

Lincoln's paradoxes

by [James D. D. Bratt](#) in the [May 24, 2000](#) issue

*Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, by Allen C. Guelzo

Few books deserve to be labeled brilliant; this one does. Allen Guelzo not only manages to find something new and substantial to say about Abraham Lincoln, the most-studied figure in American history, but captures the intellectual world of mid-19th-century America. The result is a deeply studied yet altogether accessible narrative that ranges confidently across politics, history and theology, interweaving the three and boring down to their bedrock questions.

A committed Christian himself, Guelzo, professor of history at Eastern College in St. Davids, Pennsylvania, demonstrates that Lincoln kept a lifelong distance from orthodox Christianity. Lincoln's life plumbed the pain of doubt, a doubt all the more poignant for having been prompted by the high ethics that evangelical Christianity demanded. Guelzo places Lincoln with Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville in the pantheon of ex-Calvinists who were too honest to claim a faith that mandated entire sincerity. Lincoln never relinquished a part of the Christianity he absorbed from his ultra-predestinationist primitive Baptist childhood--the part that cast God as Creator, Judge and inscrutable Providence. Much of Lincoln's best rhetoric, especially the Second Inaugural Address, owes much to this theology, Guelzo shows. So do Lincoln's signal personal qualities: a dogged determination that persevered through years of military reverses and unprecedented casualties, and a humility that made his voice uniquely clean of vengeance and self-righteousness.

One of Guelzo's earlier books treated the century-long debate on Jonathan Edwards and human will. Here he attends to the Lincoln who denied free will and confessed--particularly at personal and political crossroads--"the doctrine of necessity." Yet following the work of Oxford historian Daniel Walker Howe, Guelzo also captures Lincoln as the quintessential Whig who abhorred the Jeffersonian model of subsistence farming and cultural diversity. Lincoln espoused Henry Clay's program of commercial development: high tariffs, government-capitalized transportation, a national bank and cultural cohesion. He fled his rail-splitting origins just as fast as he could, abandoning them for a career in business and law and emerging in the 1850s

as a corporate attorney for the Illinois Central Railroad. Only at that late date did Lincoln declare himself a foe of Negro slavery. Notably, Clay's program was instituted faster and more enthusiastically than emancipation.

Guelzo could have dug deeper into the paradoxes in this self-made man. He notes, briefly, that Lincoln might have fit the Gilded Age cult of capitalist industrialization far better than most biographers have countenanced. More fundamentally, he neglects to work out the contradiction between Lincoln's commitment to necessitarian philosophy and to libertarian political economy. On the other hand, the way this self-declared captive to fate became the author and enforcer of the Emancipation Proclamation is deftly drawn out along a double helix of inward and outward development. Guelzo shows how Lincoln's psyche and geopolitical opportunity matched each other step by step. Lincoln's God was a cunning God who ground slowly but relentlessly, liberating peoples even as he seemed to abandon individuals.

Guelzo's finest achievement is to identify and interweave so many strands of intellectual history (through so monumental a secondary literature) while still producing an eminently readable book. Indeed, the person interested in Lincoln can hardly do better than to start with this book, which offers reliable interpretations of Lincoln's early years, his romances and marriage, his legal and political career, his long experimentation with colonization and compensated emancipation as solutions for slavery, his perpetual discomfort with abolitionism, his chronic (though relatively mild form of) racism, and his relationships with cabinet officials, Union Army generals, and radical Republican leaders. Framed by Guelzo's well-wrought analysis of Lincoln's thought, the events of Lincoln's life make a new kind of sense.