

Lincoln and the American Founding

Lucas E. Morel

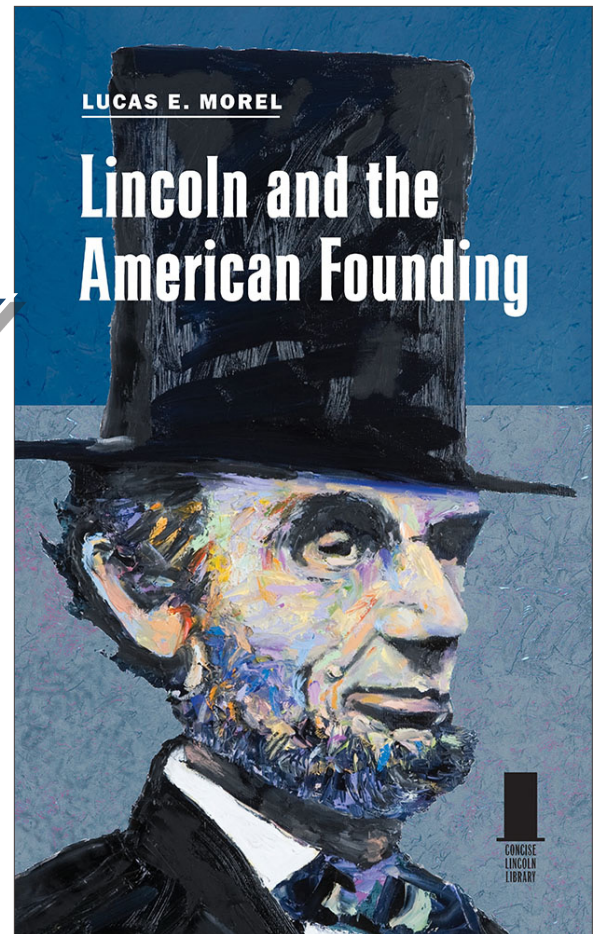
“With admirable clarity and conciseness, Morel explores Lincoln’s political philosophy and its roots in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The discussion of how Lincoln used these iconic documents in his treatment of the issue of slavery is particularly incisive and valuable. This is an important contribution to the literature on the sixteenth president.”—James M. McPherson, author of *The War That Forged a Nation: Why the Civil War Still Matters*

Lincoln’s most vital ideas traced back to our founders

In this persuasive work of intellectual history, Lucas E. Morel argues that the most important influence on Abraham Lincoln’s political thought and practice was what he learned from the leading figures of and documents from the birth of the United States. In this systematic account of those principles, Morel compellingly demonstrates that to know Lincoln well is to understand thoroughly the founding of America.

With each chapter describing a particular influence, Morel leads readers from the Founding Father George Washington to the founding documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; to the founding compromise over slavery; and finally to a consideration of how the original intentions of the Founding Fathers should be respected in light of experience, progress, and improvements over time. Within these key discussions, Morel shows that without the ideals of the American Revolution, Lincoln’s most famous speeches would be unrecognizable, and the character of the nation would have lost its foundation on the universal principles of human equality, individual liberty, and government by the consent of the governed.

Lincoln thought that the principles of human equality and individual rights could provide common ground for a diverse people to live as one nation and that some old things, such as the political ideals of the American founding, were worth preserving. He urged Americans to be vigilant in maintaining the institutions of self-government and to exercise and safeguard the benefits of freedom for future generations. Morel posits that adopting the way of thinking and speaking Lincoln advocated, based on the country’s founding, could help mend our current polarized discourse and direct the American people to employ their common government on behalf of a truly common good.



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Lucas E. Morel is a professor of politics and head of the politics department at Washington and Lee University. His previous publications include *Lincoln and Liberty: Wisdom for the Ages* and *Lincoln’s Sacred Effort: Defining Religion’s Role in American Self-Government*. He is a trustee of the Supreme Court Historical Society, former president of the Abraham Lincoln Institute, and member of the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, which will plan activities to commemorate in 2026 the founding of the United States of America.

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Introduction: Looking to the Past for the Sake of the Future**1. Lincoln, George Washington, and the Founding Fathers: An Appeal to the Founder Par Excellence**

As the indispensable American founder, George Washington was the chief builder of a new nation devoted to securing civil and religious liberties. Lincoln saw in Washington's moral character and republican vision an example to inspire his own political engagement as he sought to shape public opinion when slavery threatened to engulf the nation.

2. Lincoln and the Declaration of Independence: An Appeal to the Founders' Ends

Even more important than a founding father was a founding document, the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln drew his political thought from the principles laid out in the Declaration: namely, human equality, individual rights, government by consent of the governed, and the right of revolution.

3. Lincoln and the Constitution: An Appeal to the Founders' Means

Moving from founding aims to founding means, this chapter explains how Lincoln saw the ends of the Declaration secured by the means spelled out in the Constitution. He believed reverence for the federal constitution and the rule of law was essential for the perpetuation of self-government.

4. Lincoln and Slavery: An Appeal to the Founders' Compromise

The implications of the federal system of government for securing the equal protection of rights is seen most clearly in the founding compromise with slavery. Lincoln agreed with the founders that slavery was a necessary evil that should be put on the course of ultimate extinction. He sought to recover their approach to slavery as it threatened to expand into federal territories.

5. Lincoln and Original Intent: An Appeal to the Founders' Relevance

Lincoln's devotion to the American founding was strong but not blind. He explained not only why their founders' original intentions should be followed but also the circumstances that could lead subsequent generations to improve on what the founders established.

Conclusion: Lincoln as Conservative Liberal or Liberal Conservative?

Acknowledgments

Notes

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