FROM BUFFOON TO PHILOSOPHER KING: THE MANY FACES OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

This course will examine the different visions Americans have held about Lincoln from his own time to the present. While most Americans have regarded him as a “secular saint” and granted him a place in the pantheon of our nation’s greatest heroes, others have ridiculed him as a country bumpkin, or decried him as a dictator. Most contemporary historians see the “Great Emancipator” as the foremost advocate for African American freedom and equality, but others view him as a racist and hypocrite. We will sift through the kaleidoscopic images of Lincoln as they evolved over the years, and make an assessment of which views are valid, and which are unfair.

Week One: LINCOLN AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

Week one will be devoted to an analysis of the wide range of opinions on Lincoln current during his lifetime. Through examining the views of critics such as newspaper editor Horace Greeley, Generals McClellan and Fremont, political opponent Stephen Douglas, and others we will see that the living Lincoln was far from universally regarded as the hero figure he subsequently became. We will look carefully at the most commonly expressed doubts and complaints about Lincoln, and see how he responded to these hurtful attacks. We shall also take note of the abusive, mocking humor he was subjected to during his presidency. But we will also delve into the reflections of Lincoln’s friends and admirers—men such as law partner William Herndon, poet Walt Whitman, and personal secretary John Hay—to see how many contemporaries almost worshipped him and saw greatness that others would recognize only after his death. Finally, we will discuss how some Lincoln observers came to change their point of view from that of bitter critic to enthusiastic supporter. The experiences of William Seward and abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass will illustrate this phenomenon. This talk will draw largely on the works of Doris Kearns Goodwin, David Herbert Donald, and Michael Burlingame.

Week Two: THE PROGRESSIVE AND LIBERAL LINCOLN

This class will delineate the Progressive, New Deal, and contemporary liberal understanding of Lincoln. Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and more recent Democrats
such as Mario Cuomo and George McGovern, all embraced Lincoln as a kind of Proto-Progressive/liberal. They believed that he fundamentally transformed the role of the Federal government in order to bring about great (and badly needed) social/economic changes. We will examine the elements of Lincoln’s far reaching domestic agenda that gave rise to such an interpretation: his avid support of the Homestead Act, the establishment of Land Grant Colleges and the Department of Agriculture to modernize American farming, and most importantly his backing of the transcontinental railroad. We will also show how Lincoln introduced the first income tax to pay for such unprecedented government spending. But we will also see how, with equal fervor, conservatives such as Herbert Hoover and Ronald Reagan claim Lincoln as a political ancestor. At the conclusion of the class, we will speculate on whether Lincoln would feel more at home in today’s Democratic Party, or would he likely remain a Republican loyalist.

Week Three: LINCOLN AS RACIST

This week we will tackle the charge that Lincoln was a racist. This theory, advanced by historian Lerone Bennett and journalist Michal Lind, holds that Lincoln did not really believe the rhetoric of equality he preached. Rather, he was only interested in preserving the benefits of American society for white businessmen, farmers, and mechanics. Accordingly, he opposed slavery because it diminished economic opportunities for enterprising, middle class whites. His best solution for dealing with freedmen was to send them back to Africa. The Lincoln-as-white supremacist stance usually points to his arguments in the Douglas debates as convincing proof of his racism. Consequently, we will look carefully at Lincoln’s speeches which seem so damning at first glance. We will try to show that Lincoln simply may have been appeasing the sentiments of his audience for reasons of political expedience. We will consider the possibility that his words did not reflect his private, more radical views on the equality of all men. In Lincoln’s defense, we will propose that at every opportunity he was subtly guiding public opinion toward an increasingly enlightened position on racial equality. Admittedly, he did not move forward as quickly and unequivocally as one might hope. But we will see that in the rough and tumble world of 19th century politics he was advancing as rapidly as possible.

WEEK Four: LINCOLN AS DICTATOR
The image of Lincoln as a dictator has a long, complex history, and merits a full session. During the war, Northern anti-war Democrats and news editors castigated Lincoln’s “tyranny”. And, of course, most Southerners decried the brutish dictatorship in Washington. We will examine selected writings and speeches of Copperheads and Rebels to establish a baseline of anti-Lincoln rhetoric which has resurfaced with a vengeance in recent years. Contemporary neo-Confederates, Libertarians, and states-rights conservatives accuse Lincoln of subverting the Constitution in order to establish a military despotism designed to crush local traditions and autonomy. Some have gone as far as comparing Lincoln with Hitler and Stalin. We will explore the critiques of writers Thomas DiLorenzo and Thomas Woods and assess their validity. Most of the “Lincoln-as-Dictator” school of thought rests on the emergency war measures he adopted to deal with the crisis. As such, we will take a close look at Lincoln’s suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, the establishment of military trials, and the blockade of Southern ports, and attempt to determine the constitutionality of these acts. Our work here will be guided largely by Mark Neely, author of works on Lincoln’s violations of civil liberties. Lastly, we will discuss the ideas of many Progressive and liberal scholars who admit that Lincoln took great liberties with the law, but who nevertheless applaud his decisions as necessary and proper.

Week Five: LINCOLN’S MELANCHOLY

Much Lincoln scholarship in recent years has dealt with his mental health. Michael Burlingame, Joshua Wolf Shenk, Charles Strozier, and others have shown how Lincoln had to battle through “melancholy” and “the hypos” to achieve greatness. Since present day Americans seem to have an insatiable curiosity about the psychological mainsprings of our heroes, we will devote a full class to tracing the roots of Lincoln’s acute mental suffering. This will require an analysis of Lincoln’s childhood, his relationship with his two mothers, and his troubled connection with his father. We will attempt to trace a link between the young Lincoln’s resistance to his domineering father and his later hatred of slavery. We shall also discuss his intense sorrow at the deaths of his sister and youthful sweetheart Ann Rutledge. We must look closely at Lincoln’s breakdown in January of 1841 (and his subsequent treatment), which illustrates just how seriously Lincoln was plagued by psychological demons. Many of his friends feared for his life during this period, and Lincoln spoke often of his suicidal despair. The Lincoln marriage reveals much of what troubled him during his adult years. Mary proved to be a demanding, unbalanced and violent spouse, complicating Lincoln’s personal life immeasurably. Consequently, we will spend a considerable portion of this class delving into Mary Todd Lincoln’s tortured psyche as well.
Week Six: LINCOLN’S RELIGION

In this presentation, we will describe how Lincoln has been drafted to serve as a model standard bearer by churches and religiously oriented reform groups of all stripes. Shortly after his assassination, Protestant ministers claimed this protean Lincoln to be a devout Christian. Indeed, some clergymen viewed him as a Christ-like figure, slain on Good Friday. We will survey the vast body of writings which promulgated the image of the Christian, Bible-loving Lincoln. We will also examine the reasons behind the affection American Jews held for Lincoln, and see why “Rabbi Abraham” came to be viewed as a modern day Moses. To achieve a fair balance, we will also look at the dissenting tradition which casts Lincoln as an “infidel” freethinker. Here we will look at Lincoln’s youthful thoughts on the absurdity of revealed religion in contrast with the rational, deist creed of his Enlightenment heroes. To complete the picture we will address Lincoln’s brief flirtation with spiritualism following the tragic death of his son Willie. In our concluding remarks, we will hazard a guess as to Lincoln’s genuine, heartfelt feelings (as opposed to his public pronouncements) on the nature of God, the Soul, and the Afterlife.

Week Seven: LINCOLN AS COMMANDER IN CHIEF

Lincoln entered the White House in March of 1861 with virtually no background in military affairs. While he had serve as a militia Captain during the Black Hawk War of 1832, that brief summer of soldiering against half-starved Indians in northern Illinois would hardly be relevant for the coming storm. He had to bring himself up to seep very quickly to manage the vast complexities of a modern war. But Lincoln had always taken pride in his ability to gain a thorough understanding of difficult subjects by dint of incredibly hard work and intense, concentrated study. (Recall that he had mastered Illinois law and advanced mathematics on his own, with a minimum of help from formal tutors.) The challenge presented by the Civil War would be no exception. Within a year, he had established himself as the greatest Commander in Chief in our nation’s history; indeed, he virtually defined the role, since the Constitution uses the term but says little about it. By reading military treatises borrowed from the Library of Congress, pouring over maps, and talking with trusted advisors, he became an adroit strategist and a persuasive molder of public opinion on the conduct of the war. In this lecture we will trace the development of Lincoln’s grand strategic design for the prosecution of America’s deadliest conflict.

Week Eight: THE MARTYRDOM OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

In this concluding talk we will explore the tragic assassination of President Lincoln and his “apotheosis” after the senseless killing. In this session we will rely heavily on the work of
Merrill D. Peterson and Eric Foner. We will look at the outpouring of grief by Northern artists, poets, newspaper editors, preachers and politicians as they attempted to fashion moral meaning from the catastrophe. In the process, these mourners instantaneously transformed Lincoln the man into a cult figure. We shall look at how the martyred President paradoxically came to be viewed both as an extraordinary human being, filled with grandeur, while at the same time being seen as the archetypal “man of the people.” During the painful years after the war, Americans fashioned an iconic Lincoln who took his place beside George Washington in American folk mythology, a process which has become an enormous impediment to our attempts to understand the “real” Lincoln. This lecture will explain how Lincoln’s near-deification blended with religious impulses and popular patriotism to create a new vision of American democracy. Southern reaction to the assassination and to Lincoln’s canonization also merits a close look, and we will spend some time dealing with the unrepentant rebel view of he killing.