



A Response to Rich Lowry's "Conservative" Defense of Abraham Lincoln

The latest in Lincoln polemics comes courtesy of Rich Lowry, editor of *National Review*. In the latest issue of the latter, Lowry both promotes his new work and takes aim at those of our 16th president's detractors that are to Lowry's political Right — the "Lincoln haters."

The "Lincoln haters," Lowry insists, are limited "mostly, but not entirely," to a libertarian "fringe" whose members "apparently hate federal power more than they abhor slavery." Chief among these fringe characters is Lincoln scholar Thomas DiLorenzo, whom Lowry accuses of having "made a cottage industry of publishing unhinged Lincoln-hating polemics."

To sense what sort of argument Lowry's promises to be, the reader should note that before it even gets underway, its author seeks to undermine the character of his opponents — not the substance or form of their reasoning. His interlocutors are "haters," on "the fringe," and even, as in the case of DiLorenzo, "unhinged." From the outset, Lowry tries to stack the deck in his favor by portraying his rivals as both irrational and disreputable.

Ironically, in doing so, he deprives himself of the high ground, both intellectually and morally, for Lowry's argument, it is painfully clear, has little to do with history and everything to do with contemporary politics.

"The debate over Lincoln on the Right is so important," Lowry writes, "because it can be seen, in part, as a proxy for the larger argument over whether conservatism should read itself out of the American mainstream or — in this hour of its discontent — dedicate itself to a Lincolnian program of opportunity and uplift consistent with its limited-government principles."

Lowry wastes no time in spelling out for the undecided just why conservatives *must* embrace the course that he has chosen. "A conservatism that rejects Lincoln is a conservatism that wants to confine itself to an irritable irrelevance to 21st century America and neglect what should be the great project of reviving it as a country of aspiration."





Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on June 7, 2013

Now, being neither a Lincoln scholar nor even an historian, I am neither a “hater” nor a deifier of Lincoln. I am, however, a philosopher, a political philosopher, and a conservative political philosopher to boot. As such, I confess to being at a loss to account for how any self-avowed conservative, any proponent of “limited government,” could look to, of all people, Abraham Lincoln as a source of inspiration.

Lincoln presided over America during what remains, by leaps and bounds, its darkest hour. More tellingly, he was, at the very least, instrumental in making it its darkest hour, for Lincoln waged a war unprecedented (in our history) for its death and destruction, and he waged it against Americans. Whether or not he had the constitutional right to do so, whether or not the South was the aggressor, are utterly irrelevant considerations.

To repeat, for our purposes here, Lincoln’s legal and moral prerogatives or lack thereof simply do not matter. What matters is that for four long years, the president of the United States conducted the bloodiest war that, before or since, our nation had ever witnessed, a war that laid waste to much of the country, to say nothing of the genuinely federal character of the government that the Framers of the Constitution ratified.

And he waged this war against his fellow citizens, men and women who sought to peaceably secede from the Union — not usurp Lincoln or the federal government.

Again, whether Lincoln’s was a morally worthwhile cause or whether he had the legal right to do what he did are matters for historians and moralists to sort through. The point is that whatever else may be said of Lincoln, it is difficult to see how, with Lowry, we can say of him that he was “perhaps the foremost proponent of opportunity in all of American history,” “the paladin of individual initiative, the worshipper of the Founding Fathers, and the advocate of self-control.” In what universe, one must wonder, can a self-declared champion of conservatism, like Lowry, regard Lincoln as “a fellow traveler with today’s conservatives”?

But maybe that’s the point. Maybe *today’s* “conservatives” do need Lincoln, for given their obsession with fundamentally transforming the Islamic world into a bastion of Democracy and their own country into the melting pot of the universe, today’s conservatives care as much about preserving the decentralized character of American government as did Lincoln.

As a result, they are about as conservative as he was as well.



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