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5.0 out of 5 stars

WOW! This is a great book!, May 1, 2009

By James Durney (Tampa Bay area)

(TOP 500 REVIEWER)

Our Abraham Lincoln is the Great Emancipator, the sure hand that guides America through the Civil War, struck down as we entered the promised land of peace. A wise and wonderful man of courage and strength, an eloquent voice that defines our better nature, a guide, a comfort in time of crises, and need. Our Abraham Lincoln "is a marble man, a mythic icon enshrined in a magnificent twenty-foot tall statue that looks down on visitors from beneath the dome of his Memorial, a Greek temple modeled after the Temple of Zeus."

The book's Abraham Lincoln is about seven feet tall, by today's height standards, topped with a shock of unruly black hair, clad in an ill-fitting suit, unattractive if not ugly, speaking in a high voice with a distant western twang. He is not socially adept, prone to bluntness and seems not to consider the feelings of his peers. The man in the middle, he is trying to hold things together while being attacked for going fast/slow in the right/wrong direction from all sides at the same time.

That both portraits are Abraham Lincoln and that the author can reconcile these different ideas shows what a well-written book this is. This was a slow and often difficult read for me. Not because the author did a poor job but because I had to reconcile my Lincoln to the actual man and the times. We have all read about the political and personal attacks on Lincoln during his presidency. We have read that the years after his death were much kinder to him than the years he was President. I know we do not understand how different these two eras are and how much the image of Lincoln has changed. This book is a major step in giving the reading public that understanding.

Larry Tagg gives us a short introduction covering Lincoln's nomination and election. Combined with a look at American life and politics in the years leading up to the election of 1860, we have a good foundation. The book concludes with an explanation of constructing the Lincoln of legend and how many factions found building the legend useful. In between is a very solid political history of Lincoln's administration, the negative reactions and personal attacks. Lincoln's election is not the result of personal popularity; he receives fewer votes than the loser in past elections, but the collapse of the national political parties. While not on

Southern ballots, he is not popular in the Democratic strongholds of major Northern cities nor is he the choice of the Radical Republicans.

Negative reactions and comments start right after the election and never stop. The Baltimore Plot is just the first incident that provides the press with material. Once the war starts the democratic papers are largely silenced by the combination of patriotic mobs and government action. The author handles this story in a nonjudgmental tone avoiding any fiery rhetoric on this highly charged subject. This is one of the strongest points in the book, as the story has many sensitive subjects. Another well-written comprehensive section is the election of 1864; Lincoln's nomination, Chase and the role of the Radicals make an exciting mix. The author traces each of these in both the press and historically giving the reader a ringside seat on the double-dealings, back stabbings and ultimately Lincoln's victory. This is well written, informative and enjoyable reading. In an excellent book, this was my favorite section.

Another excellent section of the book is the fight over slavery and emancipation within the Republican Party and Lincoln's Administration. This very strong writing will upset many people. Lincoln is the man in the middle, determined to keep the coalition of War Democrats, Border States, Republicans and Abolitionists focused on preserving the Union. The Radical Republicans and Abolitionists launch some of the harshest and most persistent attacks on him. This is an excellent history of not only the fight for emancipation but the start of Reconstruction politics too.

Another well-done area is the fight between an activist President and a Congress in the process of losing control to him. It is easy for us to miss how much power Lincoln took from Congress and how bitterly they resented this. That they were the same political party seems to have occurred to many rarely.

This is a wonderful and unique look at Lincoln's presidency. The book is full of information, thought provoking and readable. You may find that it is necessary to reread paragraphs to reconcile "our" Lincoln with the "real" Lincoln. I did and knew that I was really learning each time that happened.