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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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“THE REDEEMER PRESIDENT OF THESE STATES”

February 12, 2009 is the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. Born in Kentucky and reared in Indiana, his family came to Illinois when he was a very young man and it was here that he lived until February of 1861 when he headed to Washington to be inaugurated as the country's sixteenth president. So those three states, at least, ought to have been planning for a major celebration this month. Of course, the boys of Springfield are preoccupied with other things just now – as I write this, Governor Blagojevich has been impeached and is awaiting his trial in the state senate – so we may be on our own with regard to how best to observe the bicentennial of the birth of the nation's greatest president.

That is not the way it should be, not in the state that calls itself “Land of Lincoln,” but there may be some good effects from it. When we show up at a memorial planned by somebody else, it can be very good, but if we are forced to work up and work out our own way of remembering the man on his two hundredth birthday, it may end up meaning more and doing more for us. This is especially true if we can use this year to read more deeply in the life of Lincoln, to take our knowledge of him to the next level. This will also increase our appreciation of and gratitude for him. No matter how defective or spotty our education in American history – and the educational surveys all assure us that history is the worst taught subject in American schools – Lincoln looms very large in our minds, and the more we read of him the larger he grows.

But where to start? There are so many books written on Lincoln, his life, his presidency, his conduct of the Civil War, his family. If we had the time to read a book a day on Lincoln for the whole year we would not even make a dent in the available literature. With so many good books on Lincoln, one hesitates to make a single recommendation, but I will. The best, most helpful Lincoln book that I have found is *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, written by Allen C. Guelzo and published by Eerdmans.

The book is a biography, but not a conventional biography. While not ignoring the external facts of Lincoln's life, it focuses much more on Lincoln's intellectual and spiritual development, and this is a level that not many authors have managed to reach. Lincoln's achievement was huge: he conducted a multi-theater Civil War, preserved the federal union, emancipated several million people held in the bondage of slavery, and molded the Republican party into an institution that would dominate American politics for the next seventy-five years. The magnitude of this accomplishment dazzles the mind and demands of us so much effort just to see what he did that there is very little energy left in us to wonder just how he pulled it all off. What intellectual gifts, what ideas and beliefs, what political opinions and philosophical assumptions, what religious understanding did Lincoln have and use as he faced the immense challenges before him? Guelzo thinks that the sheer greatness of Lincoln's achievement “has always tended to obscure the intellectual materials from which it

was constructed,” and he intends his book to be an exploration of those “intellectual materials.”

Economics is the key to understanding Lincoln’s worldview, and Lincoln’s own life experience is the key to understanding his approach to economics. In early 19th century America there were two dominant, antagonistic economic visions of the United States. The older vision found its most powerful proponent in Thomas Jefferson, in the last month of whose presidency Abraham Lincoln was born. Jefferson firmly believed that a democratic republic could not exist without a virtuous citizenry. Greed posed the greatest threat to virtue, and so the greatest aid to virtue was an economic system that restricted as much as possible the opportunities for a citizen to act on his greedy impulses. Subsistence farming and a largely agrarian economy were the linchpins of Jefferson’s economic system. There would, of course, have to be merchants and manufacturers, but the fewer of these the better, and the ideal of Jeffersonian agrarianism was a free man on his own farm, making most of what he needed. In a Jeffersonian economy, an expanding population required an expanding country so that there would always be land available for the increasing population. This economy also had a role, a prominent one, for slave labor.

Abraham Lincoln was born into a family that lived the Jeffersonian ideal. His father moved from Kentucky to Indiana to Illinois in quest of more and better land, and all along the way the life of the family was that of the subsistence farmer. They grew most of their own food, raised most of their own meat animals, wove most of their own cloth, and made most of their own farm implements. At a young age, Abraham came to hate this life. Decades before Karl Marx began writing about “the idiocy of rural life,” Lincoln felt in his blood that that’s exactly

what it was, and he wanted to get away from it. And he did. As soon as he could do so, he left his family on the farm to try his hand at something else in the town and the city.

Thus Lincoln, prodded by his own negative, first-hand experience of the Jeffersonian model, came to embrace the other economic view. At the same time Jefferson was hymning the rugged, yeoman farmer, Alexander Hamilton was hammering out a very different vision of America’s future, one based less on agriculture than on manufacturing and trade. Hamilton’s vision was of a much more dynamic country, a country in which the people were not tied to the land but were free to move about, to try different things, to sell their labor or their talents or their ideas to the highest bidder and to make their way free and clear in the cash and credit economy that would always afford more opportunity for self-betterment than life on the farm. The Hamiltonian notion, as a political program, was advocated by the Federalist party. The Federalists did not survive much beyond 1800, but in the 1820’s and 30’s those ideas formed the center of another party, the Whigs. Originally a break-away group from Jefferson’s Democratic party, the Whigs collapsed in the 1850’s, but their ideas continued on in the new Republican party.

Lincoln turned out to be a pretty poor businessman and a worse entrepreneur. He had a part interest in a couple of general stores and other business ventures and none of them panned out. But he believed in the Whig political economy and eventually found his place in it as a lawyer. He had a lot of clients who were farmers and small businessmen, but as a lawyer he really made his money from the Illinois Central Railroad. There is some irony, to put it charitably, in the marketing of Lincoln in the 1860 presidential campaign as “honest Abe, the rail-splitter.” Splitting rails was part of the hated



work his father had made him do on the farm, and the mature Lincoln's only connection with "rails," was as a successful corporate lawyer whose most profitable business association was with the largest railroad in Illinois.

Man does not live on bread alone, and economics all by itself has never been a winning political platform. First the Whig party and then the Republican party joined to a fundamentally Hamiltonian economic program a specific view of human freedom and a large dose of evangelical religion. For Lincoln and his allies freedom had political implications but it was not fundamentally a matter of political or civil rights, such as voting, being elected to office, or serving on juries. As important as those things were, of even more basic importance were the "natural rights" of the individual: the freedom to move about as he pleased, and the freedom to sell his labor to whomever he wished and to dispose of the profit of that transaction in a way that he, and only he, saw fit. Freedom for Lincoln was thus, at the root, freedom to enter into contracts with others on an equal basis. His judgment on slavery was that it was immoral and unjust precisely because it denied to the slaves this natural right of all men, a right they had not because some government or constitution gave it to them, but because, as the American Declaration of Independence had proclaimed, "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" are unalienable rights bestowed on all men by their Creator.

The connection with evangelical Christianity was made partly on the basis of this appeal to the religious and natural law underpinnings of the Declaration, but more on the basis of the moral fervor that entered into American life and politics as the result of the "second great awakening," a religious revival in the early 19th century. That Whigs first and then Republicans saw themselves through the lens of the Bible and had a biblical understanding of America's identity and mission is undeniable. That Lincoln quoted the Bible more than any of his predecessors and that he used biblical vocabulary and ideas to interpret the experience of the Civil War to his

fellow Americans is also undeniable; his second inaugural address alone is proof of that. But what Lincoln actually believed religiously, in his heart of hearts, is a very different question and a much disputed one. And it is here, at this most central concern, that Guelzo is at his best.

Lincoln was never baptized, nor did he ever formally join a church, nor did he ever profess (not even to his most intimate friends) a belief in Christ as Savior. He was shot on Good Friday, and the many pastors and preachers who rushed to find Christological overtones of sacrifice and redemption in that coincidence had to deal with the very uncomfortable fact that he was shot in a theater while watching a show, a place that to most serious Christians of the day was only a step or two removed from a house of ill repute. Frequently urged by political advisors and business associates to issue a personal testimony of his faith, he never did so. There is some evidence that he wanted to believe, and that he wished he were more religious than he was, but it seems that he could only bring himself to the door of the house of faith. He could not enter in. For most of his life he believed in "providence" as a general and impersonal mechanism, but not in a personal God who had a specific will. The last couple years of his life, as the war dragged on and this to no purpose that he could make out, that pressure seems to have moved him more towards a "biblical faith." Again, the second inaugural is instructive, but even there he only can offer, hesitantly, a tentative biblical reading of slavery as the great sin and the war as the national atonement.

Guelzo works through the evidence deftly and sensitively to draw the picture of a man who could neither believe nor be comfortable in his unbelief, a man who most identified with "doubting Thomas" and who mourned that he could not, as Thomas did, move beyond doubt to faith. It is thus bitterly ironic that so many have seen Lincoln as the fulfillment of the poet Walt Whitman's hope, expressed in 1856, for the coming of "the Redeemer President of these States." It is a great personal story and a great national story, and Allen Guelzo tells it well.

—*Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.*

