

# **Inventing Lincoln: Approaches to His Rhetoric**

**D. Leigh Henson**

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Book design, including the cover, by the author. The author's cover photo depicts *Lincoln Rallies the People*, a life-sized, bronze statue of Abraham Lincoln by David Seagraves. This statue is located on the southwest corner of the Logan County Courthouse in Lincoln, Illinois—the First Lincoln Namesake Town. As a member of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission of Lincoln, Illinois, the author proposed this statue and corresponding historical marker in 2008. The statue, portraying Lincoln as the 1858 Illinois US Senate Republican candidate, shows him proudly holding up his speech manuscript in a salute to his audience after he delivered a two-hour stump speech on the steps of the Logan County Courthouse on October 16 that year, the day after the last Lincoln-Douglas debate, at Alton. Like each Lincoln statue and other artistic portrayal of him, each publication on his rhetoric is an interpretation contributing to the world's diverse perceptions of his life, work, and legacy.

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In memory of

James T. Hickey, Florence Molen, and Gary Hoos, MD



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## Preface

From the tradition of classical rhetoric, we have the term *invention* to designate the formulation of communicative purpose, creation of discourse content, and corresponding adaptation of other rhetorical elements. Abraham Lincoln did not gain distinction when he dabbled in writing poetry or delivered lectures, yet his remarkable success as a politician and statesman was largely due to his ingenious rhetorical invention.

Historian Don E. Fehrenbacher testifies to the importance of studying Lincoln's discourse: "Among modern public leaders especially, important action is nearly always verbal. In the words of a Jefferson, a Napoleon, or a Churchill one finds not only the record but the substance of his principal deeds, as well as the clearest traces of his character. To study Abraham Lincoln, then, we must examine his words, and not only the words that he wrote but also those that he uttered, insofar as they are known."<sup>1</sup> Lincoln's compositions provide insight into the complexities of his personality and character, and they help to define his distinctive political and literary achievements: "In the letters, speeches, and public papers of Abraham Lincoln, one finds the real man, but not the whole man. . . . The contours of Lincoln's character and career are plainly visible in his prose. . . . Most of that prose is strictly functional; to read it is to see him in action, pursuing practical results, rather than ultimate truth. Only at rare moments, such as the dedication of Gettysburg Cemetery, did the occasion demand the utmost from his literary power."<sup>2</sup>

Studying Lincoln's rhetoric, however, is challenging, as is studying publications about it. Lincoln's rhetoric is prodigious, serves various purposes, and takes many forms, and some of it has been controversial. His prepresidential rhetoric includes stump speeches, debate speeches, legislative speeches, lectures, eulogies, and private and public letters. His presidential rhetoric consists of inaugural addresses, messages to Congress, proclamations, executive orders, celebratory speeches, as well as private and public letters. Biographers have explained and assessed Lincoln's discourse, as have historians and specialists in rhetoric, speech communication, English and cultural studies,

literary criticism, and political science. Lincolnian writers' fields of expertise, values, and beliefs affect their choice of texts and every aspect of treating them: contextualizing, analyzing, summarizing, explicating, quoting, paraphrasing, and assessing. In effect, all techniques of rendering the meaning of a text and judging it are interpretive.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes writers seeking to offer new contributions to Lincoln studies have found that their educational or professional background affected how established authorities perceived their work.<sup>4</sup> All in all, Lincolnists are immensely responsible for inventing him through their approaches to his speeches and other compositions.

Many kinds of publications treat Lincoln's discourse for one purpose or another, to one extent or another. They range from single-volume and multi-volume biographies to books, book chapters, essays, lectures, editorials, and documentaries appearing in print, video, and online formats—including blogs—produced by sources ranging from university and commercial presses to news media to publishers of popular magazines, newsletters, and niche journals to social media, including tweets and other blurts. Early printed publications incline toward praise, sometimes extravagant. Most printed publications offer various kinds and degrees of objective analysis and qualified praise. Some publications vent the negative biases of their authors toward Lincoln and are sharply derogatory.

Beginning with Garry Wills's book *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (1992) and Harry V. Jaffa's essay "The Speech that Changed the World" (1997), publications about Lincoln's discourse have gained significance; and as evidence of their importance, recent books relating to his discourse have been recognized in the competition for the prestigious Lincoln Prize.<sup>5</sup> It is "awarded annually for the finest scholarly work in English on Abraham Lincoln, or the American Civil War soldier, or a subject relating to their era."<sup>6</sup> Some of these recent books focus on individual speeches and other compositions, and these books variously discuss such rhetorical elements as Lincoln's political and communicative purposes, the contexts of his most important



speeches and other major writings, sources that influenced them, composing process, methods of argumentation, stylistic techniques, press coverage, and impact on his contemporaries and his legacy.

The importance and variety of Lincoln's rhetoric, the diversity of those who write about it, and the complexity and significance of their publications thus make them worthy of study, just as some scholars have studied his biographies for how their authors generally approach their work.<sup>7</sup> One of the ironic gaps in the vast Lincoln literature is that discussions have been quite limited concerning the rhetorical principles and practices applied by those whose publications treat his discourse. This book provides a systematic discussion of the work of selected biographers and several kinds of scholars (as noted above) who have invented Lincoln through their explanations and judgments of his discourse. This discussion reveals the rhetorical concepts and analytical methods applied by Lincolnists to his discourse and in turn the rhetorical qualities they perceive in his speeches and other writings. Such an account of approaches to Lincoln's rhetoric should strengthen our understanding of the relationship between his compositions and his public life, and should facilitate more meaningful reading of his texts by the educated public, instructors, and advanced students, who may gain ideas for further research.

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 discuss how Lincoln's biographers have treated his rhetoric, and chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 do likewise for scholars with special interest in discourse analysis. The scope of this study is broad, and there are so many publications focusing on or touching on Lincoln's rhetoric, as is true for any other significant aspect of his life and work, that some limits must be set. This study concerns selected biographies, which discuss a few or many of Lincoln's speeches and other writings. Chapter 1 tells more about the choice of biographies. This book especially looks at how certain biographers have approached Lincoln's overall rhetoric as well as his prepresidential political

compositions. Chapter 1 explains the rationale for those considerations.

Rhetorical studies have also been chosen with certain criteria in mind. The essays and book chapters about Lincoln's rhetoric discussed in this book treat his overall discourse, compositions in a period of his life, or individual compositions, including some of his presidency. Many essays on Lincoln's rhetoric are so specialized that they have not been readily accessible to biographers, historians, other kinds of scholars, and the general public, especially in the pre-Internet world. As biographer Ronald C. White Jr. has written, "Some excellent studies, usually focusing on specific speeches, have been offered by professors of speech communication. These contributions [mostly essays] have too seldom been utilized by biographers and historians of Lincoln."<sup>8</sup> This book encompasses many of those important studies.

Excluded here are books devoted to Lincoln's individual compositions and to those of a limited segment of his political career, for example, his service in the Illinois legislature, Congress, the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and the presidency but not to his entire prepresidential rhetoric or his overall rhetoric. Most of the books on Lincoln's individual compositions have been published early in the twenty-first century.<sup>9</sup> Reviews of those books may identify an author's approach to Lincoln's rhetoric. Additionally, the approaches used by those authors, in one way or another, appear in the works discussed in this study. Many unpublished papers on Lincoln's texts are in the form of master's theses and doctoral dissertations, and they are excluded here. A reasonable assumption is that most of the significant ones have found their way into publication and that such representative examples have been included in this study.

The introduction provides background information about rhetoric as a field of study as well as about the questions of Lincoln's rhetorical education, his rhetorical growth and development vs. consistency, and his eloquence vs. demagoguery.

## Acknowledgments

This book emerges from a journey that has taken me along career paths intersecting the study, teaching, and writing about literature and its pedagogy, rhetoric and composition, and technical communication. In the last few years, I have taken new trails, reaching successive plateaus of research and publication about my hometown, Lincoln, Illinois—the First Lincoln Namesake Town—, William Maxwell, the rhetoric of Abraham Lincoln, and now the present book about how Lincolnists have interpreted him through their explanations and assessments of his discourse. My formative years in Lincoln implicitly set the compass for this long, upward journey. The following narrative summary recognizes some of the most important people who influenced this journey, with apology to anyone I have overlooked.

In 1961 I moved from my hometown to attend Illinois State University, then for thirty years to teach high school English at Pekin, Illinois, and next to Missouri State University, where for fourteen years I taught and published on the theory, practice, and pedagogy of technical communication. Throughout my teaching careers, I often returned to my hometown to visit family and friends, always with the shadowy memory of some of Abraham Lincoln's activities there. By the late 1990s I had gained tenure at Missouri State, and with that security I had the time to reflect on how growing up in the First Lincoln Namesake Town and attending Lincoln College—the First Lincoln Namesake College—my freshman year had influenced my personal life, education, and careers.

Then, Abraham Lincoln stepped out of the shadows. He became a central subject of the community history website of the First Lincoln Namesake Town I published in 2003 and have continually expanded. That site includes stories of the Lincoln legend I heard from Lincoln buff E.H. Lukenbill, the Logan County Superintendent of Public Instruction, when he visited classes I attended at Jefferson School through sixth grade. During those years my mother, the late Jane Wilson Henson, told me about Mr. Lincoln's law practice at Postville Courthouse. That site, just a block from our family home, was a

neighborhood playground before and after the 1953 courthouse replica was built. I attended its dedication as a student in Principal Bernadine Jones's fourth-grade class, witnessing the appearance of Governor William G. Stratton—a true Lincoln buff, I discovered years later. During family picnics at nearby Postville Park, my mother told me about Mr. Lincoln playing sports there when court recessed. My hometown history website led to my research and publication about the political speeches Mr. Lincoln had given there in the 1850s.

That online history also includes information about the work of James T. Hickey, former curator of the Henry Horner Lincoln Collection in the Illinois State Historical Library (now the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum) and author of many essays reporting his Lincoln research. As a freshman at Lincoln College in 1960–1961, I enjoyed his two-semester course in Lincoln literature. I never forgot the charming pleasure he expressed for the study of Abraham Lincoln, and that memory has been a motivating factor for my fun-work of researching Lincoln's discourse in retirement.

In 2008, as an honorary member of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission of Lincoln, Illinois, I researched and wrote the play script used for the reenactment of Mr. Lincoln's political rally and stump speech he gave on the steps of the Logan County Courthouse on October 16, 1858, the day after the last Lincoln-Douglas debate. I also proposed a statue of Lincoln and historical marker to commemorate that rally-speech, and they were erected in 2015. I am grateful to the civic leaders who helped to accomplish the reenactment as well as the statue and marker installation, including Wanda Lee Rohlf and Ron J. Keller, associate professor of history and political science at Lincoln College, and member of the Board of Directors of the Abraham Lincoln Association.

In 2011 I published *The Town Abraham Lincoln Warned: The Living Namesake Heritage of Lincoln, Illinois*, and several Lincolnists and historians provided suggestions and testimonials

for that project, including Dr. Thomas F. Schwartz; Dr. Wayne C. Temple; Dr. Robert M. McColley; and Paul Beaver, professor emeritus of history at Lincoln College and former director of its Lincoln Heritage Museum. Their support encouraged my further research on Lincoln's speaking and writing. In 2014 I published "Classical Rhetoric as a Lens for Reading the Key Speeches of Lincoln's Political Rise, 1852–1856" in the *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, with guidance from its editors, Dr. Bryon Andreasen and Dr. Christian McWhirter.

I am grateful to many others from my earlier years who helped and encouraged my research and writing, especially Florence Molen, Dr. Stanley Renner, Dr. Daniel W. Stowell, Dr. Joseph Morris Webb, Dr. Kristene Sutliff, Richard E. Hart, William Furry, Richard Sumrall, David and Patrick Doolin, Bill Gossett, Geoff Ladd, and Mike Starasta. I thank my children, Kendra L. Henson and Brandon L. Henson, for sharing interest in their father's hometown roots and for following and supporting my professional activities.

I especially thank Dr. John M. Barr, Mr. Harold Holzer, and Dr. David Zarefsky for reviewing a draft of *Inventing Lincoln*. The comments and suggestions I received in that process enabled me to make revisions and additions that strengthened this project. My devoted, beloved wife, Patricia L. "Pat" Hartman, MBA, Boston University, has helped immeasurably through her sound advice, patient encouragement, and skill in content editing, copy editing, and indexing. I take full responsibility for errors and omissions. I am grateful to Michael Stowe, senior instructor at Missouri State University, for promptly responding to my sporadic calls for help in using software.

I developed the text, page layout, and PDFs of the cover and interior pages using MS Word 2016. The *Chicago Manual of Style* 16<sup>th</sup> edition provided a guide to book design, language usage and mechanics, documentation, and indexing.



## Introduction

A few of Lincoln's contemporaries saw him as a statesman and man of letters before his death, but in *Lincoln's Sword* Douglas L. Wilson observes that not until after Lincoln's death did he begin to gain the widespread reputation as a man of letters: a "revelation" to the American public "and particularly to members of the American intelligentsia."<sup>1</sup> As Lincoln studies evolve, biographers and academics in diverse specialties discuss more and more of his speeches and other writings, and in greater technical detail, expanding our knowledge of not only their literary qualities but also their complex rhetorical dimensions.

Anyone who reads about Lincoln's discourse will encounter concepts and corresponding terminology relating to literary and rhetorical technicalities. Some of that terminology has textbook clarity, but some of it can be problematic, even in higher education. In the vast spectrum of Lincoln studies, *rhetoric* does not always mean the same thing. Often *rhetoric* or *rhetorical* refers to just speaking (oratory) or to the manner of delivering a speech or to language usage. Frequently the terms are negative, referring to audience manipulation through unreliable facts, fallacious and misleading argumentation, or incendiary language. Rhetoricians Andrew King and Jim A. Kuypers lament the entrenched, pejorative usage of the word *rhetoric*: "Why it is not an honored term remains a mystery. Despite our professed best efforts the derogatory definition of rhetoric as insincere words and inflated style remains the predominant usage both inside and beyond the academy."<sup>2</sup> In fact, these negative meanings associated with the word *rhetoric*, whether in Lincoln studies or elsewhere, obscure the original definition of rhetoric in Western civilization as "the art or the discipline that deals with the use of discourse, either spoken or written, to inform or persuade or motivate an audience, whether that audience is made up of one person or a group of persons."<sup>3</sup>

In Western civilization the field of rhetoric began with the work of Greek and Roman rhetoricians—classical rhetoric—and through centuries of development, classical rhetoric has provided fundamentals for generating, analyzing, interpreting,

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evaluating, and teaching discourse. Given the significance of classical rhetoric as the foundation of communication as a field of study, those who publish about Lincoln's discourse consciously or intuitively apply fundamentals from classical rhetoric, and readers in turn can use the concepts and terminology of classical rhetoric as a lens to gain insights into those publications and into Lincoln's discourse. As explained below, Lincoln was familiar with key elements of classical rhetoric.

Classical rhetoric has especially concerned three kinds of persuasive discourse: not just political (deliberative) but also forensic (legalistic) and ceremonial (epideictic).<sup>4</sup> The main components of classical rhetoric are communicative purpose, audience analysis, invention (content development, including adaptation of other rhetorical elements), arrangement (organization), style (language), memory, and delivery.<sup>5</sup> Principles of classical rhetoric originally pertained to oratory but for centuries have been applied to various forms of writing. Contemporary rhetoricians Edward P.J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors observe that nineteenth-century rhetoric emphasized writing more than speaking and that "the rhetoric of writing does have many roots in classical rhetoric."<sup>6</sup> Invention in legal and political compositions—the kinds most important to Lincoln's prepresidential careers—concerns effective argumentation, but invention also more broadly requires integrating all rhetorical strategies and techniques, including language. Argumentation makes appeals to logic (logos), emotions (pathos), and the communicator's credibility (ethos). Style, according to classical rhetoric, requires competent grammar and vocabulary. In creating his legal and political compositions, Lincoln needed to devise logical arguments and present them in a coherent structure with appropriate language for a given audience.<sup>7</sup>

Lincoln's political compositions have specific rhetorical purposes and argumentative strategies that were determined by his political purposes and audiences. His chief political purposes were to get elected, to advance Whig Party positions and policies



(to some extent even to shape Whig policy), to promote Whig presidential candidates and the first Republican Party presidential candidate (John C. Frémont), to build the Republican Party through coalitions, and to formulate and promote its policies. As a Republican Party leader and spokesman and as president, he also sought to shape public opinion.

Lincoln would have encountered fundamentals of classical rhetoric in his efforts to improve his communicative ability from childhood through adulthood. The tradition of classical rhetoric was a major influence on the work of nineteenth-century, Anglo-American rhetoricians, and some of the textbooks and anthologies that Lincoln is known to have read (or may have read) afforded him the opportunity to learn about classical rhetoric in his formative years.<sup>8</sup> During Lincoln's childhood and teens in Indiana, he would have become familiar with at least two books that had information relating to classical rhetoric: William Scott's *Lessons in Elocution* (1823) and Lindley Murray's *English Reader* (1799), which included readings from such Enlightenment thinkers as David Hume, who influenced the writers of the American Declaration of Independence. Nearly half of the readings in Murray's *English Reader* are borrowed from Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783).<sup>9</sup> Blair's work testified to the value of literature and the importance of a plain writing style.

Murray's work emphasized the importance of reading aloud to an audience, and Robert Bray suggests that "a pupil such as Lincoln, almost never in school, could use the *English Reader* as a means of self-tutelage. And he probably did just that. Murray's introduction presents nine categories of voice training." Bray claims that as Lincoln "read in and out of school, silently in solitude, 'publicly' to his peers, he began to write from his reading—a lifelong habit."<sup>10</sup> Murray's book promoted the study of models of composition, including selections from classical antiquity. Throughout its history, the pedagogy of classical rhetoric included copying and imitating models.<sup>11</sup> Biographers have cited Lincoln's stepmother's testimony that during his

childhood he learned about language by copying material from books he read. Other sources of classical rhetoric have been identified that might have influenced Lincoln during his early years and young adulthood.<sup>12</sup> Roy P. Basler speculates, “An examination of some of the textbooks which Lincoln used as a boy reveals that he probably had a more thorough training in rhetoric than the average college graduate of the present” (1939).<sup>13</sup>

The speeches of the self-taught Lincoln beginning with his time as a member of the Illinois General Assembly (1834–1841) demonstrate the rhetorical skill of a well-educated person, and his ongoing desire for self-improvement meant he would continue to learn about rhetoric. The extensive critical attention given to Lincoln’s 1838 Lyceum Address suggests it is an early, significant demonstration of his talent for composition. David Zarefsky writes that the portion of Lincoln’s 1842 Temperance Address about strategies of persuasion offers an “implicit theory” that “reaches back to the classical understanding of rhetoric as the discovery of available means of persuasion. His concern was not with artistry in itself but with making his message acceptable to his audience.”<sup>14</sup> Lincoln the aspiring politician in the 1840s may have learned about rhetoric from reading the speeches of his first law partner, John T. Stuart, who was also a Whig colleague elected to the US Congress. Stuart had earned a liberal arts degree and would thus have studied classical rhetoric. As a US congressman, Lincoln could have learned about rhetorical strategy through reading and listening to the speeches of John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, and Daniel Webster, whose formal education included the study of classical rhetoric.<sup>15</sup> During Lincoln’s return to politics in the early 1850s, he was especially influenced by Webster’s rhetoric. Zarefsky maintains that Lincoln “acquainted himself with some of the exemplars of the time . . . , [including] Jonathan Elliott’s collection of debates on the US Constitution . . . and ‘very likely’ also the collected speeches of William Henry Seward, Joshua Giddings, and Theodore Parker, and it is ‘somewhat likely’ that he read those of Patrick Henry.”<sup>16</sup>

As a politician, Lincoln appreciated the close relationship between reading and writing: biographers observe he sometimes read drafts to political friends or provided written copies to solicit feedback. The best-known example of his rejection of feedback was his resolve to deliver the House Divided Speech as he had planned but contrary to the advice of political friends, and the best-known example of accepting advice was his decision to use some of William Seward's suggestions in revising the conclusion of the First Inaugural Address. The study of anyone's rhetoric involves the difficult, if not impossible, challenge of trying to determine to what extent a person's communicative skill is based on conscious application of learned information rather than intuitive assimilation of information.

Two questions recur in biographers' and rhetoricians' approaches to Lincoln's discourse: to what extent does it show growth and development vs. consistency, and eloquence vs. demagoguery? The second question is especially significant and complicated. The question of eloquence vs. demagoguery concerns how a speaker/writer crafts messages with appeals to reason, emotion, and credibility. These appeals are closely interrelated. For example, a speaker/writer's attempts to elicit approval and gain credibility could falter if an audience detected fallacious argumentation. Many Lincolnian writers praise some of his compositions for eloquence, but typically this praise reflects implicit concepts, not stated criteria. One of the aims of this study is to develop a fuller understanding of Lincoln's eloquence based on the collective explanations and assessments of his discourse provided by biographers and rhetoricians.

Few Lincolnian critics accuse him of complete demagoguery: life-long rhetorical abuse and presidential tyranny. Even some of the most respected, objective Lincolnists have identified demagogic elements in his rhetoric. Yet, as J. Justin Gustainis explains, "It does not necessarily follow that a speaker who uses demagogic rhetoric on a particular occasion is thus properly to be considered a demagogue."<sup>17</sup> Lincoln biographer Reinhard H. Luthin allows, "There exists a bit of demagoguery

in the most lofty of statesmen.”<sup>18</sup> Political rhetoric in some instances may thus blend the technicalities of both eloquence and demagoguery, and this quality forms a kind of rhetorical tension.

J. Justin Gustainis defines a demagogue as an opportunist mainly concerned with gaining and exercising power by suppressing a community (or component of a community) in a shared crisis, which the demagogue purports to resolve and thereby become a “savior.”<sup>19</sup> According to Gustainis, the rhetorical techniques of demagoguery are personalized appeal, political pageantry, ad hominem attacks, specious (fallacious) argumentation, anti-intellectualism, and emotional appeals. Corbett and Connors offer a similar definition of demagoguery as the “exploitation of specious arguments . . . and rank emotional appeals to gain personal advantage rather than to promote public welfare.”<sup>20</sup> Corbett and Connors identify various kinds of fallacies that constitute specious argumentation, including half-truths, fact errors, either/or options, unjustified personal attacks (ad hominem), appealing to the emotions and prejudices of the public in order to divert them from rational thought about important political issues (ad populum), faulty analogy, and the red herring.<sup>21</sup>

Gustainis notes that demagoguery can surface only in a democracy because rhetorical abuse requires free speech. Lincoln lived during a time of increasing slavery agitation—a fearful time, thus conducive to demagoguery. Like many Americans, Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, his long-standing rival, tried to mitigate this agitation through political action and rhetoric. Douglas was active as a US Senator whose efforts were vital to the design and passage of both the Compromise of 1850 and the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act. The national firestorm over that 1854 legislation motivated Lincoln to return to politics and oppose its key principle of popular sovereignty—allowing local governments in new territories to decide for or against slavery. Both politicians then faced career crises. Douglas had to defend popular sovereignty and his opposition to the pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution in Kansas despite his party’s support of

it. Lincoln had to defend his opposition to slavery extension, the accusation that the Republican Party and he were radical abolitionists in favor of disunion, and the threat that his party would embrace Douglas for his opposition to the Lecompton Constitution. Rhetoric was the main weapon Lincoln and Douglas used against one another, resulting in much partisan criticism.

An overview of Lincoln's harshest critics and reactions to them is appropriate background to prepare this book's readers for its later, more-technical analyses. Lincoln's naysayers typically cite excessive ambition and racism as reasons for the demagoguery they allege against him. These detractors form what historian Don E. Fehrenbacher in 1982 called the anti-Lincoln tradition. Fehrenbacher also refers to this tradition as the anti-Lincoln cult, suggesting that its members possessed a monomania for discrediting Lincoln rather than seeking truth through objectivity. Some of the members of the anti-Lincoln cult named by Fehrenbacher are biographers and historians, including the twentieth-century "revisionists" who blamed political leaders, Lincoln included, for failing to prevent the Civil War. Fehrenbacher says that the political biases of the anti-Lincoln cult have led to flawed scholarship.

Among the anti-Lincoln cults Fehrenbacher describes are "the radicals of the 1960s," and he includes journalist Lerone J. Bennett Jr. in that group. In describing their aims, Fehrenbacher quotes from Bennett's 1968 explosive essay published in *Ebony* magazine, "Was Abe Lincoln a White Supremacist?": "On every issue related to blacks, he [Lincoln] was 'the very essence of the white supremacist with good intentions.' He came to emancipation reluctantly, under radical pressure, and, indeed, according to some cynics, may have 'issued the Proclamation to forestall more forcible action by Congress.' That is, his real intention may have been to prevent effective emancipation."<sup>22</sup> Fehrenbacher faults the scholarship of anti-Lincolnists:

In their use of evidence to support such judgments, radical writers were biased, selective, and often uncritical. Furthermore, they generally paid little attention to the limits of circumstance within which Lincoln had to work and the variety of considerations claiming his attention—such as the plain fact that proclaiming emancipation would have been a waste of time without military victory. But then the radicals of the 1960s were interested less in scholarly fairness than in making history serve the social causes to which they had committed themselves.<sup>23</sup>

Yet Fehrenbacher tempers his criticism:

And there was nothing new or corrupt in that point of view. The past is not an exclusive preserve of historians. It may legitimately be used to inspire social action. Lincoln himself did so, and Jefferson too, with spectacular success in the Declaration of Independence. The ethical problem arises when social polemics masquerade as historical scholarship, and that was sometimes the case in New Left evaluations of Lincoln.<sup>24</sup>

Fehrenbacher says those in the anti-Lincoln tradition range from the rhetorician M.E. Bradford to the iconoclast Gore Vidal to the provocative literary critic Edmund Wilson and to such psychohistorians as George B. Forgie and Dwight G. Anderson.

Beginning in the last quarter of the twentieth century, important questions debated in Lincoln studies have concerned members of both the anti-Lincoln tradition and his defenders. After Lerone J. Bennett Jr. fueled racist accusations against Lincoln in the 1968 essay, he spent thirty years researching and writing to support his thesis because it had come under attack. The result was *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* (2000). In that continued attack on Lincoln, Bennett also

attempted to discredit those who have championed Lincoln as the Great Emancipator and savior of the Union.

These and similar accusations have prompted refutations from historians Thomas L. Krannawitter and John M. Barr, among others. Krannawitter contends that Lincoln's detractors fail to grasp his purposes and strategies within the constraints he faced: "The most serious attacks on Lincoln are solely mistaken. The most urgent demands to knock Lincoln down in the estimate of the American mind are based on misunderstanding Lincoln's words and actions."<sup>25</sup> Barr is more aligned with Fehrenbacher's view that Lincoln's detractors attempt to denigrate him in order to advance a political agenda: "More often than not this agenda has been illiberal, even counterrevolutionary, in its aim to roll back or limit the liberty-expanding achievements of Lincoln and the antislavery movement during the Civil War and Reconstruction."<sup>26</sup>

Barr predicts that anti-Lincoln literature is an enduring feature of the American political tradition:

If the past 150 years are any indication, disgust with Lincoln will remain a permanent feature of the American political landscape, and his image will continue to be twisted and turned for different political ends. Of course, the form that such loathing takes will be determined by the specific discontents that exist in a particular historical era, as attitudes toward Lincoln have always been shaped by contemporary understandings of freedom, equality, and federal power.<sup>27</sup>

Krannawitter's and Barr's critiques underscore the need for close, further scrutiny of the publications of Lincoln's detractors.

Refutations of writers in the anti-Lincoln tradition have come mainly from historians, not rhetoricians, and typically emphasize the complaint that Lincoln's enemies quote

selectively from his writings, a demagogic technique often called cherry-picking. The negativity of Lincoln's harshest critics suggests they may use other demagogic methods besides cherry-picking, and the present study examines the anti-Lincoln writings of Edgar Lee Masters, Lerone J. Bennett Jr., and M.E. Bradford to assess the nature and extent of their rhetorical methods and findings, including justified criticism. One important, contemporary anti-Lincoln academic not included here is economist/historian Thomas J. DiLorenzo because his criticism is aimed at Lincoln's economic policies and because he does not much concern himself with Lincoln's rhetoric.

A discussion of the analytical methods and findings of a broad spectrum of Lincolnists should help us better understand their interpretations, Lincoln's discourse, as well as his political values, beliefs, and activity, including leadership initiatives.



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## Notes

### Preface

<sup>1</sup> Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Lincoln in Text and Context: Collected Essays* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 270.

<sup>2</sup> Don E. Fehrenbacher, ed., introduction to *Abraham Lincoln: A Documentary Portrait Through His Speeches and Writings* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1964), xxix.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of approaches to Lincoln's rhetoric being essentially interpretive is based on the theory of literary criticism known as Reader-Response Criticism. For an introduction to it, including examples and suggestions for further reading, see Charles E. Bressler, "Reader-Response Criticism" in *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed. (Upper-Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), 62–86.

<sup>4</sup> In mid-twentieth century Otto Eisenschiml published a controversial theory about Lincoln's assassination, but some Lincoln scholars scoffed at him because he was a chemist. Eisenschiml, chagrined at the biased rejection, retorted that scientists are more objective and fairer than Lincoln scholars. Benjamin P. Thomas quipped, "Eisenschiml should have realized that intolerance is no new thing among Lincoln biographers. The whole effort to get at the truth about this most tolerant of men has been marked by singular intolerance." Benjamin P. Thomas, *Portrait for Posterity: Lincoln and His Biographers* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 276.

<sup>5</sup> Books on Lincoln's discourse recognized in recent competition for the Lincoln Prize: In 2005 the Lincoln Prize was awarded to Allen C. Guelzo for *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation*, while second place went to Harold Holzer for *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech That Made Abraham Lincoln President*. In 2006 *The Eloquent President: A Portrait of Lincoln Through His Words* by Ronald C. White Jr. was a finalist, ranking higher than an honorable mention. In 2007 first place went to Douglas L. Wilson for *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words*. In 2009 Fred Kaplan earned an honorable mention for *Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer*. In 2014 first place was

awarded to Martin P. Johnson for *Writing the Gettysburg Address*. Such other books as Lewis E. Lehrman's *Lincoln at Peoria* (2008) have dealt with individual speeches and other writings, and have been well received.

<sup>6</sup> Gettysburg College, Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize, <https://www.gettysburg.edu/lincolnprize/>.

<sup>7</sup> Two important books treating Lincoln biography are Benjamin P. Thomas, *Portrait for Posterity: Lincoln and His Biographers* and Michael Burkholder, *100 Essential Lincoln Books* (New York: Turner Publishing Co., 2003). Articles on such major Lincoln biographers as Josiah Holland, Edgar Lee Masters, James G. Randall, and Benjamin P. Thomas appear in the *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*.

<sup>8</sup> Ronald C. White Jr., *The Eloquent President: A Portrait of Lincoln Through His Words* (New York: Random House, 2005), 424.

<sup>9</sup> Besides the books on Lincoln's individual compositions cited in supra note 5, other notable books, excluding those on the Emancipation Proclamation, are Gabor Boritt, *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech That Nobody Knows* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); Jared Peatman, *The Long Shadow of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013); Ronald C. White Jr., *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002); and Louis P. Masur, *Lincoln's Last Speech: Wartime Reconstruction and the Crisis of Reunion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

## Introduction

<sup>1</sup> Douglas L. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 3–4.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew King and Jim A. Kuypers, introduction, "Our Roots Run Deep," *Twentieth-Century Roots of Rhetorical Studies* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2001), ix.

<sup>3</sup> Edward P.J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (New York: Oxford University Press,

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1999), 1. This book, published in various editions, is an excellent primer on rhetoric and the history of its development in Western civilization.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 23–24. A knowledge of the three types of persuasive discourse in classical rhetoric is useful in understanding Lincoln’s rhetoric and how biographers and rhetoricians have treated it. Deliberative discourse, originally concerned with public affairs issues, “more generally . . . is that in which we seek to persuade someone to do something or to accept our point of view” (23). Forensic oratory refers to legal or judicial discourse, “but it can be extended to cover any kind of discourse in which a person seeks to defend or condemn someone’s actions” (23). Several terms have been used for the third type of oratory: epideictic, demonstrative, declamatory, panegyric, and ceremonial. In this type, “One is not so much concerned with persuading an audience as with pleasing it or inspiring it” (23). Lincoln’s political compositions typically combine deliberative and forensic qualities, and his ceremonial speeches include deliberative aspects.

<sup>5</sup> Theresa Enos, ed., *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient Times to the Information Age*, s.v., “Contextuality.” See also, Corbett and Connors, 17–23. Once communicative purpose and audience are well defined and the medium selected, content (including argumentation), structure/organization, and style (language features) can be developed and adapted accordingly.

<sup>6</sup> Corbett and Connors, 518.

<sup>7</sup> Corbett and Connors explain Aristotle’s non-artistic and artistic proofs. Non-artistic proofs do not originate with a speaker/writer but derive from such sources as laws and testimonials. Artistic proofs consist of deductive and inductive reasoning: “The deductive mode of arguing is commonly referred to by the term that Aristotle used, the *sylogism*. In rhetoric, the equivalent of the syllogism is the *enthymeme*. The rhetorical equivalent of *full induction* in logic is the *example*” (18). Corbett and Connors also assert that a knowledge of the fallacies in reasoning is useful in refutation and in avoiding deception (62).

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of the history and development of the theory, practice, and teaching of rhetoric in Lincoln's time, including the use of textbooks, see Nan Johnson, introduction, "A Profile of Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric," *Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric in North America* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 3–17.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of Lindley Murray's use of Blair's *Lectures*, see Robert Bray, *Reading with Lincoln* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 2010), 5–6. Bray's work is a painstaking effort to identify the many books that Lincoln read (or may have read), and Bray's discussion includes rating each on the likelihood that Lincoln read it or not. For a discussion of the rhetorical theory of Hugh Blair, including the influence of classical rhetoric on it, see Linda Ferreira-Buckley and S. Michael Halloran, eds., editors' introduction to Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), XV–LIV.

<sup>10</sup> Bray, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Corbett and Connors, 411–13.

<sup>12</sup> Nineteenth-century, Anglo-American education continued the classical tradition of emphasizing the study of grammar, rhetoric, and logic; and Lincoln may have known about the close relationship between grammar and rhetoric through his study of Kirkham's *English Grammar in Familiar Lectures* at New Salem because that source includes Kirkham's view of that relationship, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14070/14070-h/14070-h.htm#RHETORIC>. It follows that a Lincoln motivated to study grammar would also have been interested in rhetoric. Whether Lincoln read Blair's *Lectures* at New Salem is uncertain. Colonel Matthew Rogers lived just a few miles outside New Salem, and his family had a relatively large library that some scholars say Lincoln borrowed from. That library included Blair's *Lectures* (2 vols.). James T. Hickey, "Three R's in Lincoln's Education: Rogers, Riggin and Rankin," *The Collected Writings of James T. Hickey* (Springfield: The Illinois State Historical Society, 1990): 5–13. Robert Bray concludes it is very unlikely that Lincoln read Blair's *Lectures* as a separate work.

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Bray cites Henry B. Rankin's testimony that Blair's *Lectures* was "one of Lincoln's favorite books," but Bray admonishes that Rankin "is never a reliable informant on Lincoln." Bray, "What Abraham Lincoln Read—An Evaluative and Annotated List," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 28, no. 2 (Summer 2007), 39. Douglas L. Wilson notes: "Except for the passages on rhetoric in the textbooks he read as a young man, it is doubtful that Lincoln ever studied the art of persuasion as a formal discipline or read Aristotle's *Rhetoric*." Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 147. But as Ronald C. White Jr. has observed, "Lincoln's rhetoric embodies the principles of the ancient Greek philosopher" [Aristotle]. White, *The Eloquent President: A Portrait of Lincoln Through His Words* (New York: Random House, 2005), xxi. Some of Lincoln's contemporaries, including William H. Herndon, Henry Clay Whitney, and John T. Stuart, recalled that in the early 1850s Lincoln had been studying the related subject of logic in the form of Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*.

<sup>13</sup> Roy P. Basler, "Abraham Lincoln's Rhetoric," *American Literature* 11, no. 2 (May 1939), 171.

<sup>14</sup> David Zarefsky, "Rhetoric in Lincoln's Time," *Lincoln Lore*, no. 1894 (Fall 2008), 26. This article discusses the relationship between classical rhetoric and the "belletristic and elocutionary movements" as sources in the "rhetorical study of Lincoln's time" that could have influenced him.

<sup>15</sup> For information about Webster's education in classical rhetoric and his influence on Lincoln's rhetoric, see D. Leigh Henson, "Classical Rhetoric as a Lens for Reading the Key Speeches of Lincoln's Political Rhetoric, 1852–1856," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 35, no. 1 (Winter 2014), 13–15.

<sup>16</sup> Zarefsky, 26.

<sup>17</sup> J. Justin Gustainis, "Demagoguery and Political Rhetoric: A Review of the Literature," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1990), 155.

<sup>18</sup> Reinhard H. Luthin, *American Demagogues* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954), 355, quoted in Gustainis, 155.

<sup>19</sup> Gustainis, 158.

<sup>20</sup> Corbett and Connors, 25.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 62–71.

<sup>22</sup> Don E. Fehrenbacher, “The Anti-Lincoln Tradition,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 4, no. 1 (1982), 20.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 20–21.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Thomas L. Krannawitter, *Vindicating Lincoln: Defending the Politics of Our Greatest President* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 8.

<sup>26</sup> John McKee Barr, *Loathing Lincoln: An American Tradition from the Civil War to the Present* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2014), 3.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

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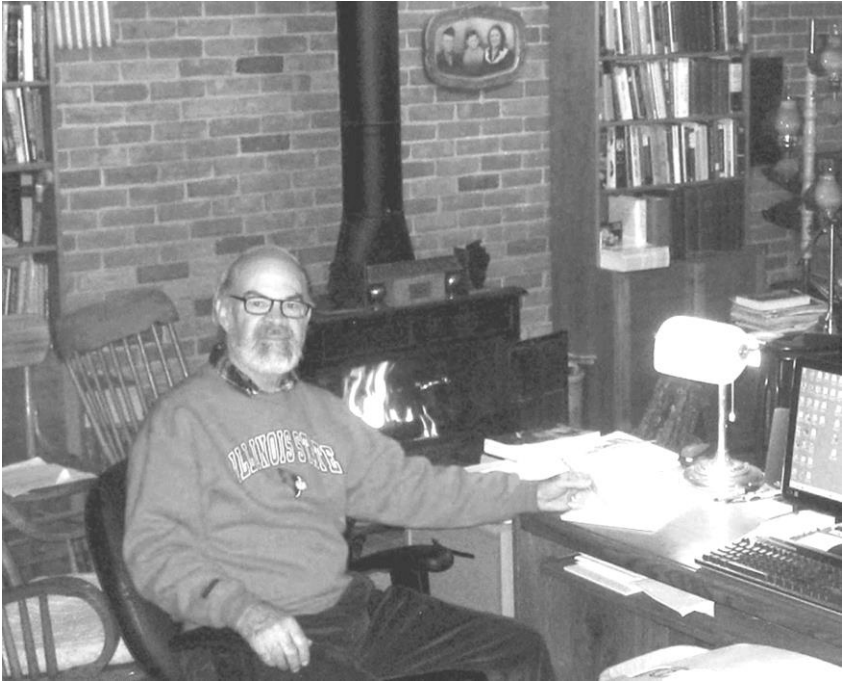
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