency all his adult life of writing brutally honest notes to himself. I found these deeply humanizing, whether it be Lincoln's real thoughts about himself in his adult years or his personal thoughts about slavery. These self-reflective, highly personal notes let the reader get to know Lincoln and not just the mythic image. Americans accept as a sort of cultural doctrine how great Lincoln was. These personal notes, never intended for publication, display the heart and mind of the man and they showed me what "great" means not just for a president but for a human being. Brilliant, self-reflective, deeply honest - this was our 16th president.

The other unique thing White does in this book, especially in the second half, is to parse out how Lincoln developed some of his most famous speeches. White shows how Lincoln used English - the choice of words, the rhetorical and stylistic structures - to craft the final speech. These structural elements show why so many of Lincoln's speeches are both simple to understand and at the same time highly memorable. Lincoln would take a draft, perhaps work it through with Seward, and then often redo it in a way that improved its presentation enormously. What is worth noting, especially in today's world, is that these stylistic and grammatical elements were not just rhetorical devices but what Lincoln actually thought and felt put in a way that moved his listeners. It was a creative fusion of honesty and public presentation.

We desperately need to remember the person of Abraham Lincoln today. This excellent biography does Lincoln justice and is a lesson to us of what true leadership and the best of humanity can be in the midst of a terrible crisis on American history.

Alien

It has been estimated that over 11,000 books and other writings have been devoted to Lincoln. It is as if there is something elusive about him, which no book can satisfy. Indeed there is something mystical about him and profoundly unknowable. The trend today in writing about Lincoln is to write more and more about less and less. It is like tasting the apple but never finishing it. This book by Ronald White is a complete biography. We now get a chance to ingest the entire fruit. Although no event is treated in depth, that is not the point of the book. It is more than a repetition of the well-known events. It is an exploration of Lincoln's thoughts and ideas. For those who are frustrated by the mystery of Lincoln, this book represents an opportunity to get to know him more intimately and completely.

The book consists of a chronologic account of Lincoln's life. But it is more than simply a listing of events. The events themselves are like the chords, which accompany the melody of his deepest

thoughts. White allows Lincoln to speak to us through his speeches and writings. These works are not always repeated verbatim, but White summarizes them and expands upon them so as to give us an understanding of what Lincoln was actually thinking. In so doing, we hear Lincoln as he bears his soul to the reader.

White begins his book before Lincoln is born. His family history in America dates back to the 17th century, even before the birth of the nation. His parents were religious Baptists and he was born into their Calvinist beliefs. However, he soon abandoned organized religion when he became repelled by the emotionalism of revival meetings, which were intrinsic to the Second Great Awakening. Turning his back on revealed religion he sought refuge in reason and became a lawyer. As Patrick Cleburne, a confederate general noted, the law provided a stepping-stone to "distinction and civil importance". White, in his insightful way, draws attention to the fact that Lincoln learned to examine issues from every angle before settling on a conclusion. This ability would serve him well, not only in his career as a lawyer but as a legislator and then President of the United States. It was in the legal profession that he first encountered moral conflict, a condition that would plague him until nearly the end of his life. The law is adversarial and is thus based on conflict and confrontation, whereas Lincoln preferred mediation. He preferred to settle a case rather than argue it in court. He felt that after all is said and done, the adversaries would need to live together following their confrontation, a notion presaging his sentiments regarding reconstruction.

At age 28 while running for re-election to the Illinois state legislature, he delivered a speech at the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois. The speech was ostensibly about the role of memory and our responsibility for preserving our political institutions. However, more importantly, it dealt with creating a secular religion with its morality based on reason. It became one of the most notable speeches ever delivered.

Reason, cold calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defense. Let those materials be molded into general intelligence, sound morality and in particular, a reverence for the constitution and laws.

The collision of politics, morality and divine will occurred most acutely over the issue of slavery. Lincoln was always concerned about slavery, but the issue came to a head as the Civil War approached. The Lincoln Douglas debates were mostly about the moral issue of slavery. Although both Lincoln and Douglas were practical men and recognized the role of necessity in dealing with slavery, it was Lincoln's insistence on recognizing the immorality of slavery that distinguished him from Douglas. For Lincoln, the issue became one of intolerable moral conflict. Only elimination of slavery would resolve the conflict and the attendant cognitive dissonance. With the end of the Civil War the conflict between morality and necessity came to an end. The slaves were at last freed and the country was saved.

An important subtext of the book is how Lincoln's devotion to reason was eventually tempered by his surrender to God. In a letter to Albert Hodges in 1864 Lincoln described the evolution of his thinking evoking the role of God in directing man's actions. Here he came full circle from the religion of his parents to an embrace of reason as a reaction to those teachings and finally to submission to God's will. He described his beliefs in a private communication uncovered after his death, termed The Meditation on God's Will. Lincoln counseled that one must defer to God, in all of his mystery and lack of transparency, a mystical notion divorced from reason:

The will of God prevails. In great contests, each party claims to act in accordance with God's will. Both may be and one must be wrong. In the present Civil War, it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party

The journey for Lincoln was a long one. The word God is rarely mentioned in Lincoln's earlier writings and in fact is absent in the First Inaugural Address. It appears once in the Gettysburg Address, but then 14 times in the Second Inaugural Address. One of the pleasures of this book is

that one discovers for oneself what God meant to Lincoln. In the Second Inaugural address, Lincoln submitted to God who is totally opaque and unknowing. This notion is more Islamic than Christian. If one understands how Lincoln came to understand God, then one comes closer to understanding Lincoln. His journey was intensely personal. Hence, the book is voyeurism at its titillating best. It took real courage for White to write another book about Lincoln, much less a complete biography. Those who complete the book of over 750 pages hear beyond the background noise an entire Lincoln symphony. It is a real treat.

Anarawield

One of the best biographies I've ever read. Love all the details and additional information about Abraham Lincoln that I never realized or you wouldn't get in a history book. A great read and worth it. A bit tedious in parts, but you get more in the strategy of Lincoln here than anywhere else. The only complaint, which really shouldn't matter in a biography, was the lack of information that might be found after Lincoln's death if anything was to be found in records, the papers, and so on. I feel a good legacy chapter would have been a great compliment. Otherwise, I enjoyed reading this book quite a bit.

Not-the-Same

I concur with the cover quote - if you read one book about Abraham Lincoln, let it be A. Lincoln. I've read numerous books on Abraham Lincoln and this is by far my favorite. It covers a lot of good ground on his childhood and early life which many biographies gloss over but which directly impact his values and decisions in adulthood.

Zorve

I learned so much from this! I have read a couple other biographies on him, but this one, though incredibly detailed, was written so clearly that I got a sense of the divergent views on him, and what he faced on a daily basis. It also showed the progression on his thinking about preserving the the Union but also about slavery, until he was willing to do what ever it took to eradicate it. What incredible pressure he was under! No way to get through that but by God's gracious sustaining hand. And yet, his views of God and His sovereignty developed over time as well, as this author detailed from his private correspondence as well as his public speeches. Very long book, very detailed...but very much worth the read!

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