

Lincoln's Ethics

Unlike many important leaders and historical figures, Abraham Lincoln is generally regarded as a singularly good and morally virtuous human being. *Lincoln's Ethics* assesses Lincoln's moral character and his many morally fraught decisions regarding slavery and the rights of African Americans, as well as his actions and policies as commander in chief during the Civil War. Some of these decisions and policies have been the subject of considerable criticism. Lincoln undoubtedly possessed many important moral virtues, such as kindness and magnanimity, to a very high degree. Despite this, there are also grounds to question the goodness of his character. Many fault him as a husband, father, and son, and many claim that he was a racist. Thomas L. Carson explains Lincoln's virtues and assesses these criticisms.

Thomas L. Carson is Professor of Philosophy at Loyola University Chicago. He is the author of three other books – *The Status of Morality* (1984), *Value and the Good Life* (2000), and *Lying and Deception: Theory and Practice* (2010). He is also the co-editor (with Paul Moser), of two anthologies: *Morality and the Good Life* (1997) and *Moral Relativism* (2001). Carson was previously a member of the editorial boards of *American Philosophical Quarterly*, *Public Affairs Quarterly*, *Journal of Happiness Studies*, and *Business Ethics Quarterly*.

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THOMAS L. CARSON



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For Judy, with love and gratitude

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“It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just
God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of
other men’s faces; but let us judge not that we not be judged.”
Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address

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Part of Chapter 2 was presented to the American Philosophical Association in 2014. I thank Todd Franklin for his helpful comments and for pushing me to say more about Lincoln's letter to Horace Greeley. Thanks also to Elizabeth Anderson for helpful comments during and after my talk.

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How This Book Came to Be

Because some might wonder how a philosopher came to write a book about Lincoln, I offer the following account.

Since grade school, I have had a very strong interest in history. During junior high and high school, I read many history books, often to the exclusion of working on my homework. In college, I fell in love with philosophy and, for a time, stopped reading much history. Then, in 1974, during the middle of my time in graduate school, I purchased a battered edition of Carl Sandburg's six-volume biography of Lincoln in a used bookstore in Providence, Rhode Island. I loved this book. Reading it was a pleasure I cherished every evening for a long time. I was then in the thrall of a rather facile dismissal of Lincoln as a racist who did not care nearly enough about slavery, this despite the cogent arguments of my friend David Braun to the contrary. After reading Sandburg's biography I found Lincoln to be a much more impressive and compelling person than I had imagined. Jeff Tulis suggested that I next read Lord Charnwood's beautiful and appreciative biography of Lincoln. After that, I continued to read a number of other books about Lincoln.

In the late 1970s, David Braun and I went to the Lincoln Memorial. I read the words of Lincoln's Second Inaugural

Address carefully for the first time and was deeply moved. It is by far the most beautiful and compelling political speech I have ever read. I noticed that other people reading it were also moved (some were in tears). My wife Judy was also moved by the words of this speech when we went to the memorial several years later.

Once I started teaching, I continued to read history regularly most evenings for recreation and escape. This became my most serious hobby. I made use of historical cases in my classes about war and morality and in some of my writing about ethics.

By the time I reached the age of fifty, I was spending as much time reading history as philosophy. I enjoyed this very much, but this indulgence seemed somewhat detrimental to my career. My 2010 book on lying and deception includes several chapters that discuss historical examples and issues in detail. This required me to do a great deal of historical reading and research. I greatly enjoyed this work, though it proved to be difficult.

Starting in the late 1980s, a very large number of excellent books about Lincoln and the Civil War began to appear. I read many of these, beginning with James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* and David Herbert Donald's *Lincoln*, and my interest in Lincoln and the Civil War deepened considerably. I noticed the following in the preface to Donald's *Lincoln*:

My interpretation of Lincoln's political philosophy and religious views has been much influenced by the ideas of John Rawls, who collaborated with me in teaching the first seminar ever offered on Abraham Lincoln at Harvard University. (p. 17)

I would have given anything to be in that class and I thought that it would be wonderful to be able to teach such a course. Some years later, William Lee Miller's book *Lincoln's Virtues* appeared. It occurred to me that I could use this book as a main text for a course on Lincoln. At this point, it seemed

possible for me to teach such a class by myself, but the press of other commitments postponed that project.

As the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth drew near in 2007–8, I decided that I should teach a class on Lincoln's ethics. Ted Karamanski and I organized a symposium on Lincoln's character at Loyola University Chicago in fall 2008. Douglas Wilson and Kent Graham gave wonderfully stimulating talks. Eric Foner, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and Joshua Wolf-Shenk also presented splendid talks about Lincoln at Loyola during that period.

In fall 2008 and 2010 I taught my class on Lincoln's ethics. I had wonderful discussions with some outstanding students, several of whom are named in the Acknowledgments. In late 2009, I received an invitation from my alma mater, Saint Olaf College, to give the 2010–11 Belgium Lectures. We discussed three possible topics for my lectures. The last one that I mentioned was Lincoln's ethics. They indicated a strong preference for that topic, even though it was the topic I was least prepared to speak on and I had to stretch myself to prepare the lectures in time. They formed a detailed outline for much of the present book.