

# Abraham Lincoln's Statesmanship and the Limits of Liberal Democracy

Jon D. Schaff

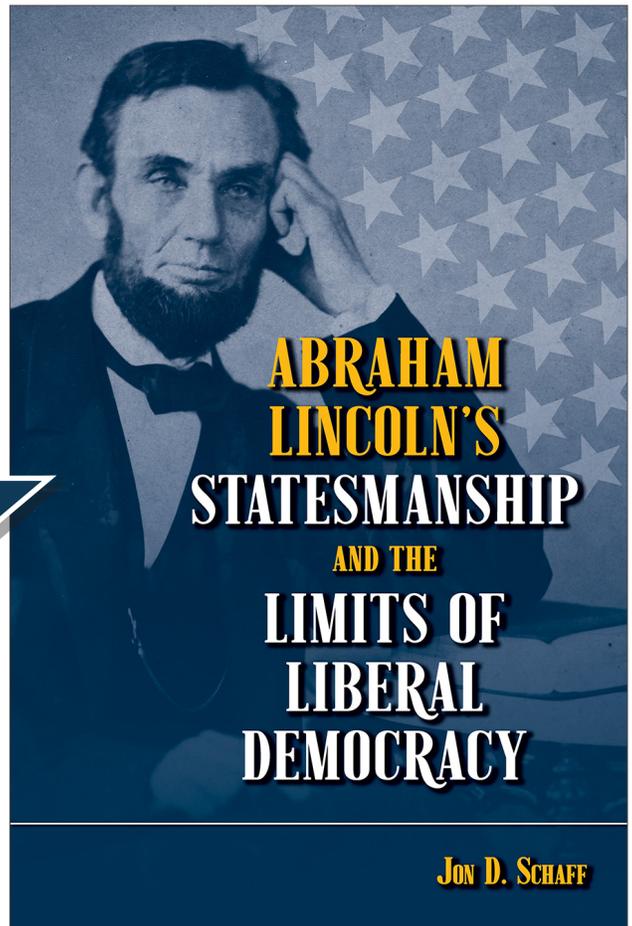
"Schaff's book should be read by anyone interested in Lincoln, the politics of the Civil War, and the enduring possibilities and challenges of presidential statesmanship in American democracy."—Jason R. Jividen, author of *Claiming Lincoln: Progressivism, Equality, and the Battle for Lincoln's Legacy in Presidential Rhetoric*

## Lincoln's statesmanship as a guide for a more civil and effective democracy

This bold, groundbreaking study of American political development assesses the presidency of Abraham Lincoln through the lenses of governmental power, economic policy, expansion of executive power, and natural rights to show how Lincoln not only believed in the limitations of presidential power but also dedicated his presidency to restraining the scope and range of it.

Though Lincoln's presidency is inextricably linked to the Civil War, and he is best known for his defense of the Union and executive wartime leadership, Lincoln believed that Congress should be at the helm of public policy making. Likewise, Lincoln may have embraced limited government in vague terms, but he strongly supported effective rule of law and distribution of income and wealth. Placing the Lincoln presidency within a deeper and more meaningful historical context, *Abraham Lincoln's Statesmanship and the Limits of Liberal Democracy* highlights Lincoln's significance in the development of American power institutions and social movement politics.

Schaff explains how Lincoln's views on prudence, moderation, natural rights, and economics contain the notion of limits, then views Lincoln's political and presidential leadership through the same lens. He compares Lincoln's views on governmental powers with the defense of unlimited government by twentieth-century progressives and shows how Lincoln's theory of labor anticipated twentieth-century distributist economic thought. Schaff's unique exploration falls squarely between historians who consider Lincoln a protoprogressive and those who say his presidency was a harbinger of industrialized, corporatized America.



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## Introduction

### Part I. Lincoln and the Architecture of Democracy's Soul

#### 1. Lincoln and the Political Virtues of Prudence and Moderation

Using Lincoln's early speeches "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions" and "Washington Temperance Address," this chapter establishes Lincoln's defense of moderation and prudence as chief political virtues. Examples from Lincoln's political career illustrate this dedication.

#### 2. Lincoln and the Defense of Natural Rights

Lincoln's defense of natural rights as a limitation on majority rule is outlined. Focusing on Lincoln's long debate with Stephen Douglas, the chapter shows Lincoln's argument for natural rights as an antidote to a politics of mere self-interest.

#### 3. Lincoln's Political Economy in the American Tradition

This chapter places Lincoln in the Hamiltonian and Whig tradition of strong government. But Lincoln's thought can easily be distinguished from the principled defense of unlimited government by early twentieth-century Progressives. A concluding discussion of Lincoln's theory of labor shows he believed that even in economics, self-interest is not the only guide.

### Part II. The Domestic Lincoln: Presidential Power and the Second American Revolution

#### 4. Lincoln and the Second American Revolution

A history and analysis of the Republican realignment of the 1850s shows, contra McPherson, that neither was economics a primary motivator nor was Lincoln a major organizer of that realignment. Lincoln's eventual role as the first Republican president is not sufficient evidence for McPherson's "revolutionary" thesis.

#### 5. Whigs and Lincoln: A Realignment Reconsidered

The American Whig Party is briefly chronicled and the reason for its collapse and what role Lincoln may have had in forming the Republican Party that replaced the Whigs are examined.

#### 6. The Domestic Lincoln and Congressional Government

Presented here are legislative history of five key pieces of legislation arising from the Civil War Congresses—the Homestead Act, the Land-Grant College Act, the Pacific Railroad Act, the National Bank Act, and the Legal Tender Act—and an examination of whether Lincoln led congress as a modern president or a more deferential one.

## Conclusion

Lincoln teaches valuable lessons for twenty-first-century democratic citizens. His prudence and moderation recognize the necessity of democratic statesman who are adept in teaching the people to limit their demands. Lincoln's presidency also runs contrary to the excesses of the modern plebiscitary presidency. Lincoln teaches that a love of liberal democracy must of necessity be a moderate love.

Acknowledgments

Notes

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