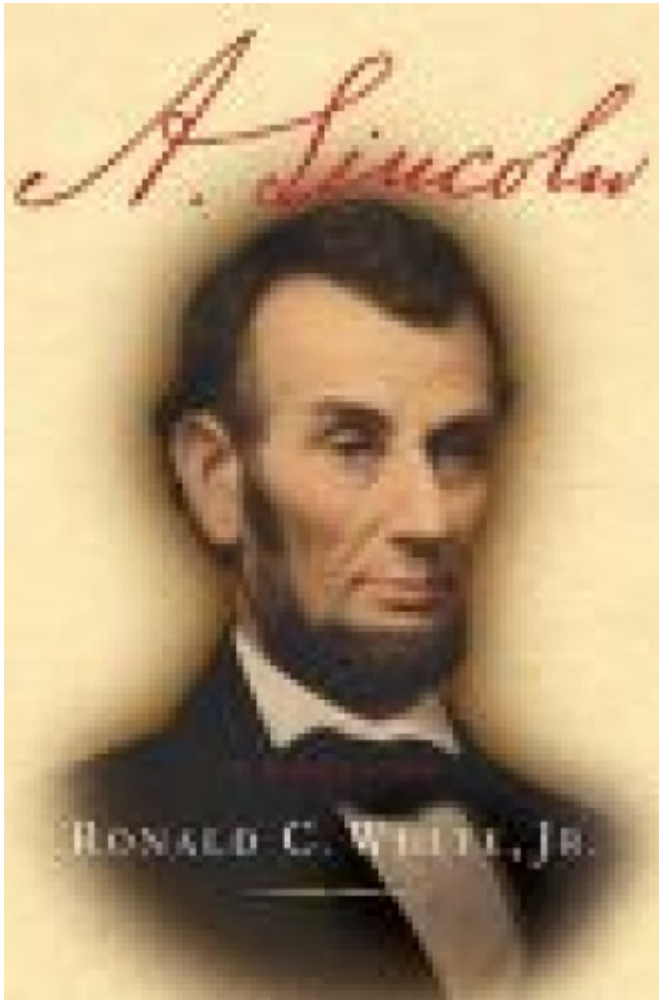


A. Lincoln: A Biography

reviewed by [Andrew Murphy](#) in the [May 5, 2009](#) issue

In Review



A. Lincoln: A Biography

Ronald C. White Jr.

Random House

Americans who have been living under a large, soundproof rock for the past year or so may be forgiven for not knowing that February marked the bicentennial of

Abraham Lincoln's birth. The rest of us have no excuse, and the nation's publishers have certainly done their part to ensure that no aspect of the 16th president's life is overlooked. The past several years saw a gradual ratcheting up of publishing in the already crowded field of Lincoln studies, and 2009 has so far witnessed the publication of everything from a half-dozen new biographies to analyses of the significance of Lincoln's penmanship.

The 2009 biographies range from James McPherson's 96-page *Abraham Lincoln* to Michael Burlingame's *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, which weighs in at just over 2,000 pages. Ronald C. White Jr.'s *A. Lincoln: A Biography* more or less splits the difference, coming in at about 800 pages, including bibliography, maps, illustrations, copious notes and a "Cast of Characters" roster to help readers keep names in order.

White, emeritus professor of American religious history at San Francisco Theological Seminary, is a familiar face to Lincoln enthusiasts, having written *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*, a well-received 2002 study of the Second Inaugural, and, four years later, *The Eloquent President*, a series of essays on major speeches of Lincoln's career.

The heart and soul of Lincoln's greatness, for White, is his moral integrity, "the strong trunk from which all the branches of his life grew." White looks to Lincoln's boyhood in Indiana as the source of that "interior moral compass that enabled him to navigate not simply the forests and streams of the state, but the more difficult terrain of ethical decisions in a young America on the rise." Like most Lincoln biographers, he writes from a standpoint of warm admiration for the 16th president, stressing the ways in which Lincoln differed radically from those around him, from childhood through his presidency. Of his youth and young adulthood, White writes, "Lincoln would grow from a boy to a youth to a young man who would prove different from any young man in the world around him"; at the other end of life, White argues, the American people came to recognize in Lincoln "a gentle leader, free from the egomania associated with most political leaders."

There is much to applaud in this biography, and the abundant praise that has been bestowed upon it by leading Lincoln scholars is well deserved. White provides the reader with a fine-grained appreciation of Lincoln's pre-presidential career—which included such varied occupations as rail splitter, boatman, soldier, shopkeeper, surveyor, postmaster, state legislator and lawyer—and his brief sketches of significant figures in Lincoln's life are models of lucid characterization and pithy

synthesis. The chapter that covers the important years from 1852 to 1856 is a masterful treatment of a turbulent time, which encompassed Stephen Douglas's introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska Act (which brought the circuit-riding attorney Lincoln back into political life), Lincoln's failed bid for the U.S. Senate in 1855, and the birth of the Republican Party. Also exceptional are White's accounts of the Lincoln-Douglas debates and of the importance of the Declaration of Independence to Lincoln's evolving political philosophy.

For White, moral integrity is the theme that unites the young Lincoln with the war president who was assassinated just as the contours of a postwar settlement were coming into view. It is odd, therefore, that White makes no mention of Lincoln's careful attention to issues of guilt and innocence in the Great Sioux Uprising of 1862. During this brief but important series of events, the president apparently conducted a personal review of more than 300 death sentences passed on Native Americans who had participated in attacks on whites in Minnesota. He let fewer than 40 sentences stand, in spite of the widespread racism and anti-Indian sentiment across the country.

A. Lincoln: A Biography has been hailed as the definitive life of Lincoln for the 21st century, and it has already taken its place among the handful of truly superior biographies of the 16th president. Yet it is hard to read this book without wondering whether as president Lincoln was so totally consumed with and defined by the Civil War. The reader discovers only on page 656, for example, that French troops had occupied Mexico since 1862. What were they doing there? Wasn't this a brazen violation of the Monroe Doctrine? Nor does White offer any comment on the importance of Lincoln's moral integrity to significant western legislation that he signed, including the Homestead Act of 1862, the Pacific Railway Act (which provided land grants to the railroads) and the Morrill Land Grant Act (which laid the foundation for a national system of public colleges and universities). Did Lincoln simply sign these pieces of legislation so he could continue to enjoy the support of Congress for his prosecution of the war? Or were they significant elements of a larger political view?

Lincoln's actions during the Civil War have keenly interested observers of the U.S. government's reactions to dissent. Figures in the George W. Bush administration have claimed Lincoln's conflict with the Supreme Court over his suspension of habeas corpus, which led to Chief Justice Roger Taney's ruling in *Ex parte Merryman*, as justification for restrictions on civil liberties during wartime. The Bush

administration's critics, on the other hand, have pointed out that Lincoln used such restrictions relatively infrequently and that there are significant differences between an armed domestic insurrection and a shadowy global war on terror that might never end.

Unfortunately, *A. Lincoln* breezes over these important issues. It is simply not true to say that in refusing either to try or release Confederate sympathizer John Merryman, in defiance of a decision written by the nation's highest jurist, "Lincoln chose a course of no action." Violating a direct order of the nation's top jurist seems anything but "a course of no action." Nor does White mention the Habeas Corpus Act of 1863, which legitimized far broader suspensions of civil liberties throughout the North. One wishes that White had offered some thoughts on how his deep and sympathetic research on Lincoln's wartime behavior might shed light on our very different—yet eerily familiar—times.

The reader of *A. Lincoln* emerges with an unparalleled understanding of Lincoln's conduct of the war and his personal growth during his four years as president, but with little sense of the wide range of pressing issues that faced both him and the nation during the early 1860s. This is a shame, for the omissions can leave the reader unfamiliar with the many important aspects of Lincoln's presidency that took place outside of military preparations and the conduct of the war. Given the enormity of the carnage and the Civil War's transformational effect on the nation's history, White's focus is certainly understandable. But there was always more to Lincoln, and to his life and presidency, than the war.