Mackey on Schaff, 'Abraham Lincoln's Statesmanship and the Limits of Liberal Democracy'

Review published on Monday, February 24, 2020


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“The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present.... As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our county,” urged President Abraham Lincoln in his December 1, 1862, Annual Message to Congress. Can a deep and insightful examination of the “statesmanship” of Lincoln coexist with a critique of 2019 national politics? Jon D. Schaff, professor of political science at Northern State University in South Dakota, thinks so. He offers readers a useful, even important, perspective on leadership in the era of Lincoln, only to segue through time and space to deliberate on the crisis of leadership under the current occupant of the executive mansion. As a result, Schaff interprets two topics—one historical and one modern—within the confines of one book.

Schaff urges his readers to look backward, to Lincoln, in order to resolve modern political problems. Admiring Lincoln (without descending into hagiography), Schaff observes virtues now long absent on the twenty-first-century American political scene: “prudence, moderation, and [a respect for] natural rights.” Yet, for Schaff, Lincoln matters now more than ever because “the power of Lincoln’s thought is precisely its continued ability to speak across time to our present situation” (p. 3). And here the disciplinary preferences start to drive a wedge between the historians and the political scientists. Political scientists like to shift through time and space and draw straight-line connections between and among divergent historical events and historical processes. Historians, on the other hand, stay grounded in their understanding of historical contexts as they pursue their interpretations and arguments about change and continuity over time. Political scientists draw “lessons” for the present by scooping up evidence from the past to make arguments about the modern world. However, extrapolating from the unique past to cast judgment on the uncertain present is not the historian’s task. When analyzing Lincoln and his decision-making, Schaff stands on solid ground and deepens the historiography on Lincoln as a political and domestic leader. However, when he shifts and writes about the present political situation, it becomes clear that (perhaps unintentionally) Schaff uses Lincoln as a straw man or foil to criticize the current occupant of the White House. As Schaff’s own work suggests, Lincoln was no straw man; to then use Lincoln as such diminishes the power of Schaff’s contribution.

The book is carefully crafted and highly disciplined in its organization and writing, and Schaff’s overall hope is for Americans to work toward and live in a “moderate, principled democracy” (p. 6). Fair enough; Lincoln’s example of leadership/statesmanship and his personal and political values...
ought to be the touchstones on how to achieve that desirable end, Schaff argues. He identifies five key traits and values personified by Lincoln or pursued by him through his political career that Schaff believes ought to be the foundations of modern political life. First, Lincoln maintained a genuine commitment (not just a rhetorical one) to the rule of law, which Schaff describes as “the moderating effects of the law” (p. 5). The commitment of Lincoln as attorney-in-chief to process and procedure, ingrained in him through his study and practice of the law (which Schaff needs to consider more deeply), helps to explain Lincoln’s effectiveness as political leader. Second, Schaff points to Lincoln’s defense of “natural rights” and his efforts to straighten the crooked line between popular opinion and “natural justice.” Third, Schaff shows that Lincoln remained confident, not timid, in using the powers of government to both preserve the nation and end the all-corrosive problem of human bondage. Yet Lincoln did not rise to political power for himself, nor did he believe that government (especially the central government in a state-based federal system) held the king’s cure for all of the ills in society, the economy, and culture. Fourth, Lincoln understood that political economy shaped the character of the American people, influencing their reactions to historical events and processes. But for Lincoln, material progress did not constitute the only social goal; he understood that the depth and breadth of political democracy mattered equally with material progress. In an unanswered rhetorical question, Schaff asks, “For what does it profit a citizenry to gain material wealth but lose its democratic soul?” (pp. 5-6). Fifth, and lastly, Schaff highlights Lincoln’s understanding of, and use of, presidential power, which helped to channel his decision-making as national executive. If properly understood, Schaff’s *cri de cœur* becomes for the American people to change course, to bridge their differences, to reject political extremism, and to craft a “moderate, principled democracy” (p. 6). To do so is to understand the prudence and moderation of Lincoln himself and his (mostly) prudent and moderate public policies during the crisis of the Civil War. Schaff then contrasts that statesmanship with the leadership failures of the early twenty-first century.

Schaff shapes his tightly argued book around those five aspects of Lincoln’s statesmanship. The book is divided into six chapters and organized in two parts: “Lincoln and the Architecture of Democracy’s Soul” and “The Domestic Lincoln: Presidential Power and the Second American Revolution.” Each chapter demonstrates a disciplined scholar creating as dense and as careful an argument as any philosopher. Schaff is strongest when he draws connections between the ancient concepts of prudence and moderation and tests them against Lincoln’s actions and predispositions. He is less persuasive when considering whether the Civil War was, or was not, a “second American Revolution,” as described most notably by James McPherson. Schaff’s present-minded agenda comes through most clearly in his conclusion, where he argues that Lincoln sought to reenergize a tired democracy, making Lincoln’s statesmanship pertinent today because the United States is in as bad a shape politically as the 1850s, if not worse. As the author alleges, “The centralization of power in the presidency, the confusion of politics with entertainment, and a growing gap between what the people demand from government and the government’s ability to meet those demands ... have given rise to an anger that is not healthy for a democratic people” (pp. 207-8). Lincoln, as Schaff seeks to demonstrate, “recognized that statesmanship in a democracy is less the assertion of will than the molding of public opinion” (p. 210). And “Lincoln’s defense of natural rights and the rule of law and his respect for public opinion showed profound recognition that to be an advocate of democracy, one must be a moderate advocate” (p. 211). Schaff contends that we need a prudent leader who understands his times, himself, and his limitations—someone like Lincoln—in our current crisis.

Few, and perhaps no one in the academy, would doubt that more Lincolonian restraint, more self-
awareness by political leadership, more prudent decision-making, less impulsive actions, and more political moderation from all points along the political spectrum would be a healthy development for the current age. Yet, on Schaff's work, historians will be mixed. On the one hand, Schaff contributes to our understanding of Lincoln's statesmanship, and his analysis of the values that guided the sixteenth president do help to explain and account for Lincoln's actions and decisions. However, historians will be put off by his use of Lincoln to criticize modern politics. Schaff's jump through time and space, without a sufficient appreciation of the uniqueness of historical contexts, diminishes the usefulness of this effort. No one doubts that liberal democracy has its limits, and perhaps the current domestic political situation is proof of that assertion. That Lincoln's fundamental values of moderation and prudence can "solve" modern political ennui is the challenge presented by Schaff. Yet the resolution offered by him is less straightforward than the author suggests. Schaff can advocate for more moderation and prudence in twenty-first-century politics, but Lincoln's moderation and prudence are bound by the conditions and contexts of the nineteenth century rather than timeless values applied to any era. As Lincoln once put it himself, "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate for the stormy present."


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