



Rebel Underground

Sons of Confederate Veterans
Major John C. Hutto Camp #443
Jasper, Alabama

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The Major John C. Hutto Camp's January meeting
will be in Jasper, Alabama on

Sunday, 17 March 2024 at 2:00PM

Meeting will be at the
First United Methodist Church's Adult Center

March's Newsletter includes an article by David Gordon

*Not Altogether Honest Abe
Lincoln's God:
How Faith Transformed a President and a Nation*

Mises Wire
Not Altogether Honest Abe
Friday Philosophy with David Gordon
Mises Wire • David Gordon
Lincoln's God: How Faith Transformed a President and a Nation
by Joshua Zeitz - Viking, 2023; 313 pp.

Joshua Zeitz, a contributing writer to Politico, has written a very useful book. It belongs to an increasingly common genre: books that are very favorable to Abraham Lincoln, in some cases approaching a deification of him, which nevertheless present material that show Lincoln in a less-than-flattering light.

Lincoln's God is just such a book. Zeitz has done substantial research on Christianity in America during the nineteenth century and offers valuable insights about Lincoln's religious beliefs. Lincoln grew up in a Calvinist home, but in his teenage years, he rejected Christianity and indeed scoffed at it. This did not prevent him from lying about his religious doubts in order to win elections. He did however take from the strict Calvinist predestinationism of his father Thomas a belief that the world is governed by fixed deterministic laws, though Abraham Lincoln took these laws to be the expression of an impersonal force rather than a personal God. During the War between the States, he tended to personify this force, viewing himself as its instrument to punish America (not just the South) for the evils of slavery. Some of us, though not Zeitz, will be inclined to view this belief as delusional, throwing into question Lincoln's fitness to guide a nation.

Concerning Lincoln's belief in Providence, Zeitz says:

How deeply Lincoln absorbed his parents' hyper-Calvinist theology is

unknown. Certainly he would have attended sermons and church meetings with his parents, and from one of the first books he absorbed, *The Kentucky Preceptor*—a handbook on Christian morality and oration—he learned that “every occurrence in the universe is Providential . . . to select individual facts, as more directed by the hand of providence than others, because we think we see a particular good purpose answered by them, is an infallible inlet to error and superstition.” However far he traveled from organized Christianity, that idea seemed to stick with him until his death.

By the time Lincoln’s family arrived in New Salem, Illinois, in 1831, Lincoln had become an open scoffer at Christianity:

Years later, friends remembered that he would privately “ridicule” such Christian doctrines as the Immaculate Conception, virgin birth, and the Trinity. . . . He was wont “to pick up the Bible—read a passage—and then Comment on it—show its falsity—and its follies on the ground of Reason—would then show its own self-made and self-uttered Contradictions and would in the End—finally ridicule it and as it were Scoff at it.

My purpose in discussing this is not to condemn Lincoln for his views about Christianity but rather to set the background for his hypocrisy in denying that he was a skeptic in order to win political office. (If the report is accurate, Lincoln does deserve credit for realizing that the Immaculate Conception and the virgin birth are different doctrines.)

When he ran for Congress, his opponent brought up his reputation as a scoffer. If Lincoln had admitted his views, this would have ended his chances of winning the election—at the time, most people thought badly of atheists. The issue became more pressing when a rumor circulated that Lincoln has written a book critical of the Bible. Lincoln’s solution was simple. He lied about it:

Whether the incident occurred or not, Lincoln felt compelled during his congressional bid, more than ten years after the fact, to address the rumors. In July 1846 he issued a “Handbill Replying to Charges of Infidelity,” in which he forcefully denied that he was an “open scoffer at Christianity.” . . . This claim was, of course, most likely false.

During the War between the States, Lincoln frequently invoked God and quoted the Bible. He had not become a Christian, but many evangelical Christians in the North viewed the war as a holy crusade to punish the South, and Lincoln needed their votes: “Always a shrewd student of popular opinion, he understood that an already religious nation had rallied to the Union cause and ascribed to it considerable religious meaning. His rhetorical pivot was surely calibrated in some part for his audience.”

Lincoln’s view of the role of Providence differed from that of many Northern Protestant ministers. He didn’t see Providence as inflicting punishment only on the South. The ways of Providence are inscrutable, but although this is true, he knew that he had been called by Providence to carry out judgment on the entire country:

At Gettysburg, the president channeled popular religious conviction to ascribe meaning to the war. . . . But his spirituality moved against the currents of his countrymen. As it became more common for Protestant clergy and lay leaders to conceive of the war as a holy writ, Lincoln grew convinced that God’s will was imperceptible to humankind, and that his own freedom of action was limited and ordained. In effect, he inched closer to his parents’ religious fatalism—the very fatalism he had rejected in his youth.

Lincoln’s wife confirmed that he thought this: “Mary Todd Lincoln . . . would later observe that her husband believed that ‘what is to be will be, and no cares

of ours can arrest nor reverse the decree.”

How the belief that people cannot know God’s ways is to be reconciled with Lincoln’s viewing himself as the instrument of God in carrying on the war is not immediately evident, but this is in fact what Lincoln thought:

It was one matter to believe in a divine plan, indiscernible to the men and women acting the script. But this did not strip people entirely of agency. Even as he remained uncertain how the war would end, or which side God favored, Lincoln grew sure according to [his friend James] Gillespie that God had chosen him for a specific purpose—“he came to believe himself an instrument foreordained” to save the Union and end slavery.

Another wartime political leader of a great nation said, “I go the way that providence dictates with the assurance of a sleepwalker.” I’ll leave it to readers to find out who it was.

David Gordon is Senior Fellow at the Ludwig von Mises Institute. He was educated at UCLA, where he earned his PhD in history. He is the author of *Resurrecting Economics*, *An Introduction to Economic Reasoning*, *An Austro-Libertarian View* (three volumes), and *Resurrecting Marx*. He is also editor of *Secession, State, and Liberty* and co-editor of *H. B. Acton's Morals of Markets and Other Essays*.

Dr. Gordon is the editor of the *Mises Review* and the *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, and a contributor to such journals as *Analysis*, the *International Philosophic Quarterly*, the *Philosophical Quarterly*, the *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, and the *Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics*.

Dissecting Lincoln
Friday Philosophy with David Gordon
Mises Wire • David Gordon

Thomas DiLorenzo, the president of the Mises Institute, has already reviewed Paul C. Graham's *Nonsense on Stilts: The Gettysburg Address and Lincoln's Imaginary Nation* (Shotwell Publishing, 2024) in characteristically excellent fashion, but the book is so insightful that some further comments are warranted. It is clear that Graham has a philosophical turn of mind and is a master of linguistic analysis.

His skill is amply on display in his dissection of Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address, delivered in March 1861. In that address, Lincoln endeavored to respond to the main arguments that secession was constitutional. Graham calls attention to a crucial point in the beginning of the passage in which Lincoln does this. He said: "I hold that in contemplation of universal law and of the Constitution the Union of these States is perpetual."

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