



Lincoln Unbound

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In this thoughtful mix of history and politics, the *New York Times* bestselling author and editor of *National Review*—the conservative bible founded by William F. Buckley, Jr.—traces Abraham Lincoln's ambitious climb from provincial upstart to political powerhouse and calls for a renewal of the Lincoln ethic of relentless striving.

Revered today across the political spectrum, Abraham Lincoln believed in a small but active government in a nation defined by aspiration. Fired by an indomitable ambition from a young age, the man who would be immortalized as the "railsplitter" never wanted to earn his living with an ax. He educated himself in a frontier environment characterized by mind-numbing labor and then turned his back on that world. All his life, he preached a gospel of work and discipline toward the all-important ends of self-improvement and individual advancement. As a Whig and then a Republican, he worked to smash the rural backwardness in which he was raised and the Southern plantation economy that depended on human bondage.

Both were unacceptably stultifying of human potential. In short, Lincoln lived the American Dream and succeeded in opening a way to it for others. He saw in the nation's founding documents the unchanging foundation of an endlessly dynamic society. He embraced the market and the amazing transportation and communications revolutions beginning to take hold. He helped give birth to the modern industrial economy that arose before the Civil War and that took off after it.

His vision of an upwardly mobile society that rewards and supports individual striving was wondrously realized. Now it is under threat. Economic stagnation and social breakdown are undermining mobility and the American way. To meet these challenges, Rich Lowry draws us back to the lessons of Lincoln. It is imperative, he argues, to preserve a fluid economy and the bourgeois virtues that make it possible for individuals to thrive within it.

Lincoln Unbound Details

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Author : Rich Lowry

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From Reader Review Lincoln Unbound for online ebook

Elizabeth says

Lincoln Unbound is a refreshing look at an historic figure. It was pleasant and encouraging to get an alternative perspective of Lincoln and his views. For a non-fiction book this was an easy read. Don't expect this to be a biography of the man so much as a fresh look at his writings and actions of his time and how they relate to our current political climate.

Received as an ARC.

Stephen Kubiakowski says

An interesting take on Lincoln. Lowry takes Lincoln's work ethic, views on abolition, and adherence to economic freedom as a springboard for how such values remain critical for today's conservative. You won't read anything much about the civil war, or his presidency. If that's what you're looking for, this is not your book. But it's a fresh take.

Wesley Roth says

As someone who really enjoys Rich Lowry's writings on National Review, I was looking forward to Lincoln Unbound. It was a pretty good history book covering the country during Lincoln's life, but at times disconnected from Lincoln himself and had me wondering at times "what is the point of these certain pages?"

I most liked ch.6 on how the country should rediscover the "Lincoln Ethic." The GOP should follow Lowry's advice.

Overall good book, but could have been better.

Dean Anderson says

The premise of this book should be quite obvious, but I hadn't given it much thought before. Abraham Lincoln did not start his political career wanting to win a bloody war, preserve the union or even free the slaves.

Because none of those things are not exactly in the purview of an Illinois legislator. Rich Lowry (editor of National Review) explores in this book Lincoln's fundamental political values through biography, primarily of his early career.

We also have images of young Lincoln reading by fire light, splitting wood and wrestling. The frontier boy and man in ill fitting buckskin. There is truth in all of that imagery. But what Lowry makes clear in his book is that it was Lincoln's motivating desire in life to leave the wilderness behind and remold himself into a

modern, prosperous, even urban individual.

The American Dream of pursuing happiness, and yes, wealth, was not just a pretty picture in Lincoln's mind, but rather one of his deepest ambitions.

Lincoln often spoke of the importance of hard work and how it was key in one's life for advancement. He often quoted from Genesis about man earning bread from the sweat of one's brow. (It is interesting as he always seems to quote this Scripture positively, though it is part of Adam's curse.)

In his late teens, Lincoln was forced to work to pay off his father's debts. This led to his hatred of seeing others prosper due to other men's labor. Apparently, this drew him to a desire for fair laws of property, so no one could be swindled out of land; suspicion of confiscatory taxes; support of the right of unions to strike; and, yes, opposition to slavery.

Lowry points to the tendency of politicians to claim Lincoln as their own. Most recently, President Obama has encouraged the image of himself as a second 16th president, pointing to Lincoln's support of education and public works projects.

But Lowry ably argues that the first great Republican would remain a great Republican, and that the GOP needs to remember and embrace Lincoln's embrace and proclamation of values that go back to the nation's founding.

Richard de Villiers says

This was a surprisingly good read. As a columnist and writer Lowry has never written anything that has inspired me to quote or remember him. In this format however, Lowry excels. Lowry is measured and eloquent. With more room to work he fleshes out his story, marshals facts and throws in a dash of opinion. Lincoln Unbound reminds me of the books penned by his National Review stablemate Richard Brookhiser. Lincoln Unbound is less than a full throated biography and more along the lines of character sketch. Most appealing is that Lowry avoids the obvious and well worn episodes, hewing more closely to the formative years of Lincoln the man and politician. The problem, however, is that Lincoln Unbound promises to be much more than character sketch it also hopes to serve as a blueprint for our troubled times.

The problem is that the central figure in the establishment of the Republican Party as a viable force is very far removed from the grassroots of today's Tea Party faction of the GOP. What emerges is a young man who runs away from his agrarian roots, embraces an elitist party, works as a trial lawyer, represents big business, supports infrastructure development and fan of tariffs. The more you read about the Lincoln that Lowry is writing about you start wondering where is taking this.

In the end Lowry does attempt to tie it all together. Unlike other such as President Obama and Mario Cuomo Lowry doesn't pretend to know where Lincoln would stand on certain issues. Much to his credit he even acknowledges certain issues where Lincoln would probably run counter to Republican orthodoxy. Lowry points out Lincoln's low tolerance for "idleness," his belief in self-improvement and education are very much conservative virtues. He may have supported infrastructure improvements but he was also a fan of private property and free markets. In the end perhaps Lowry would've been better served jettisoning this last chapter which feels tacked on to help us connect the dots. Then again, if Lowry wouldn't have done some dot connecting Heritage Action, Jim Demint, Freedomworks and who knows who else would be calling for him to be tossed out of the movement for writing a fawning book of a statist leader who in some quarters of the Tea Party is reviled.

Shelly says

Lowry gives an excellent if brief biography of Lincoln, and concludes with a chapter about what he thinks Lincoln would feel if he were transplanted to today. I don't entirely agree with all of the political views he ascribes to Lincoln, though he's far less off-target than Cuomo or Obama. His prescription for the GOP to borrow more from our founder in terms of becoming a party of aspiration is right on target. A good read, well written and highly readable.

Jennifer Thompson-Thalasinos says

This was an interesting book. I liked the first person accounts that included original punctuation and spelling. As I read the first 5 chapters I felt like I was reading a thesis or dissertation. Interesting but quite dry. Especially all the discussion about politics and the economy. The last chapter where the author discusses how Lincoln could help us today was annoying. Especially because this author had a bias against Reagan and wasn't afraid to say it. Now I know Reagan had his flaws, but coming from a place where my Democratic father said Reagan was his favorite president I felt that the author was unfair. Overall a good book, but more suited for a political science class.

Nathan Albright says

This book was a pleasure to read, and a bit surprisingly so. As someone who reads a distressingly large amount of Lincoln books, I find quite often that people write about Lincoln with a distinct political agenda in mind [1]. The author himself, interestingly, points this out. To be sure, this book has an agenda, and the author has an agenda, but the author is so refreshingly honest about where his interpretation comes from and where he believes he would disagree with Lincoln that there is no reason to view this book with any sort of hostility. He is open about his biases and his perspective, and they happen to be biases I share myself and so the hermeneutic of charity is easy to apply to this particular book. Ultimately, the author is looking at Abraham Lincoln and his devotion to sober virtue and discipline as a model for contemporary society which has forgotten about the need for virtue and sobriety as an essential foundation for success, along with relentless self-education and personal improvement, all of which were characteristics of Lincoln's approach as he rose from rural poverty in his childhood to urban professional respectability and eventually the highest office in the land.

This book is about 240 pages or so and is divided into six chapters that show a facet of Lincoln's approach and worldview when it came to economics and the role of government, an area of considerable contemporary debate. The book opens with a look at Lincoln's America during the time of his youth, when the West was still wild and sparsely inhabited. After that the author turns his attention to Lincoln's restless and immense ambition that drove him to self-education despite the fact that it was viewed by others as laziness. The author then turns to Lincoln's political worldview as a sober, industrious, thriving Whig, and what that meant in the times as well as by implication for us. The author then looks at the genius of American capitalism and Lincoln's enthusiastic support of industrialization and development. After this he turns his attention to the Lincoln-Douglas debates and what it meant as far as race. The last two chapters of the book extend the

author's view of Lincoln, which is certainly a sensible one, to the period after his death. First, he looks at the realization of Lincoln's optimism about America's growth in the decades after his assassination, and then the author looks at what would be necessary for Americans to recover Lincoln's intense work and self-improvement ethic.

Overall, this book succeeds because instead of using selected Lincoln quotes as a way of trying to bolster a political worldview, as is often the case with contemporary Progressives, the author actually takes Lincoln's political worldview seriously and comes up with a reasonable extrapolation of that worldview for the present. The author admits the distance between himself and the way he views Lincoln to be, which is not something all writers are as good about in this subject, but he also views Lincoln as a standard for others to aim at rather than simply someone to appropriate. Lincoln's sober and somewhat cold-blooded approach, his awkwardness, and the intensity of his efforts to improve and educate himself and escape the rural poverty of his youth are definitely models to the behavior of some people, myself included. Whether or not he serves as a model and an example for others to escape the trap of poverty through the cultivation of virtue and self-discipline remains to be seen, though. In a crowded field of books about Lincoln this is a worthy one that has a lot to say about our cultural malaise.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2010...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2016...>

Jo Sorrell says

Bazooka Joe and His Gang

This little book celebrates the cast of cartoon characters that have kept Bazooka chewers chuckling for six decades (the comics will be replaced by brain teasers and activities this year). It's a sweet treat for your inner kid.

Lincoln Unbound Exploring Lincoln's dedication to the values of hard work, discipline, and self-determination, National Review editor Rich Lowry argues that following the example of the president who led us away from slavery can help us escape our current economic malaise.

Parade magazine June 16 2013

Adam Carman says

"Lincoln believed in an active government, not a blunderbuss government."

In this insightful book, Rich Lowry strips away the long-standing myths about Lincoln, especially those held by liberal Democrats. In showing the real Lincoln as a pro-capitalist, pro-improvement person, Lowry also challenges conservative Republicans to stop reflexively embracing the old-school planter ideology of the Confederacy and return to the ideals of their actual Founder. It is a call that is long-overdue.

Sue Johnson says

While the author, Richard Lowry, certainly did his research and stuck to his passion for Lincoln, this book read like a history book except for the last chapter. It was a bit dry in parts and I had to skim just to get through it. Granted, I like the Lincoln story but it just didn't keep my interest as I'd hoped. The author's true point of the book is well summarized in the last chapter.

Miles Smith says

I have very mixed feelings about this work, but I've given it four stars because it is earnest, well-written, and on the whole intellectually honest. It is also devastatingly wrong in its assumptions and prescriptions.

Lowry lays out a convincing and I think accurate case that Lincoln was a conservative man committed to liberal capitalism and that the federal state was an appropriate engine for the development of American capitalism. None of these presuppositions is innately problematic, but Lowry seems incapable of seeing the idea of the American nation being a vehicle for anything other than positive social change. That the very idea of a unitary cultural or social "nation" might be a instrument of social imperialism destroying the very bourgeois virtues seems to have never occurred to Lowry.

He also seems convinced that social mobility corresponds to individualistic effort seems to discount thoughtful Progressives who point out, with a significant amount of proof, that systemic poverty plagues significant sections of the populace. This poverty transcends race. And it will take more than a mere re-adoption of bourgeois values to rectify the spiritual (and economic) malaise plaguing working class Americans.

David Kent says

Two books in one. The first works; the second doesn't.

Rich Lowry is a conservative pundit and editor, and this is most egregiously reflected in his final chapter of his six-chapter book. If you are interested in Abraham Lincoln, read the first five chapters and don't waste your time on the final chapter. If you are looking for far right wing talking points, go straight to the final chapter, which presents current day "conservative" principles vaguely wrapped in the authors' view of Lincoln's beliefs. Better get, go read some right wing screed.

The odd thing is that the first book, i.e., chapters one through five, does provide some valuable information on Lincoln's upbringing, values, and views on the grand questions of the day. Lowry correctly identifies Lincoln's remarkable ambition and desire to rise from meager beginnings and make something of himself in the world. Lowry also discusses Lincoln's belief in government-sponsored "improvements" in infrastructure, modernization, and industrialization. He also delves into Lincoln's own inventiveness and appreciation of the emerging technologies of the day – railroads, canals, weapons during the Civil War, just to name a few.

The writing often rambles, but its unevenness shouldn't significantly lessen the reader's ability to garner the historical significance of Lincoln's belief that hard work was a path toward advancement, both of individuals and the country. Lowry's discussion of Lincoln's views with respect to racism and slavery, as well as his debates with Stephen A. Douglas are sometimes out of sync with informed scholarly historians, but are nevertheless important interpretations to consider, even if after doing so you don't agree with him. Overall, Lowry has offered opinions not seen in more academic and scholarly biographies of our sixteenth president.

Which makes the final chapter so bizarre. Lowry makes valid points when he sticks to reporting Lincoln's views from the perspective of Lincoln's time period, but when he tries to force fit Lincoln into somehow approving of far right wing screed and surrealism, the author reveals his own profound political biases. Here he often suggests Lincoln would disdain today's government (as Lowry clearly does) but then provides information that would lead most informed readers to conclude the opposite. The creation of false premises to support a pre-defined conclusion is a common problem with pundits flying on the extreme wings of either party, and Lowry puts these on vivid display in this final chapter. While likely this was the main purpose of producing the book in the first place, the author would have been better to leave out this particular chapter. It dramatically cheapens and undermines what could have been an otherwise informative book.

So read the first five chapters. Think about Abraham Lincoln and his times. Then learn your own lessons from Lincoln and ignore the disjointed, unsupported, polemics.

George P. says

Rich Lowry, *Lincoln Unbound: How an Ambitious Young Railsplitter Saved the American Dream—And How We Can Do It Again* (New York: Broadside Books, 2013). \$26.00, 288 pages. Hardcover / Kindle

Two score and seventeen years ago, historian David Herbert Donald noted the tendency of politicians to appropriate Abraham Lincoln's name and words in support of their preferred policies. Borrowing a phrase from Illinois Republican pol Everett Dirksen, Donald titled this phenomenon, "getting right with Lincoln."

Between the Civil War and the dawn of the New Deal, this appropriation was done solely by Republicans (or ex-Republican Bull Moosers like Teddy Roosevelt). Then, in 1932, casting about for a usable past, Teddy's cousin Franklin began appropriating Lincoln's name and words for Democratic Party initiatives. Since FDR, progressives have routinely claimed Lincoln as one of their own. Indeed, in 2008, Illinois Senator Barack Obama verged on presenting himself as Lincoln redivivus.

Lincoln Unbound by *National Review* editor Rich Lowry sets out to reclaim Lincoln for the Grand Old Party by putting Lincoln's ideology and policies in biographical perspective. Raised dirt-poor on the American frontier, Lincoln dreamed of escaping the hard, dreary life of working the land. Like many other young men on the make, he turned to Henry Clay's Whig Party, whose "American system" of moral improvement,

infrastructure development, and protectionist policies aimed to create a new America, unlike the vision of self-sufficient yeoman farmers so beloved by partisans of Jefferson and Jackson. Lincoln the Railsplitter became Lincoln the Railroad Supporter. Indeed, he seemed never to have found an industrial innovation he didn't like.

He never liked slavery, however. Like most Whigs, he was content to attempt to limit the extent of slavery. Henry Clay—Lincoln's “beau ideal of a statesman”—had negotiated the Missouri Compromise of 1820, limiting slavery to the South (Missouri excepted). The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, negotiated by Stephen Douglass, had effectively repealed the Compromise and allowed new states to decide, through “popular sovereignty,” whether they would be slave or free. All this negotiating came to naught, however, when Roger Taney's Supreme Court issued its ruling in *Dred Scott*, effectively legalizing slavery in all states of the Union and pushing the country to war.

Lincoln, whose national political career had been limited to a single ineffective term in the House of Representatives, battled Stephen Douglass for the Illinois Senate seat in 1858. In their famous seven debates, he ridiculed the notion of popular sovereignty, critiqued the Supreme Court's ruling, and argued that whether whites and blacks were equal, they were equal before the law. And he lost. But his arguments brought him national fame, and in 1860 when he won the presidential election as a Republican and led the Union through four long years of war to victory and emancipation.

Lowry's book narrates Lincoln's life and ideas succinctly and winsomely. This narration occupies the vast majority of the book. It is the final chapter, appropriating Lincoln's ideas for today, that will be the most controversial for many readers. Lowry writes:

So, what would Lincoln do today? His essential formula wouldn't have to change much: Economic growth. Policies to enhance the market and ensure that it is as fluid and flexible as possible. Education. An ethic of self-reliance, free of control or dependence on others. And a commitment to order and self-regulating conduct. We should be a strenuous society that demands individual exertion and rewards it, and that is open to all, without favor or prejudice. We should be a country where you can make your way and you *have* to make your way (p. 207).

How to do that specifically? Lowry offers a raft of “my own policy preferences,” quickly adding, “without presuming Lincoln would have necessarily endorsed any of them” (p. 208).

And thus the problem of getting right with Lincoln. We know who Lincoln was, what he believed, what policies he pursued and when in power enacted. But we cannot “necessarily” know what Lincoln would do today, because our times are not his. And perhaps Lincoln's ideas would've evolved with changing circumstances

As much as I agreed with many of Lowry's proposals, indeed seeing them as logical extensions of Lincoln's ideas, I can't help but think that what America and American conservatism need today is not Lincoln redivivus—or the Second Coming of Ronald Reagan—but similar Declaration-loving, Constitution-following politicians who propose sound solutions to the problems we face today, and work successfully to see them enacted. Personally, as much as I love all things Lincoln, I'd rather see that kind of politician unbound.

P.S. If you found my review helpful, please vote “Yes” on my Amazon.com review page.

Andrew says

This book teaches how Lincoln was such a great leader for our country. It explains how we can get back to such a great time in our nation by following how he led. I would recommend this book to people because of how good the author describes Lincoln.
