

Lincoln's Thought and Rhetoric

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George Kateb, *Lincoln's Political Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2015), 256 pp., \$24.95 cloth.

In a note to himself, Abraham Lincoln once defined the essence of democracy with a simple statement: “As I would not be a *slave*, so I would not be a *master*.” Is there more to the political thought of the savior of the American union and the emancipator of slaves? George Kateb, the William Nelson Cromwell Professor of Politics, Emeritus, at Princeton University, believes that what Lincoln thought politically and how he communicated these thoughts require more than a cursory reading to understand his deep moral convictions and deft political rhetoric.

Mindful that Lincoln's most famous words were delivered for a political purpose, Kateb argues that he used these words to conceal, as well as reveal, what he really believed because the problem of American slavery stirred fierce passions – he calls them “ferocities” (3) – on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line. His short book (218 pages) presents a strikingly original interpretation of Lincoln and the antebellum/Civil War era. Although this reviewer finds much with which to disagree, Kateb's account takes seriously the philosophical and theological rigor of America's most famous backwoods statesman, and raises important questions about the requirements of statesmanship in a self-governing régime.

Lincoln's Political Thought comprises seven chapters: the antebellum America of Lincoln's most prominent political activity (1854-65); Lincoln as a writer; human equality; race; the Constitution; military necessity

during the Civil War; and Lincoln's "world outlook" or theological politics. While these are key elements of Lincoln's political theory, Kateb diminishes the importance of the rule of law as an essential component of what Lincoln preached as a "political religion" necessary for the perpetuation of self-government. He rightly emphasizes Lincoln's devotion to human equality, the chief end which any "law-abiding" society must serve (56-57), and highlights Lincoln's "moral commitment to human equality" (xi) as central to his political project. However, in minimizing the importance of the rule of law in Lincoln's political rhetoric, he minimizes the fragility of American self-government as Lincoln saw it in the early antebellum years.

This last point goes a long way toward explaining Lincoln's "tactical dexterity in yoking the cause of black freedom to the cause of the Union" (xii). To his credit, Kateb acknowledges that Lincoln's attempt to end slavery was a rarity for the majority white America of his day, with its pervasive racial bigotry toward blacks, slave or free (xi). He is one of the few interpreters of antebellum America to observe that free states were to be marveled at, not slave states, because of the widespread racial bigotry (13). Moreover, he is right to point out how serious white southerners were in defending slavery insofar as they attempted to break up the union – or "secede," as they termed it – through first political and then eventually military measures in order to preserve the peculiar institution (14).

Still, Kateb's scant sympathy for southern whites who fought to preserve their control over blacks gives short shrift to their longstanding fear of black reprisals. For example, he does not accept Thomas Jefferson's defense of white reticence to emancipate slaves as simply a plea for uneasy self-preservation on the part of admittedly unjust but outnumbered whites: to wit, "But as it is, we have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other" (Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, 22 April 1820). Rather, Kateb argues "the necessity for maintaining slavery was not physical or not only physical but

cultural" (83). But this ignores the impact of the Haitian Revolution at the turn of the nineteenth century and Nat Turner's Rebellion in 1831, events that eventually stymied southern white efforts in the United States to emancipate slaves long before Lincoln became a national political figure.

Kateb argues further that Lincoln's rhetorical magnanimity towards white slave owners "was so contorted it was spurious" and amounted to an "imputation of goodness" (28, 29). This umbrage causes Kateb to misunderstand why Lincoln's main political target was not unrepentant southern slave owners but complacent northerners like free-state Illinois' U.S. Senator Stephen A. Douglas. Lincoln's critique of Douglas's "popular sovereignty" policy, which assumed neutrality on the slave question and insisted only on the right of whites at the local level (state or territorial) to decide the question, indicates that the most urgent challenge to the march of freedom in the United States was the temptation of white northerners to become indifferent to the plight of blacks in the federal territories. What made Douglas's profession not to care about slavery becoming legal in the territories so insidious was that slavery's becoming national did not require a full-throated defense of the peculiar institution; rather, simply promote the acquiescence on the part of free-state whites in the enslavement of blacks in the territories, and eventually those territories would become additional slave states of the American union.

Lincoln argued that what was once viewed and treated as a necessary evil had, to be sure, become "a positive good" in the South (to quote John C. Calhoun), but that problem could not be addressed directly in the short run because of the federal nature of the United States. Slavery was a state institution, and therefore could not be abolished by Congress short of a constitutional amendment. This meant that the spread of slavery or freedom in America would be decided by the votes of northern whites, who according to Lincoln could use federal authority to ban slavery in the federal territories: what was owned by all could be regulated by all. But under the spell of Stephen Douglas, they would

determine slavery's fate not by moral right but by mere self-interest – and that of the few who could profit by taking black slaves into the territories. If free-state whites agreed with Douglas that Congress had no authority to regulate the domestic affairs of the territories, then his “declared indifference” would actually represent “covert *real zeal* for the spread of slavery” (Lincoln's 1854 address at Peoria, Illinois). Kateb's misreading of the Peoria address, as well as Lincoln's famous debates with Douglas in 1858, leads him to conclude that “Lincoln was hiding the truth or hiding from it” (35). While Kateb acknowledges the intransigence of white racism, which he notes was strong enough to last at least until the 1950s and the modern civil rights movement's triumphs of the 1960s (92), he does not see how this history of racial bigotry shows the adroitness with which Lincoln had to speak publicly about the rights of blacks in the face of prejudiced whites – especially northern, free-state whites.

Regarding Lincoln's intentions as the incoming president, Kateb believes Lincoln rejected compromise categorically and was therefore “at war from the start” (20). However, a more fundamental issue was at stake: namely, the nature of republican government. Lincoln had campaigned on a policy of no extension of slavery into the federal territories: for the electoral winner to give up that policy in the face of southern threats of secession would be to concede to the losers of a free election. As Lincoln declared just a week before issuing his preliminary emancipation proclamation, “We already have an important principle to rally and unite the people in the fact that constitutional government is at stake. This is a fundamental idea, going down about as deep as any thing.” In short, constitutional government, operating by the consent of the governed, requires good winners and good losers.

Kateb does not appreciate that Lincoln's refusal to compromise on slavery extension (which was far short of insisting on slavery's abolition, at least at the outset of his presidency) was actually a refusal to compromise on the very operation of self-government. This is why Lincoln equated secession with “anarchy” in his First Inaugural Address

(4 March 1861) and why in his Address to Congress in Special Session (4 July 1861) he explained that its principle was "one of disintegration, and upon which no Government can possibly endure." Kateb need only recall that the Republican Party only four years earlier had lost its first national bid for the White House. But instead of calling for northern free states to leave the American union, Republicans acceded to the doughface James Buchanan while continuing their efforts to shape public opinion until the next presidential election.

When Kateb gets around to criticizing the U.S. Constitution, the reader is not surprised, for doing so is tantamount to criticizing Lincoln, given his reverence for it. Here Kateb again underestimates the federal nature of the constitution. Channeling the muse of William Lloyd Garrison, Kateb says the pre-Civil War Constitution was "unworthy of obedience" (106) because of its compromises with slavery. Contrasting the evils of slavery and disunion – "Union was preferred to the most elementary justice" (117) – Kateb fails to appreciate the enormity that disunion would have been to both blacks and whites at the time of the founding. Simply put, Kateb does not believe the evidence supports the American founders as putting slavery on the course of ultimate extinction, as Lincoln declared through the latter 1850s. Unfortunately, Kateb's explication of *Federalist* No. 54 (116), where James Madison adopts a fictive voice to defend the slavery compromises of the proposed constitution of 1787, misses the point. As Harry Jaffa once wrote of the founding constitutional compromise, "To have asked for more would not have been to gain more but rather to lose everything" (*A New Birth of Freedom* 227).

Lincoln's anti-slavery convictions were the very thing that informed his devotion to the Constitution, for like the founders, he believed that but for the American union, there would be no freedom – for whites or blacks. This was no innovation of Lincoln's but rather the abiding mantra of Americans who knew their colonial and revolutionary history. Individual freedom required political independence from foreign powers; political independence required domestic unity. To keep the

union of American colonies-turned-states required that compromises be made regarding slavery. As Lincoln once said, “We had slavery among us, we could not get our Constitution unless we permitted them to remain in slavery, we could not secure the good we did secure if we grasped for more, and having by necessity submitted to that much, it does not destroy the principle that is the charter of our liberties” (Speech at Chicago, 10 July 1858).

Kateb’s most important contribution to explicating Lincoln’s political thought is his discussion of Lincoln’s “providential determinism” (4). This entails an examination of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, which means Lincoln’s beliefs about religion, especially as it impinged upon the political crisis that led to a civil war and complicated that war’s resolution. As a war that claimed over 600,000 lives drew to a close, the re-elected president set the bar high for himself by tackling the subject of theodicy to forge a common memory of the conflict: namely, how the will of God manifested itself in a war no one really wanted and an emancipation no one seriously expected. Lincoln proposed that the devastating cost to both sides in lives and property could be interpreted as divine punishment for the national sin of slavery.

Kateb keenly focuses on Lincoln’s grappling with man’s free will in light of the sovereignty of God, at least as Lincoln portrays the deity. Kateb attempts to unpack the mystery of the juxtaposing intentions of God and human beings. For starters, he does not believe Lincoln’s religious utterances can be believed at face value. He characterizes Lincoln as “always a free spirit” (188), which is not a bad place to start for a man known as a skeptic early in life but not where one can end, or at least not readily without considering the evidence, which is scant in Kateb’s presentation. Such an important aspect of Lincoln’s “world outlook” deserves fewer assertions by Kateb and more consideration of words by Lincoln, which are ample when it comes to references or allusions to God and the Bible, especially during his presidency.

But Kateb does not just pick on Lincoln, but also goes after the Almighty for supposedly “not obey[ing] his own moral commandments,

especially against killing, and [...] teaches the wicked idea that retaliation is justice" (193). However, Kateb asserts but never explains why "an eye for an eye" is "the reproduction of immorality" (194). Much like his early comment that "evil done to prevent or remove evil remains evil and is not washed clean by a good result" (xiii), Kateb assumes that the reader agrees with his moral calculus.

To his credit, he perceives the mercy at the heart of the Second Inaugural. This is easy to miss for those who bristle at Lincoln's statement regarding "this mighty scourge of war." Of the American people, Kateb argues: "at the end of the war, if they took seriously the scriptural God they professed at his most vengeful, a murderous (we could say genocidal) God, they must see that they deserved the worst possible retribution, even worse than they endured" (211). The war may have been long, but slavery had existed in America much longer. If the God of most Americans chose a civil war to punish the nation for the sin of slavery, in Lincoln's rendering, its lasting only four years would be a divine mercy in the grand scheme of things. This mercy should therefore inspire a similar charity by Americans towards each other regardless of the side on which they fought.

Kateb notes that Lincoln "hoped that the cost would not be equal to what was owed" (216). That would have entailed the demise of American self-government, the only true republic in the mid-nineteenth century world. En route to his first inauguration as president, Lincoln declared, "I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle." Even with its many provocative statements, unsupported claims, and significant omissions, *Lincoln's Political Thought* deserves a careful read for its serious consideration of Lincoln's most important political principles and theological reflections.

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Work Cited

Jaffa, Harry V. *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.

