

From the Family of the Lion

by M.E. Bradford

"There is a kind of revolution of so general a character that it changes the tastes as well as the fortunes of the world."

—La Rochefoucauld



Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution

by James M. McPherson

New York: Oxford University Press;
192 pp., \$17.95

There is a popular myth of Abraham Lincoln, our 16th President, that is known to most Americans. According to the orthodox version of this highly sympathetic construct, Lincoln was a plain and honest fellow, called by other plain, uncalculating men to preserve the handiwork of the Fathers, the Old Republic, perfecting that inheritance in the process of keeping it together. This Lincoln is no illustration of frenzied ambition, but rather a simple soul who had stumbled first into the practice of law and then into Illinois politics. He hated war but was determined to honor a trust put into his hands, even if that commitment meant more killing than in all other American wars put together. A reluctant and gentle conqueror, he stood ready, once secession had ended, to welcome the South back into the national family: like the father in the parable, rejoicing at the return of foolish children. Such is the

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Lincoln who grew melancholy in thinking of what blacks endured and who "died to make them free." This Father Abraham, the sad man of Illinois, the prairie republican/Republican, in his spirit still hovers over this nation, giving direction and encouragement to successive generations of his countrymen. Of his early life we know that he identified with the poor, that he read by firelight, lost his sweetheart, deplored the Mexican War, and served a frontier community as a member of the state legislature and the U.S. Congress. As a spokesman for wholesome, local ways, he debated Stephen Douglas. And he truly suffered in presiding over his country at war, spending blood only with agonized reluctance—certainly with no idea of reshaping its social and political order so as to make of it a vehicle for his private dreams of what power in the state might accomplish. So goes the myth.

In making, over a period of two decades, a series of scholarly objections to the distortion and oversimplification embodied in this myth, I had the pleasure of being treated briefly as the object of national puzzlement and irritation. For about five weeks I was cast as the leading villain in a political melodrama of what a public servant is allowed to believe: anathema because of what I said about the American past. Obviously,

what I thought of Lincoln was not the real issue behind this affected and rhetorical outrage at my political heresy. But to my surprise, it is now evident that in most fashionable academic neighborhoods my understanding of Lincoln as transforming agent (which is, in essence, Willmoore Kendall's view of the evidence) has come all the way around to seem not at all farfetched. Or at least that is true of the descriptive component of my analysis.

James M. McPherson's *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* summarizes the current trend in interpretive historiography on this subject. His Lincoln is a radical refounder of the "Old Republic of the Fathers," like the "lion" and "eagle" of which Lincoln had first spoken in his 1838 "Springfield Lyceum Speech"; an American Caesar who, in McPherson's phrase, through "his own superb leadership, strategy, and sense of timing . . . determined the pace of the revolution [of 1860] and ensured its success." Arguing more or less to the same effect, Carl N. Degler in the *New York Times* last February 12 maintained that Lincoln was the American Bismarck and that "What the [Civil] War represented, in the end, was the forceful incorporation of the South into a newly created na-

tion.” Which, in both cases, is what I have argued all the time.

However, there is one big difference between McPherson’s *Lincoln* and what the record should lead us to conclude. For McPherson believes that all of this refounding by policy, construction, demagoguery, and force of arms was wonderful to behold, pointing toward a “more perfect Union” than even James Madison could have imagined. In other words, he likes what the United States, as a political construct, has become better than he likes what it was. Those who do not, on balance, share in his enthusiasm for the present configuration of our political system in omniscient government obviously will not agree with McPherson’s evaluation of Lincoln’s handiwork; those who differ with him about a “new birth of freedom” brought about by violation of contract will see a rejection of the terms of that contract in the accomplishments at Gettysburg, at Atlanta, and at Appomattox Court House. McPherson’s Lincoln “as he seems to us now” is a summary figure in *one* of the great American political traditions, that heritage which affirms the growing power of Leviathan to achieve ends and purposes it thinks proper, to apply its rhetoric and its energy to reshape the recalcitrant material of the body politic. In this system what seems fit according to some extrinsic philosophical or moral standard is also lawful, regardless of what Constitution and statute leave to the irregular operations of free choice among constituent members. McPherson clearly belongs to that tradition. Those who measure the history of American politics against the paradigm of the old Constitution, or who affirm in public life no more regulation than what that document, as amended, permits will not, however, be at ease with McPherson on Lincoln’s version of liberty, of unconditional surrender, implied powers, and revolutionary transformation *cum* preservation of the Union. Such Americans as are put off by this intrusive paradigm will not have so sanguine a view of Mr. Lincoln. For they come out of another American political tradition, the one which gave us our original Constitution and Bill of Rights. For them the Emancipator will always seem to be a crafty manipulator of men’s emotions, a great incendiary,

and almost a tyrant. Nothing in McPherson’s evidence dislodges me from membership in this second company.

McPherson’s arguments for Lincoln as a second Founder is based on an analysis of the “scope and meaning of revolutionary transformations in both substance and process wrought by the Civil War” and “Lincoln’s leadership in accomplishing these changes.” McPherson doesn’t dwell on the formal characteristics of the original Republic, what defined it before Mr. Lincoln came along. But he is serious about the word “revolution.” Of what happened when the South was defeated and how Lincoln shaped that victory, he writes, “Abraham Lincoln was not Maximilien de Robespierre. No Confederate leaders went to the guillotine. Yet the Civil War changed the United States as thoroughly as the French Revolution changed that country.” Lincoln accomplished this ledger-dream by making liberty a gift of government—and by assigning to the federal power a general responsibility for the well-being of American citizens. This much it accomplished by freeing the slaves and preserving the Union by military means—not by persuasion and politics—thus putting the civil bond which makes a nation on a new basis. Of the origin of the Old Republic in resistance to a power remote, unresponsive, and potentially hostile McPherson has little to say.

He praises Abraham Lincoln for his use of metaphor (Lincoln *was* the greatest master of the language among all our Presidents) and for his ability to stick to one large objective. He treats the modern theory of total war leading to unconditional surrender as if it could conceivably enjoy moral standing. And he invents a doctrine of liberty with which most men might be enslaved, “for their own good.” But these exercises are merely conventional and adjunctive. For McPherson is really about his business only in discoursing on his favorite American revolution and its objectives: to free the slaves; to end Southern domination of national politics; to change, internally, the social order of the South; and to commit the entire nation to a new politics, derivative of the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence, not the

Constitution. After 1865 almost everyone in the South was poor. But McPherson is simplistic with reference to the essentially familial order of life in the region: politicization of private things did not come until after 1918. And for the meliorist, the progressive, destruction of slavery by war was a far more complicated business than this book or McPherson’s earlier studies of abolitionists would allow. Concerning Southern domination of national politics he hits the mark. In retrospect, that shift in control was clearly the central meaning of this conflict. But as Charles Fairman, Phillip Paludan, and Earl M. Maltz have taught us, the United States Supreme Court in the Reconstruction era, with assistance from Congress and various Northern states, prevented the remaking of the Constitution: prevented even a radical reading of the Reconstruction amendments. Therefore we have to conclude that McPherson’s “revolution” is a product of the imagination; and his Lincoln less the practical politician (who at one point supported the *original* 13th Amendment that would have protected slavery forever) and more the American demigod of the Lincoln Memorial.

Thus I cannot rejoice at the extent to which Professor McPherson would seem to agree with me. For McPherson on Lincoln the revolutionary constitutes a study in inversion of terms and ingenuity in argument—an abuse of the evidence—and is less impressive than Herndon in his narrative of the strong country lad who could wrestle and pin his enemy, who learned to play his cards as they came, and who could summon eloquence when he needed it—especially when he imitated the country preachers and the language of the Authorized Version.

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In early August, I turned in this review to the literary editor of *National Review*, who had commissioned it. Although he indicated in a telephone conversation that he liked it well enough, later he informed me that the editors of *National Review* had decided not to run the piece because it might be taken as an expression of the magazine’s editorial philosophy. As a result, I sent a letter to the editor-in-chief, terminating my association of 25 years with that publication. ◊

The Treasury of Virtue

by Clyde Wilson

**The New Jacobinism: Can
Democracy Survive?**

by Claes G. Ryn

Washington, D.C.: National
Humanities Institute; 102 pp., \$8.95

“Contrary to widespread belief, evidence is accumulating that Western democracy is in continuous and serious decline,” writes Claes Ryn in the opening of this eloquent, concise, and hard-hitting manifesto that goes immediately to the heart of our times. “Many commentators proclaim democracy’s triumph over evil political forces in the world and hold up today’s Western society as a model for all humanity. They do so in the face of glaring symptoms of social decay,” he continues, and adds, a little later: “Although the difficulties of Western democracy are manifold and have no single source, the most important can be seen as directly or indirectly induced by a deficiency at the ethical center.”

Though written against a background of rich scholarship, *The New Jacobins* is not an academic book. Nor is it one of those volumes of semi-fashionable “conservative” journalism that appear from time to time and are hyped for their marginal empirical criticisms of the reigning establishment. Rather, Professor Ryn’s work resembles one of those great political pamphlets that have appeared occasionally at points of crisis in Western history to mobilize the decent and thinking into a recognition of peril. So apposite to our present situation is the book that I am tempted to turn this notice into a string of striking quotations, but let two or three suffice:

Nationalism, by contrast [to patriotism], is an eruption of overweening ambition, a throwing off of individual and national self-control.

Nationalism is self-absorbed and conceited, oblivious of the weaknesses of the country it champions. It is provincialism without the leaven of cosmopolitan breadth, discretion, and critical detachment. It recognizes no authority higher than its own national passion. It imagines itself as having a monopoly on right or as having a mission superseding moral norms. . . .

Of those in the West today who are passionate advocates of capitalism and want it introduced all over the world, many are former Marxists. The shift from being a Marxist to becoming a missionary for capitalism may be far less drastic than commonly assumed. . . . The Jacobin spirit can align itself with that set of potentialities in capitalism that are most destructive of the ways of traditional society. . . . A certain kind of advocacy of capitalism turns out to have much in common with the Jacobin passion for an egalitarian, homogeneous society. . . .

It is indicative of the influence of the Jacobin spirit in the Western world that a fondness for abstract general schemes and utopian visions should today have attraction even for people said to be “conservative” or “on the right.” This development says a great deal about the scope and depth of the Western flight from reality.

Constitutional democracy and Jacobin democracy are two different things. Constitutional democracy consists of a healthy social order with dispersed power. Like a healthy individual, constitutional democracy lives by prudence and moderation and with a set of ethical rules (a constitution in the case of a state) that govern the pursuit of prudent

ends by ethical and restrained means. Jacobin democracy is egalitarian and plebiscitary, but also, of course, centralized and elitist, and aggressive both at home and abroad. It is the burden of Professor Ryn’s alarm that we are fast inclining into an advanced state of that latter condition—that loud hosannas to the beauty and success of democracy portend not its triumph but its end. And that our real problem is ethical, not political or utilitarian—the substitution of self-congratulatory abstract political goals for a decent and ordered life and state. He is, of course, right, and nowhere has the argument been better stated in short compass.

Ryn makes his case admirably, especially in those passages in which he shows the neoconservatism to be a symptom of the problem and not a cure; as well as in the chapter, worth a book, that shows us that today’s trumpeters of capitalism are talking about something that is as different from our forefathers’ love of private property and freedom of trade as their “democracy” is from the constitutional order of our Framers. It would be well if this work could be widely dispersed, and I wish I could be as optimistic as Professor Ryn that a reaffirmation of traditional principles will serve. But I am not, for several reasons.

It may be that the social fabric no longer exists in which good principles can find root. We need to be able to produce young men who want to ride hard, shoot straight, speak the truth, and revere their ancestors, and not to imitate Michael Jackson, lust after the fast buck, and crow over the skill of lobbing high explosives accurately onto alien women and children from a safe distance. We do, indeed, still turn out such young men, but given the existing regime, their virtues are quickly perverted to bad ends or degraded into cynicism.

It is healthy and wholesome to appeal to tradition and to try to enshrine it in our education. But, as Allen Tate pointed out long ago in his criticism of Irving Babbitt, we are already at so great a level of disconnection from tradition as a living reality as to render our achieve-