



Lincoln's Battle with God: A President's Struggle with Faith and What It Meant for America

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Finding God can be difficult even in times of joy. But consider the times?and profound sorrows?of Abraham Lincoln. His beloved mother died a painful death before Abe?s tenth birthday. His father was abusive when the man wasn?t absent entirely. Abraham was so beset by depression that he neared suicide on numerous occasions. He lost one son when the boy was the tender age of three. A second was eleven when he died, and this was less than a year after Lincoln assumed the presidency of a fractured nation.

Despite his trials?or perhaps because of them?Lincoln yearned for comfort beyond the mortal world. He took counsel with ministers. He read voluminously. And he prayed.

Still, it is not easy to number Lincoln among the saints. He never joined a church and he seldom spoke of Jesus Christ. Even during his lifetime, his religious statements were greeted with skepticism. And yet the evidence indicates that Lincoln did indeed struggle to find a life-changing faith, to follow the deathbed charge of the mother he adored: ?Worship God.?

He struggled, too, with God?s will in the great war, the war between brothers Lincoln was unable to prevent. These wrestlings led to his benevolent treatment of his former enemies and ultimately to the sentiments he expressed in the greatest of American sermons, Lincoln?s Second Inaugural Address.

Lincoln?s Battle With God will challenge both of the accepted views of the great man?s faith: the atheist Lincoln and the passionately religious Lincoln. Stephen Mansfield presents a Lincoln ever on a journey of faith, a journey cut short by an assassin and obscured by scholarly bias and conflicting evidence.

Abraham Lincoln?s spiritual journey offers profound insight into the man who is today perceived as nearly the soul of America. His spiritual battles are not unlike those of our nation, which makes Lincoln?s story of faith as told in this marvelous book a story vital for our times and perhaps vital for our souls, as well.

Lincoln's Battle with God: A President's Struggle with Faith and What It Meant for America Details

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Literary Chic says

I found this book interesting without being confrontational. It was nice to hear Lincoln's varied opinions of a god. The most interesting thing I noticed was that in all of the quotes Mr. Mansfield sourced, Lincoln never referred to Jesus Christ. He referred to a deity in many ways but not by any name in this book.

The author was thought provoking and truly seemed to give a fair analysis of Lincoln's beliefs.

"When I do good, I feel good. When I do bad, I feel bad. That is my religion." - Abraham Lincoln

Kent says

Mr. Mansfield's argument in this very well written book can be summed up using his own words found on page 186 "...He had hated God, had felt tortured and rejected by him, like Job of old. Ultimately and through a process of years, Lincoln came to see God as good and just. He learned to rely on his comfort, trust in his guidance, and stand in awe of his perfect judgments. He may even have learned to love God as a heavenly Father far beyond any earthly father he had known."

In my opinion Mr. Mansfield made his case using what has been accepted as true by most Lincoln scholars of the events in Lincoln's life and comparing those events with Lincoln's own words. I didn't give the 5 stars (but would rate it 4.5) because at times I felt that Mr. Mansfield was perhaps reaching a bit too far in his statements of what Lincoln "believed." Having said that though I would highly recommend this book to anyone studying Lincoln because his religious journey from non-believer to the man placing his faith in the judgment of God cannot and must not be excluded in any understanding of America's greatest president.

T.M. says

I like just about any book about Lincoln, so I can't say that I didn't like this book. It was just disappointing.

I felt as though Mansfield definitely leapt to conclusions too quickly and jumped through a lot of hoops to classify Lincoln's religious beliefs without concrete evidence. He will write something like, "historians doubt [X] is true" but then proceed to take [X] as fact.

At one point (152) he argues plainly that Lincoln believed in "God as creator, as ruler of the world...He believed in the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ as teacher, Savior of the world...He believed in heaven, in the resurrection of the dead, and what Christians call eternal life...in fasting and prayer as a means of urging God to change human affairs, in repentance of sins, in observing the Sabbath...etc." For some of these assertions we have no evidence to believe they are true, for others we have conflicting evidence, and for some we have evidence so that we know they definitely AREN'T true.

We know that Lincoln underwent a religious transformation. We know he began his political career as mostly, if not entirely, atheist. And we know that while in the White House, if not sooner, he became much more religious. But at no point can we be sure that Lincoln ever became the sort of perfect Christian that Mansfield seeks to paint.

Overall, the book was a fast, easy read but if you're looking to read only one Lincoln book, I would stick with "Lincoln's Melancholy" by Joshua Wolf Shenk. It covers everything that Mansfield covers in this volume (and more) creating a more concrete and nuanced portrait of America's best president.

A.L. Buehrer says

I've always known that Lincoln was our best president, and this book only further confirmed it. Lincoln was a great character--very complex, conflicted, and even contradictory at times.

This book had a very speculative feeling to it. A lot of different arguments were presented. But I think this reflects in a very honest way, how Lincoln research is. And this in turn says something about the man himself, who never really stated anything outright about his inner self.

I learned a lot of things I didn't know about Abraham Lincoln's family, and the complicated and tumultuous journey he took from apparently radical atheist, to apparently Christian. Even with the question of exactly what kind of Christian he became, if a genuine Christian at all left hanging, I think this book shed a great deal of light on a subject I rarely even hear discussed.

George P. says

Lincoln's Battle with God will disappoint two kinds of readers: secularists and Christian nationalists, both of whom want to claim America's sixteenth president as wholly their own. He is neither, however. As Stephen Mansfield writes, "The silencing of Lincoln's faith by the secular and the exaggerating of Lincoln's faith by the religious have given us a less accurate and a less engaging Lincoln. We are poorer for the distortions." Indeed we are, which is all the more reason to appreciate the accomplishment of Mansfield's book.

That accomplishment is the mapping of Abraham Lincoln's religious journey. The journey began in 1809 in Kentucky, whose frontier religion was shaped by the camp-meeting revivalism of Cane Ridge (1801). Lincoln's parents, Thomas and Nancy, were Hard Shell Baptists. Their religion was primitive, emotional, and fervent. Lincoln loved his mother, who died when he was 10. Whatever spiritual sensitivity he had seems to have come from her. But when he was emancipated from his father at age 21, Lincoln disavowed both the man and his God.

As Lincoln struck out on his own in New Salem, Illinois, he fell in with a group of freethinkers, devotees of Paine, Volney, and Burns. He was known as an "infidel" who referred to Jesus Christ as a "bastard" and delighted to point out the Bible's seeming contradictions in public debate. He went so far as to write a "little book on Infidelity" that his freethinking friends had the foresight to burn. This is the Lincoln secularists love and the religious loathe.

But infidelity was not Lincoln's final take on religion. A change of view began when Lincoln moved to Springfield, the capital of Illinois. In 1846, in a hotly contested race against Methodist circuit rider Peter Cartwright for Illinois's 7th Congressional District, Lincoln published a handbill dishonestly disavowing his

earlier infidelity. “I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion in general, or of any denomination of Christians in particular,” he wrote, when in fact he had done precisely those things. His infidelity was softening, if for no other reason than political necessity. (Incidentally, he won the race.)

There may have been more going on, however. In 1849, having served his term in Congress, Lincoln moved briefly to Lexington, Kentucky, to settle the estate of his father-in-law, Robert Smith Todd. There, he came across *The Christian’s Defence*, a work of apologetics by Rev. James D. Smith, who happened to be the pastor of Springfield’s First Presbyterian Church. Upon returning to Springfield, Lincoln sought out Smith for conversation, and the Lincoln family began attending his church and supporting its ministries. When Thomas Lincoln lay dying, Lincoln wrote his stepbrother these words of comfort to convey to his father: “He [God] will not forget the dying man, who puts his trust in Him...but that if it be his lot to go now, he will soon have a joyous [meeting] with many loved ones gone before; and where [the rest] of us, through the help of God, hope ere-long [to join] them.” Whether this is a heartfelt, orthodox Christian faith is uncertain. That it is not infidelity is quite clear, however. Lincoln was on a journey.

That journey took him physically to Washington DC. Spiritually, however, it took him into uncharted territory. The Civil War did not bring out the best in America’s theologians, whose theologies predictably lined up with their respective political sympathies, whether Northern or Southern. Lincoln, of course, was for the Union, but his theology transcended his politics. In September 1862, Lincoln wrote himself this note:

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be wrong. God can not be for and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God’s purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.

What was God’s will? Lincoln came to believe that God’s purpose for him was to expand his war aims beyond merely preserving the Union (the cause Lincoln articulated in his First Inaugural Address). Now the additional purpose was freeing the slaves. According to Salmon Chase, secretary of the Treasury, Lincoln told his Cabinet, “I determined, as soon as it [the Confederate army] should be driven out of Maryland, to issue a Proclamation of Emancipation such as I thought most likely to be useful. I said nothing to any one; but I made the promise to myself and (hesitating a little)—to my Maker. The rebel army is now driven out, and I am going to fulfill that promise.” In short, the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation was the fulfillment of a religious vow, as much as it was a military strategy or a war aim.

After Lincoln had been re-elected but before the Confederacy had been defeated, Lincoln declared his theological understanding of the war to the broadest possible audience in his Second Inaugural Address:

Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. “Woe unto the world because of offenses! For it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh!” [Matthew 18:7] If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offense

came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether” [Psalm 19:9].

An infidel doesn't speak this way. Were he to mask his politics behind civil religion, he would speak the argot of his supporters and fellow partisans. He would not transcend their politicized religion with a critique aimed at both sides equally. Nor would he promise “malice toward none...charity for all” as government policy. But Abraham Lincoln did. He was no infidel. Then again, an orthodox Christian wouldn't be caught dead in a theater on Good Friday, as Abraham Lincoln was on April 14, 1865, when felled by a single bullet to the back of his head. Lincoln was no orthodox Christian either.

This, then, is the outline of Abraham Lincoln's religious journey that Stephen Mansfield traces in Lincoln's Battle with God. There is much more, of course, especially regarding how religion soothed Lincoln's lifelong melancholy and helped him grieve the death of two sons. But the journey is there: from infidelity to something short of orthodox Christianity. Mansfield's book will disappoint secular and religious partisans. Those less interested in partisan (mis)uses of history will delight in the honesty and ambiguity of the story it tells.

Amanda says

Mansfield's book on Abraham Lincoln's faith is an interesting read. Following Lincoln's faith from his rejection of God in his youth to his final words about walking in the footsteps of Christ, this book looks at Lincoln's spiritual journey and makes some informed guesses at what the president was thinking and how he changed in his beliefs about God. While I was not convinced (and I'm unsure whether or not the author was convinced) that Lincoln was a Christian at his death, based on this book I also would not be able to say that he was not. My only objection to the book is that it seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time on Lincoln's time before the presidency and almost gloss over the Civil War. The appendix with all Lincoln's speeches from his presidency was very helpful, as the book often uses short quotes from these speeches that a reader may not be able to remember in context.

Mary says

Relying on excerpts from Lincoln's speeches, letters, and conversations recounted by Lincoln's friends and associates, Mansfield makes a case for President Lincoln's transition from a nonbeliever into a man who puts his faith in God and the teachings of the Bible.

Mansfield's writing reminds me of reading a graduate thesis, very workman like and documented. All in all an interesting read. Lincoln's personal experiences with death and the burden of the Civil War support Mansfield's conclusion that Lincoln was a man of faith in God. I have never doubted this about Lincoln. Although I was surprised to learn, that he did pretend to believe to help him get elected as a young man. I would have never suspected such duplicity from Honest Abe.

Jay says

Like many other facets of the 16th President's life, Mansfield argues that Lincoln's religious views evolved over time. The author maintains that Lincoln moves from being an outright skeptic early in his life, to a more modest point of view after his 3 year old son Eddie died in Springfield, to being a full-fledged believer in the divinity of Jesus Christ by the time of his Presidency. Most scholars concur that his views evolved, though very few would agree to the extent Mansfield insists, and even the author acknowledges, "We will never know."

James P says

Interesting approach to religious biography. Does a masterful job of marshaling the evidence for Lincoln's progressing from religious skeptic to man of faith. Also contains some interesting facts about period revivals and the popularity of spiritism. Paints a clear picture of Lincoln as a brilliant, but compassionate human being.

Peter McLoughlin says

Another free book from Amazon. If it isn't new age garbage or crank science theories its Christian apologetics disguised as history. Bargain books from Amazon has some zingers.

Bill says

Lincoln's Battle with God, by Stephen Mansfield, portrays the young adult Lincoln as having become disillusioned with and skeptical of the fundamentalist Christianity of his father. Subsequent experiences of deaths of sons, personal suicidal depressions, and the frustrations of the civil war tempered his anti-Christian sentiments. Conversations with leading learned ministers of the time helped to lead him to an opening of a belief in a divine providence and an afterlife. His journey mirrors the journey of many modern seekers who seek some kind of authentic religious experience or belief after rejecting the dogmas of their church of origin. The author writes well, but his orthodox Christian bias and his tendency to speculate where historical evidence is sparse or conflicting weakens his argument. Nevertheless, the book does further the reader's historical understanding by illuminating one aspect of Lincoln that was influential in his attitude towards the civil war, slavery, and presidential leadership.

Cheryl says

Excellent book about the struggles and life of Abraham Lincoln. I feel I've gotten to know our 16th president better, and have a greater admiration, respect, and appreciation for all he did for our country. I do not agree with those who feel Mr Lincoln was not a Christian, simply because he did not profess it and was not

baptized. Mr. Lincoln certainly "walked the walk". Many profess to know Christ, they "talk the talk" - but that is as far as it goes. It was these Christians who turned Abraham Lincoln away from the faith in the beginning. Abraham Lincoln had a heart of gold and grew ever closer to his Lord, Jesus Christ. No, he may not have started out as a Christian, but he grew close to the Lord in his short journey on this earth, especially as he suffered in the valleys of his life and with the loss of two of his sons. I admire Lincoln for his love of education, how he was able to succeed with such little formal training, yet pushed himself to learn. Excellent read about a man we were very blessed to have serve this country.

Ben Denison says

A fascinating book. I've heard/read a lot about Lincoln, but little about his faith (or lack there-of). Although non-Christians and Christians alike claim him for their side, he seemed really conflicted most of his life. His early life was one of rebellion as he was brought up in a very strict Christian home with a very domineering father that Lincoln did not like. "I'm chosen and you're not!". This soured him toward religion.

His early adulthood was one of avowed atheist and mocked religion and God every chance he got. He also struggled with depression most his life. In early politics he realized he had to lie about his lack of faith and was often blasted by opponents for his earlier writings. We've heard he lost many elections before being elected president, but i'd never heard/seen his anti-religious views as being one of the reasons. However, you do start to see his views slowly changed, and by the time he was elected president, his writings, friends, and speeches seem to have a different tone and direction toward God and faith.

By the time of his presidency, he was attending church regularly, had the Bible near him and was reading and quoting it throughout his presidency. Many of his friends and colleagues said he was a man of faith late in his life.

Luke says

A marvelous book focusing on the spiritual journey of Abraham Lincoln, from an atheist to a skeptic to a believer, whose developing faith affected the nation and helped his understanding of the Civil War. Lincoln is such a complicated subject but this appears to be a honest and unbiased portrait.

"We want conclusions rather than processes, and we want conversions rather than religious journeys. The search for Abraham Lincoln's faith disappoints only if we begin that journey assuming there will be a dramatic resolution, that at some point in the story Abraham Lincoln will kneel at an altar and satisfy us with a verifiable spiritual experience."

"The silencing of Lincoln's faith by the secular and the exaggerating of Lincoln's faith by the religious have given us a less accurate and a less engaging Lincoln. We are poorer for the distortions."

David Steele says

The sixteenth president of the United States is dearly beloved by conservatives and liberals alike. He is known for his exemplary leadership, uncompromising character, and love for liberty. Yet his approach to God and the Christian life is something that is either assumed or neglected altogether. Either option shows a certain amount of naivety and must be challenged. Stephen Mansfield's book, Lincoln's Battle With God: A

President's Struggle With Faith and What it Meant for America addresses this matter in a way that is educational and inspiring.

Mansfield presents Lincoln as one who was raised in a strict Calvinistic home which was discarded during his teenage years. During his legislative years in Illinois, he was referred to by friends and associates as the "infidel." One friend spoke candidly about Lincoln's early rejection of the Christian faith: "Lincoln denies that Jesus was the son of God as understood and maintained by the Christian world."

Yet, when Lincoln began his bid for the White House, his antipathy toward historic Christianity appears to cool. In his earlier days, some considered him to be an atheist, yet as he progressed in politics, his worldview begins to shift. He is a man who as Mansfield writes, "believes in a God who exerts some degree of sovereign rule in human affairs ... whatever the case, he appears to have emerged from his season of 'infidelity' and moved toward a less skeptical view of Christian truth."

Pastor James D. Smith may have played an important role in Lincoln's view of religion. Smith was a scholar in his own right and was welcomed by Lincoln for his rational approach to Scripture. He stood head and shoulders above some of the revivalists who were excessive in their methodology, not to mention their theological foibles. Whatever the case, Smith was convinced that Lincoln was converted under his ministry. "It is a very easy matter to prove," writes Smith, "that while I was Pastor of the 1st Presbyterian Church of Springfield, Mr. Lincoln did avow his belief in the Divine Authority and Inspiration of the Scriptures." Considerable debate has taken place and continues to this day whether or not Lincoln put his faith in Christ at this point.

But in 1850, Lincoln's son Eddie grew ill and eventually died on February 1. Most agree that significant change in Lincoln's worldview occurred during this time. Mansfield writes, "Had Lincoln become a Christian? We cannot know definitively. We do have reason to suspect, though, that something had changed in his ongoing battle with God ... A process of spiritual broadening had clearly begun."

The author continues to document the ongoing theological development in Lincoln and argues convincingly that a work of grace had likely taken place. Later speeches and letters force one to conclude that at the very least, Lincoln had turned a theological corner; at the very best, a true conversion had taken place. Much of Lincoln's correspondence and especially his speeches give evidence of a truly converted man.

Lincoln's Battle With God is an illuminating look at one of the most influential leaders in American history. Mansfield writes objectively and provides a depth of research that guides readers into the inner recesses of our 16th president's heart. I commend Steven Mansfield for offering such a heartfelt book and encourage many to enjoy the fruit of his labor.
