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|   | **HARDSCRABBLE**Civil War Round Table of the Mid-Ohio Valley NewsletterJune 2021 – Vol 11 |

*Notes from Nancy Arthur*

You have all heard the saying about knowing history so it doesn’t repeat itself. A recent trip to a bookstore gave me some great finds, one of which is Congress at War by Fergus M. Bordewich. The story is focused on four members of Congress and the influence they had over Abraham Lincoln and his war powers, the financing of the war, the country at the time and the Civil War in general.

Benjamin Wade and Clement Vallandigham, both Ohio men, are two of these four so it has a local interest to me. The story goes from the floor of Congress and the heated arguments held there, to the secession of states in the South, then the financing of the war in a country that was relatively new and had a good number of the Army in the West. It also talks about Lincoln and some of his early actions that raised questions about his authority to do such actions.

Are you seeing a connection to some events that have happened in the recent past?

I’m only half way through and it is a page turner for someone with an interest in history, especially this period of our country’s past.

In my recent copy of Hallowed Ground, there is an article by Catherine Noyes on The Mysterious Fate of the H. L. Hunley. The Hunley was the first submarine to be in combat and sink an enemy ship. It was powered by a crew of eight men, not an engine. February 17, 1864, the Hunley went up against the USS Housatonic just outside Charleston. Although the Hunley was successful in it’s efforts this night, it never came up out of the water and all sailors were lost at sea. However, 130 years later, forensic anthropology told us who these sailors were.

This article was interesting to me because it is on our itinerary for the November trip.

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*Stories by Bill Teegarden*

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| **March 28, 2021**

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| Heather Cox Richardson | Mar 29 |  |  |  |

Since the Civil War, voter suppression in America has had a unique cast.The Civil War brought two great innovations to the United States that would mix together to shape our politics from 1865 onward:First, the Republicans under Abraham Lincoln created our first national system of taxation, including the income tax. For the first time in our history, having a say in society meant having a say in how other people’s money was spent. |
| Second, the Republicans gave Black Americans a say in society.They added the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, outlawing human enslavement except as punishment for crime and, when white southerners refused to rebuild the southern states with their free Black neighbors, in March 1867 passed the Military Reconstruction Act. This landmark law permitted Black men in the South to vote for delegates to write new state constitutions. The new constitutions confirmed the right of Black men to vote.Most former Confederates wanted no part of this new system. They tried to stop voters from ratifying the new constitutions by dressing up in white sheets as the ghosts of dead southern soldiers, terrorizing Black voters and the white men who were willing to rebuild the South on these new terms to keep them from the polls. They organized as the Ku Klux Klan, saying they were “an institution of chivalry, humanity, mercy, and patriotism” intended “to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States… [and] to aid and

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| assist in the execution of all constitutional laws.” But by this they meant the Constitution before the war and the Thirteenth Amendment: candidates for admission to the Ku Klux Klan had to oppose “Negro equality both social and political” and favor “a white man’s government.”The bloody attempts of the Ku Klux Klan to suppress voting didn’t work. The new constitutions went into effect, and in 1868 the former Confederate states were readmitted to the Union with Black male suffrage. In that year’s election, Georgia voters put 33 Black Georgians into the state’s general assembly, only to have the white legislators expel them on the grounds that the Georgia state constitution did not explicitly permit Black men to hold office.The Republican Congress refused to seat Georgia’s representatives that year—that’s the “remanded to military occupation” you sometimes hear about-- and wrote the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution protecting the right of formerly enslaved people to vote and, by extension, to hold office. The amendment prohibits a state from denying the right of citizens to vote “on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”So white southerners determined to prevent Black participation in society turned to a new tactic. Rather than opposing Black voting on racial grounds—although they certainly did oppose Black rights on these grounds-- they complained that the new Black voters, fresh from their impoverished lives as slaves, were using their votes to redistribute wealth.To illustrate their point, they turned to South Carolina, where between 1867 and 1876, a majority of South Carolina’s elected officials were African American. To rebuild the shattered state, the legislature levied new taxes on land, although before the war taxes had mostly fallen on the personal property owned by professionals, bankers, and merchants. The legislature then used state funds to build schools, hospitals, and other public services, and bought land for resale to settlers—usually freedpeople—at low prices.White South Carolinians complained that members of the legislature, most of whom were professionals with property who had usually been free before the war, were lazy, ignorant field hands using public services to redistribute wealth.  Fears of workers destroying society grew potent in early 1871, when American newspaper headlines blasted the story of the Paris Commune. From March through May, in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War, French Communards took control of Paris. Americans read stories of a workers’ government that seemed to attack civilization itself: burning buildings, killing politicians, corrupting women, and confiscating property. Americans worried that workers at home might have similar ideas: in italics, *Scribner’s Monthly* warned readers that “*the interference of ignorant labor with politics is dangerous to society.*”Building on this fear, in May 1871, a so-called taxpayers’ convention met in Columbia, South Carolina. A reporter claimed that South Carolina was “a typical Southern state” victimized by lazy “semi-barbarian” Black voters who were electing leaders to redistribute wealth. “Upon these people not only political rights have been conferred, but they have absolute political supremacy,” he said. The *New York Daily Tribune*, which had previously championed Black rights, wrote “the most intelligent, the influential, the educated, the really useful men of the South, deprived of all political power,… [are] taxed and swindled… by the ignorant class, which only yesterday hoed the fields and served in the kitchen.”The South Carolina Taxpayers’ Convention uncovered no misuse of state funds and disbanded with only a call for frugality in government, but it had embedded into politics the idea that Black voters were using the government to redistribute wealth. The South was “prostrate” under “Black rule,” reporters claimed. In the election of 1876, southern Democrats set out to “redeem” the South from this economic misrule by keeping Black Americans from the polls.Over the next decades, white southerners worked to silence the voices of Black Americans in politics, and in 1890, fourteen southern congressmen wrote a book to explain to their northern colleagues why Democrats had to control the South.*Why the Solid South? or Reconstruction and its Results* insisted that Black voters who had supported the Republicans after the Civil War had used their votes to pervert the government by using it to give themselves services paid for with white tax dollars.Later that year, a new constitution in Mississippi started the process of making sure Black people could not vote by requiring educational tests, poll taxes, or a grandfather who had voted, effectively getting rid of Black voting.Eight years later, there was still enough Black voting in North Carolina and enough class solidarity with poor whites that voters in Wilmington elected a coalition government of Black Republicans and white Populists. White Democrats agreed that the coalition had won fairly, but about 2000 of them nonetheless armed themselves to “reform” the city government. They issued a “White Declaration of Independence” and said they would “never again be ruled, by men of African origin.” It was time, they said, “for the intelligent citizens of this community owning 95% of the property and paying taxes in proportion, to end the rule by Negroes.”As they forced the elected officials out of office and took their places, the new Democratic mayor claimed “there was no intimidation used,” but as many as 300 African Americans died in the Wilmington coup.The Civil War began the process of linking the political power of people of color to a redistribution of wealth, and this rhetoric has haunted us ever since. When Ronald Reagan talked about the “Welfare Queen (a Black woman who stole tax dollars through social services fraud), when tea partiers called our first Black president a “socialist,” when Trump voters claimed to be reacting to “economic anxiety,” they were calling on a long history. Today, Republicans talk about “election integrity,” but their end game is the same as that of the former Confederates after the war: to keep Black and Brown Americans away from the polls to make sure the government does not spend tax dollars on public services.—-Notes: I don't link to my own books usually, but if anyone is interested, the argument and quotations here are from my second book, "The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North," (Harvard University Press, 2001).  © 2021 Heather Cox Richardson Unsubscribe548 Market Street PMB 72296, San Francisco, CA 94104 |

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# Why We Keep Reinventing Abraham Lincoln

*From Honest Abe to Killer Lincoln, revisionist biographers have given us countless perspectives on the Civil War President. Is there a version that’s true to his time and attuned to ours?*

**By****Adam Gopnik**

September 21, 2020

Lincoln revisionism is not new. In the nineteen-fifties, Edmund Wilson, in these pages, shook off the crooning hagiography of Carl Sandburg’s multivolume biography and replaced it with a vision of Lincoln as a calculating, aggressive nationalist—an American Bismarck, though one in possession of a sternly arresting prose style. The Civil War, in Wilson’s account, was fought for no higher cause than that which makes sea slugs attack other sea slugs: because it is in the nature of beasts to make war. In place of smiling Honest Abe we got lynx-eyed Killer Lincoln.

This view was taken up, with a few complimentary curlicues, in Gore Vidal’s best-selling 1984 novel, “Lincoln.” Wilson and Vidal, channeling the ghost of Henry Adams, and seeing themselves as the last redoubts of patrician hauteur, painted their Lincoln against the background of the Cold War. Lincoln’s militarization of the Republic, his invention of an armed national-security state, was taken to be a kind of original sin that would lead to the Pentagon and Vietnam. The lovable Lincoln persisted through this period, but Lincoln was interrogated as much as admired. (And this was merely the revisionism from the left; some Southern conservative intellectuals were still muttering “Sic semper tyrannis.”)

In the decades that followed, the tone of Lincoln biographies became remarkably more benign. There were hymnals in praise of Lincoln’s wisdom in assembling a Cabinet of political opponents (though all Presidents in the era assembled Cabinets of their rivals) and others on the beauty of his language (though Disraeli, in London, was as good a writer in his own way, and no one was deifying him). Spielberg’s Lincoln gave us the beatified, not the Bismarckian, President, even if Daniel Day-Lewis brilliantly caught the high-pitched, less than honeyed tones that Lincoln’s contemporaries heard. In more recent years, however, Lincoln has been under assault—not for being a militarist but for not being militant enough, for not being as thorough an egalitarian as some of the radical Republicans in Congress. Newer Lincoln biographies have been needed, and the need has been met.

David S. Reynolds’s Lincoln is very much an Honest Abe—the title of his book, in fact, is “Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times” (Penguin Press)—but he is an updated Abe, fully woke and finely radical. Indeed, Reynolds, the author of first-rate biographies of Walt Whitman and John Brown, makes much of Lincoln’s wonderfully named and often forgotten Wide Awakes—legions of young pro-Lincoln “b’hoys,” whose resolve and aggression far exceeded that of Bernie Sanders’s army. Though Reynolds rightly recycles the metaphor of the President as a tightrope walker, we’re assured that, even as the walker might list left and right, his rope stretched forth in a radically progressive direction, aligned with the hot temper of our moment.

Reynolds updates Lincoln by doing what scholars do now: he makes biography secondary to the cultural history of the country. Lincoln is seen as a man whose skin bears the tattoos of his time. Cultural patterns are explicated in “Abe,” and Lincoln is picked up and positioned against them, taking on the coloring of his surroundings, rather like a taxidermized animal being placed in a reconstructed habitat in a nineteenth-century diorama at a natural-history museum. Instead of rising from one episode of strenuous self-making to another, he passes from one frame to the next, a man subsumed.

So, where scholars have long known that Lincoln was plunged into a near-suicidal depression by the early death, in the eighteen-thirties, of his first love, Ann Rutledge, Reynolds connects Lincoln’s depression to a cult of “sensationalism” that swept the country, one that placed great prestige on acts of melodramatic emotion. In Reynolds’s account, Lincoln’s grief was, in part, a literary affect, or even an affectation, with Lincoln and Poe drinking from the same moody waters. This mapping of subject onto trope continues on through the last night of Lincoln’s life. John Wilkes Booth’s assassination of the President, Reynolds argues, was not only an act of terrorism on behalf of the defeated South but a kind of Method-acting exercise gone significantly wrong. Extreme self-identification of actor with role was highly valued then; Junius, the patriarch of the theatrical Booth family, was famed for the hyperintensity of his portrayals, and John, among the three Booth children who became prominent actors, most fully adopted his father’s stormy style. He was pleasing Junius’s ghost by enacting Brutus’s killing of Caesar, in real time with real weapons.

Reynolds’s cultural history illuminates Lincoln—and particularly his transformation from self-made lawyer into American Abe. Even readers long marinated in the Lincoln literature will find revelation in the way “Abe” re-situates familiar episodes. Reynolds places Lincoln’s early career in New Salem and Springfield, Illinois, in the eighteen-thirties, as a poor farm boy struggling to make himself into a middle-class lawyer, against the radical background of American sectarianism. We learn that “free thought” and “free love”—one favoring religious skepticism and the other sex outside marriage—flourished on the frontier, where folks had to make up their own institutions, including a debating club that forbade any appeal to God. Lincoln participated in both movements, declaring himself a freethinker (and apologizing for it in a fairly weaselly way later on, when he first ran for office) and acting as an early advocate for women’s right to vote, and to make their own sexual choices. The young Lincoln was an enthusiastic amateur poet, and his poems are a good guide to one side of his mind: the wild, passionate side, which, Reynolds says, was a counterpart to his youthful calls for “cold, calculating unimpassioned reason.” One poem defended women who’d become prostitutes: “No woman ever played the whore / Without a man to help her.”

Reynolds’s cultural frames become more arresting as Lincoln’s role grows more public; public people are always cultural objects. Lincoln spent February 27, 1860, the day he delivered his Cooper Union speech—the speech that made him President, as he later said—at a hotel across from P. T. Barnum’s museum. Reynolds reflects on Barnum and American life, and how the love of weird spectacle, what we now call the tabloidization of public people, was something Lincoln welcomed; he played up the comedy of his own appearance in a very Barnum-like way, his enormous body posed against his wife’s petite one. Barnum’s genius lay in taking circus grotesques and making them exemplary Americans: General Tom Thumb was a hero, not a freak. And so with Lincoln, as Reynolds writes: “His cragged face, with its cavernous eyes, large mouth and nose, and swarthy complexion; his wide ears and unruly black hair; his huge hands and feet and overly long arms and legs—these features, along with his ill-fitting clothes and awkward gait, made him seem almost as unusual as a Barnum exhibit.” When Lincoln was President, his Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, compared him to a baboon, and Lincoln, asked how he could endure the insult, said, “That is no insult; it is an expression of opinion; and what troubles me most about it is that Stanton said it, and Stanton is usually right.” He saw that it cost him nothing to be an American spectacle in a climate of American sensation. (He even hosted a reception at the White House for Tom Thumb and his wife.)

Lincoln exploited photography to a similar end, beginning on that same February day, when his portrait was taken at Mathew Brady’s studio. Lincoln was usually pictured not as a polished neoclassical man, like his political rivals, but as rough and frontier-made. Americans like a craggy guy in times of crisis. (Humphrey Bogart offered a similar look in the Second World War.) Even his decision to grow a beard seemed meant to evoke a log-cabin hygiene that was then seen as a sign of sincerity. Lincoln knew how to use the expressive forms of his time as a frame for his mythology. Emerson and Whitman, Reynolds demonstrates, understood Lincoln better, as a national figure, than most journalists could. Emerson saw in him the model self-reliant man and Whitman the ideal democratic leader.

As the war begins, Reynolds’s lens widens in ways that are less appealingly whimsical than in the Barnum case but still more genuinely illuminating. He explains the old puzzle of Lincoln’s reluctance to fire the obstreperous and slow-moving General McClellan as a reflection of Lincoln’s enthusiasm for the new technology of war. Lincoln, a backwoods man forever forward-facing, loved state-of-the-art gizmos, even urging an early machine gun upon the Union Army that it wasn’t willing to use. McClellan shared Lincoln’s vision of an army modernized with telegraph communications, military balloons, and railroad transportation. The choice in 1862 was not yet between McClellan and Grant; it was between McClellan and chaos. The culture of war itself becomes a subject in Reynolds’s book: it explains the eventual turn from McClellan to Grant through a broader mid-nineteenth-century turn from elegant Napoleonic battle orchestrations to Clausewitzian frontal assaults.

Sometimes Reynolds’s kind of cultural history demands more suppleness of mind than he displays. When, for instance, he proposes a parallel between Mary Lincoln locked up in the White House and Emily Dickinson isolated in her home, in Amherst, we feel that we are in the presence of a similitude without a real shape: Emily was a Yankee poet of matchless genius, Mary a bewildered Southern woman in an unmanageable role. All they shared was being alone in a big house. Elsewhere, Reynolds expresses perplexity that the pro-Lincoln satirist David Locke persisted in writing sketches in the voice of Petroleum V. Nasby, his impersonation of a Copperhead—an anti-Lincoln, pro-slavery Northerner. “Given Locke’s actual affection and respect for Lincoln, it must have been very hard for him to maintain the outrageous Copperhead pose,” Reynolds writes. But that’s like wondering why a pro-Biden comedian would keep on impersonating a maga-hat-wearing Trump supporter. Sticking to the joke is what comedians do.

Even with Reynolds’s more compelling examples of anthropological patterns, small whitecaps of uncertainty may stir in the reader’s mind: a man who loses the love of his life does not need cultural license to mourn, and, though Booth undoubtedly choreographed his assassination with an eye to the crowd and to his father, his brothers Junius and Edwin were committed to the manner but appalled by his deed. Actors know overacting when they see it.

Throughout “Abe,” the terms “culture” and “cultural” recur with such hammering relentlessness (four times on a single page, and in that chapter title as well) that one wishes Reynolds’s editor had given him a thesaurus. Not having enough words means not seeing enough types. Culture is a diffuse thing. Reading a book, choosing a costume, adapting a rhetorical style, transferring a code of conduct from one forum to another, just laughing at a joke—each of these forms of cultural transmission has its own vibration, its own dynamic, and its own web of associations.

What counts is a sense of what counts. It’s true that, as Reynolds shows in his account of sensationalism, Lincoln loved sad parlor songs, but pretty much everyone in the period loved sad songs; to make much of this is like making the possession of an e-mail address a significant cultural token today. On the other hand, although the Shakespeare whom Lincoln loved was very much the Shakespeare beloved by nineteenth-century America—a strenuous moralist, devoted to the explication of characters in extreme emotional states—Lincoln was distinctive in turning this shared Shakespeare into a template for a new kind of oratory. The passionate phrasing and sharp summations of Lincoln’s speeches—“the better angels of our nature”; “of the people, by the people, for the people”—are shaped by the passionate soliloquies and monosyllabic end stops of Shakespeare’s most agonized characters. (Among Lincoln’s favorite passages was Claudius’s guilt-ridden “Oh, my offense is rank” speech.) The interpenetration of Abe and Will is real. It is important to recognize cultural set pieces, but it’s also important to see that they are malleable and self-created. Lincoln made his time as much as he lived in it. That, after all, is why we’re reading this book.

Macro-history gives us a big picture, but politics, as “Hamilton” reminds us, happens in hidden rooms. Readers who seek the political micro-history can turn to Sidney Blumenthal’s multivolume Lincoln biography, now in its third installment—“All the Powers of the Earth” (Simon & Schuster)—with two more promised. Written by someone who bears the battle scars of modern democratic politics, the volumes are all about Lincoln as a battle-scarred democratic politician. (Blumenthal, who was once a staff writer for this magazine, worked as an adviser to President Clinton and distinguished himself in the Ken Starr wars.) Where Reynolds’s account of the most significant act in American political history—Lincoln’s insurgent victory over William Seward, a senator from New York, in the Republican-nomination battle of 1860—is necessarily summary, Blumenthal offers a vividly realized, slow crawl across the Convention floor by someone who has been there.

The heroes of Blumenthal’s most recent volume are the so-called Lincoln Men, a group of boosters and advisers led by David Davis and Leonard Swett, who, with a comic brio right out of Mark Twain, employed every hardball trick in the book to win Lincoln the nomination. At the Wigwam, in Chicago—an immense wooden convention hall, capable of holding more than ten thousand people, and thrown together, American style, in a month—they boxed out the Seward forces, making it physically difficult for his delegates to mingle and make deals.

The Lincolnians also courted a now often overlooked interest group, the émigré Germans, including many exiled by the failed liberal revolutions of 1848. As Blumenthal notes, Lincoln had bought a German-language newspaper, in order to appeal to those key players of the “identity politics” of the time. (It was the equivalent of surreptitiously funding Facebook pages in 2020.) The Germans refused to support anyone who was known to have a pro-nativist taint, which ruled out a lot of dog-eared veteran politicians. At the same time, the nativists spurned Seward, who, as governor of New York, had backed state subsidies for Catholic education. In the end, it all came down to a single eve-of-battle meeting in Chicago between the Lincoln Men and a group of delegates from Pennsylvania, who proposed a flat-out political swap: they’d support Lincoln in exchange for a Cabinet post going to Simon Cameron, a corrupt Pennsylvania senator. David Davis agreed. Lincoln had officially warned him off such dealmaking, but, as he memorably said, “Lincoln ain’t here.” (Lincoln gave Cameron the War Office, not the Department of Treasury he wanted; Davis, for his efforts, got a seat on the Supreme Court.)

As with Kennedy in 1960 and the Obama campaign in 2008, a macro-moment met micromanagement. The background in each case was the elevation of a novice with a gift for speaking, an extraordinary personal story, and a political record too short to have incurred too many grudges. The foreground was sharp dealing. Blumenthal’s kind of intricate political history—providing all the details of how the sprockets and gears engage—feeds, in turn, the larger cultural perspective. It’s hard to grasp, today, the extent to which those émigré Germans were perceived as the soul of the educated élite. (In Louisa May Alcott’s “Little Women” series, it is the idealized German—and perhaps Jewish—Professor Bhaer, with his heavy accent and love of Goethe, who rescues Jo from conventionality and joins her in building a progressive school.) It may be an obvious truth, but it is still a truth worth telling: history needs both micro-political and macro-cultural perspectives. The room where it happened is part of a world where it could.

Reynolds’s macro-history and Blumenthal’s micro-history coincide in their vindication of Lincoln as a profound radical. Lincoln was a single-issue candidate and a single-cause politician; that issue was slavery and the cause was its abolition. But he was a politician, not a polemicist: he created a broad coalition and placated its parts. He was a pluralist rather than a purist.

His central understanding, registered in his home base of Springfield—where, Reynolds shows, there was a lot more African-American political activism than has often been imagined—was that racist Northerners who could not be driven to equality could still be coaxed toward humanity. Abolition annealed to a broader “Americanism”—an understanding of equality as rooted in the sacred documents of the country—might produce emancipation. This was an insight that Lincoln, with Machiavellian shrewdness, drove to an armed point. Lincoln was not a centrist politician who happened to find himself on top of an erupting volcano in 1861; his election caused the eruption. As Blumenthal shows, Lincoln, in his 1858 debates with the racist senator Stephen Douglas, tactically conceded points about segregation: “I do not understand that because I do not want a negro woman for a slave I must necessarily want her for a wife.” But he was emphatic on the central point, that “there is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence—the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I hold that he is as much entitled to these as the white man.”

In a speech in Peoria, Lincoln declared, about the indifference toward slavery he saw in Congress, “I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world . . . and especially because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty.” Reynolds, quoting this passage, remarks that “Lincoln’s loathing of slavery comes through as strongly here as it does in any work by the most radical abolitionist.” What separated Lincoln from most other abolitionists was the absence of rhetoric that was intended to frighten as much as teach—what Reynolds calls “dark reform” rhetoric—or that catalogued, graphically but accurately, the physical horrors inflicted by slave masters.

This wasn’t because Lincoln did not know of these horrors. It was because he understood that moving the masses of the North to abolition could be done only by appealing to fundamental principles—reminding them that their own values were being violated, not merely another group’s interests. Reynolds writes that Lincoln, aware of the risks of the kind of nihilistic bloodletting that John Brown would produce, directed “this potentially anarchistic cultural current into two documents treasured by most Americans: the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.” By linking the fight against slavery to the extension of these documents, rather than to their repudiation, he could build a truly broad antislavery coalition—and an army brutal enough to enforce its mission. Every act of his Presidency, from the gathering of the militias to the speech at Gettysburg, moved toward this end.

It worked, at a price. For Lincoln, the critical issue was the abolition of slavery; racism and its constraints were, for the moment, secondary. Reynolds addresses Lincoln’s supposed racism in considering colonization programs for freed slaves, noting that Martin Delany, the most radical Black activist of the time, had also championed relocating Black people away from the degradations they faced here. It was a back-to-Africa sentiment, a kind of Black Zionism, that both Lincoln and Delany contemplated. Similarly, Lincoln’s notorious letter to the New York newspaper editor Horace Greeley, saying that if he could save the Union without freeing any slaves he would do so, is situated as part of an ongoing joust between Lincoln and Greeley—and, Reynolds says, as a way for Lincoln to garb “his radical antislavery position in the dress of military necessity.”

An unexampled source on the subject of Lincoln at war—what it cost him and what he really believed—remains John Stauffer’s “Giants,” a 2008 study of Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. And the best summation of Lincoln is still the oration delivered by Douglass in 1876 on the unveiling of a monument to the freed slaves:

Despite the mist and haze that surrounded him; despite the tumult, the hurry, and confusion of the hour, we were able to take a comprehensive view of Abraham Lincoln, and to make reasonable allowance for the circumstances of his position. We saw him, measured him, and estimated him; not by stray utterances to injudicious and tedious delegations, who often tried his patience; not by isolated facts torn from their connection; not by any partial and imperfect glimpses, caught at inopportune moments; but by a broad survey, in the light of the stern logic of great events, and in view of that divinity which shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will, we came to the conclusion that the hour and the man of our redemption had somehow met in the person of Abraham Lincoln.

Sometimes cultural works, novels and plays, can tell you more about the history of culture than cultural history can. George Saunders’s universally praised novel “Lincoln in the Bardo” (2017) creates an imagined Lincoln for our era that more literal accounts can only reinforce and echo. Saunders’s novel, an oratorio of fragments sung by American ghosts huddled in a graveyard, crowding around (and, creepily, inside) Lincoln himself as he mourns his son Willie, who died in 1862, makes that death the center point of Lincoln’s journey.

Reynolds, in turn, reveals that Spiritualism—hard-core, table-rapping Spiritualism—really was a presence in the Lincoln White House. The movement, as American as Mormonism, had begun in the eighteen-forties with the Fox sisters and their pet ghost, Mr. Splitfoot, and by the eighteen-seventies had millions of adherents. Poor Mary Lincoln, after losing Willie, consulted Spiritualists who claimed to commune with the dead, and held séances in the White House, which her husband seems to have attended. Abe himself took seriously the political counsel he got from two leading spirit-mongers, though not from their spirits.

However clearly stage-managed, this cult of an accessible afterlife gave to the tragedies of the war a set of redemptive possibilities that normal religiosity couldn’t quite contain, and adds to our understanding of Civil War mourning. Reynolds even includes a hair-raising, and heartbreaking, “spirit” photograph of Mary Lincoln with Abe’s ghost, contrived for her years after his death. The obviousness of the fraud does not alter the pathos of the embrace, the tall man’s hands placed on the small woman’s shoulders. The phony and freakish treated as heroic and elegiac—these elements, the materials of Melville’s “The Confidence-Man,” are the materials of mid-nineteenth-century American culture. Lincoln’s legend sits right there among them.

Saunders’s ghosts include those of soldiers killed in the war, reproaching the President as he mourns his own child. There is a terrible Providence in the Lincolns’ undergoing the same kind of loss that so many less celebrated Americans had to endure. The ghosts did indeed live alongside the living. Surely the belief in ghosts was, in part, a way of registering the mass killing of ordinary boys—and their persistence as a constant harrowing of the soul. All wars leave a hideous deficit, but the Civil War somehow left one uniquely deep. To grasp why the comedy of séance-table Spiritualism was not comedy at all, one must reckon with the scale of the killing—proportionally, it is as if eight million Americans were killed in a war now. And, perhaps, above all, one must reckon with the adjacency, the nearness of the places where these farm boys and working men with wives and babies were slaughtered to the places where they had lived: they died not in a foreign glade or on a distant shore but in a hayfield across the state border.

Lincoln was a pluralist politician negotiating a world resistant to pluralism of any kind. He achieved great things through compromise and cunning and occasional cruelty. The choice between pluralism and purism remains the defining choice between liberalism and its enemies. It is why, astoundingly, John Wilkes Booth adored John Brown. They spoke the same language of absolutism.

With the recent degradation of the American Presidency—our four-year nightmare has provided no spectacle more nightmarish than that of Trump sitting at Lincoln’s feet, in his memorial, for a self-pity session—it is a truism to say that we need Lincoln again. But which one? Three possible Lincolns come to mind. Call them a Barnum Lincoln, a Bardo Lincoln, and a Wigwam Lincoln.

The Barnum Lincoln shows us that a vigorous thread of vulgarity ran right through Lincoln’s life and public persona, and appropriately so for a democratic leader. Though not a vulgarian himself, Lincoln saw the value of vulgarity. The sepulchral Lincoln of Daniel French’s statue was not the Lincoln his contemporaries knew and loved. One of the actors in “Our American Cousin,” seeing the First Couple arrive in their box not long before the President was killed, ad-libbed the line “This reminds me of a story, as Mr. Lincoln says . . . ,” to great and appreciative laughter. This was the Lincoln his time knew: ribald storyteller, fabulist, beloved Barnum-style freak. It is a Lincoln worth keeping in mind for those of us inclined to bemoan the “debasement” of our political culture. (The trouble with Trump is not that he’s a short-fingered vulgarian showman; the trouble is that he is *only* a short-fingered vulgarian showman.)

It is the Bardo Lincoln who radiates moral authority from his time into our own, exactly because he was one of those rare leaders who could stare directly into their complicity in death and suffering without attempting to weaken or lessen its horror. Lincoln was in intimate touch with the suffering he made happen, and he sought every day to justify it, to himself and to the country. He sensed from very early on that he would never go home to Illinois; the spectre of assassination was constant throughout his Presidency, and his legendary dream of death in the White House is a sign that he accepted this. The British philosopher and Lincoln lover John Stuart Mill wrote soon after the President’s death that there was something almost salubrious in his dying just as the war was won. Shocking as it sounds, Mill meant that, in some almost providential way, the arc of Lincoln’s life demanded his martyrdom to complete it. This Lincoln, the man of sorrows acquainted with grief, is central to understanding the spell he continues to cast on us.

If there’s a Lincoln we need now, though, it must be the Wigwam Lincoln, the pol who pretended to oppose dealmaking in the boozy Chicago night, even as his ambition demanded it. That’s the ghost to haunt us—master politician, always placating one side in order to broaden a path to another, misdirecting and redirecting, building and rebuilding coalitions, all of it guided by shrewd insight into other people’s foibles and needs. What really distinguished Lincoln from the other Presidents who built Cabinets of rivals was that, instead of struggling against them politely, he played them like a piano. He expected to lose the election of 1864, and hatched an apparent plot—involving a secret letter that he demanded his Cabinet sign, unseen—to get as many slaves freed as possible if he did. (And then the election of 1864 was duly held, in the middle of a war, with millions of voters, and no one has ever had cause to question its legitimacy.) Lincoln will not return from the dead, even as a ghost, but his broadly balanced, extravagantly compromised democratic pluralism may be all there is to rescue us yet again. Something has to, soon. ♦

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America lost a hero and an icon of historic preservation when he died on September 15, 2020, and though it wasn’t unexpected, the passing of the nation’s greatest voice in history struck me at my core.

America lost a hero and an icon of historic preservation this week, and though it wasn’t unexpected, the passing of the nation’s greatest voice in history struck me at my core.

Bearss was a giant in his field but far from a household name. He was behind the recovery of the USS Cairo, the crown jewel of the Park Service’s Civil War battlefields. He raised countless dollars for battlefield preservation, led guided walking tours of historic sites well past his 95th birthday, and two of the most prestigious preservation awards in the country are named in his honor. His books and papers are the backbone of Civil War scholarship, especially concerning battles along the Mississippi River.

Bearss had a profound effect on my interest in history, and I feel fortunate to have met him. The moment I heard him speak in Ken Burns’ 1990 documentary “The Civil War” I was hooked. On screen he was spry and animated, and his iconic voice spoke as if directly to me and no one else.

Smithsonian Magazine author Adam Goodheart in 2005 best described Bearss’ voice as “a kind of booming growl, like an ancient wax-cylinder record amplified at full volume — about the way you’d imagine William Tecumseh Sherman sounding the day he burned Atlanta, with a touch of Teddy Roosevelt charging up San Juan Hill.”

Bearss often closed his eyes when using his crystal clear memory to regale people with his knowledge of the Civil War. One might have thought he was a time traveling eye witness or that all the knowledge he’d accumulated was mystically etched into the back of his eyelids. He was mesmerizing.

Bearss, of course, wasn’t around for the Civil War but grew up fascinated with it. His father and older cousin (Medal of Honor recipient Hiram I. Bearss) were both Marines, and Ed always figured he’d make a career out of the military.

He and his family were listening to the Chicago Bears and St. Louis Cardinals football game one Sunday night when the newsman broke in. “It is not a joke. It is a real war,” the distant voice said of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The 18-year-old Bearss took the obvious next step and volunteered for the Marine Corps. He served in the South Pacific for two years until he took five Japanese machine-gun bullets to his left side during fighting in New Guinea in early 1944.

Those five slugs of hot lead ruined Bearss’ left arm and robbed him of his dream of lengthy military career but gifted to our country its most ardent supporter of historic preservation.

After a brief stint in the Army’s Office of Military History, Bearss became historian at Vicksburg National Military Park in 1955. It was there he cemented his place as a legend when he and a crew found and later raised the wreckage of the USS Cairo.

The Cairo sank in the Yazoo River in December 1862, and was pulled from its murky resting place more than 100 years later. When there wasn’t enough money to recover the boat after it was discovered in the 1950s, Bearss secured a major donation from a cigarette company, called in a favor to a barge manufacturer who had once accidentally rear-ended his car, and won $20,000 — about $180,000 today — on TV’s “$64,000 Challenge.”

That’s the type of man Ed was. He got things done, no matter what obstacles stood in the way.

By 1965, the Cairo was recovered from the Yazoo River and sent to a shipyard to be restored. Today the boat is on display at Vicksburg National Military Park. I’ve stood on its deck hundreds of times and so have thousands of people from around the globe. It’s the only city-class gunboat left on earth.

In 1981, Bearss became chief historian for the National Park Service, where he continued his work creating, expanding and restoring historic battlefields, homes and other sites around the nation until his retirement in 1995.

Of course, Ed’s work continued long after he retired. He laid the foundation for preservation efforts that continue now that he is gone. We as Americans must ensure that future generations can enjoy and learn from the places and things that Bearss and the men and women like him have dedicated their lives to saving.

This week, I made a donation to the American Battlefield Trust in Bearss’ memory and urge our readers to do something similar. The Oldest Town in Texas is full of organizations that preserve and protect important pieces of Texas history. All of them are suffering in some way because of the coronavirus pandemic. Pick your favorite of these groups and support it.

Remember no amount of help is too small, or too big for that matter. If anyone wants to fly to New York to appear on a TV game show and donate their massive winnings to a preservation group, it would be greatly appreciated. But it wouldn’t be unique. Ed Bearss was the trailblazer in that department and so many others.

Josh Edwards is managing editor of The Daily Sentinel.

*Books by Bill Teegarden*

Multi Books

HELLMIRA

Lincoln, Seward Foreign Relations

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