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NATIONAL REVIEW

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Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point, by Lewis E. Lehrman (Stackpole, 412 pp., \$29.95)

JAY WINIK

THE question of second acts in political leadership is one of the enduring riddles of history. Most would-be leaders simply fade into obscurity—remember Michael Dukakis—but a very few don't. Still, rarely is the path to eventual greatness easy or straightforward. For all his visions of glory, Winston Churchill was derided by his peers as a crank, an eccentric out of step with his party and ill-suited for the times; having led the American rebels to a stunning victory over the mother country, George Washington tendered his resignation and returned to Virginia, vowing never again to enter public life; and the unsophisticated Harry Truman was such an insignificant vice president that only upon FDR's death was Truman told by aides that America possessed the atom bomb.

And then, of course, there is the improbable story of Abraham Lincoln.

Improbable is the word. In 1849, his political fortunes were at their lowest ebb. He had had his run of bad luck: He was a failed one-term congressman, and Pres. Zachary Taylor wouldn't even appoint him commissioner of the General Land Office. His beloved Whig party was slowly falling apart. So, beset by disappointments and deep, debilitating moods, he returned to Illinois, mute and pensive, to practice law, unhappily watching events pass him by. But then came Congress's Kansas-Nebraska Act, authored by long-term Lincoln rival Stephen Douglas; it was this, as Lewis Lehrman vividly shows in his splendid new book, *Lincoln at Peoria*, that opened the door that led Lincoln back into public life.

Mr. Winik is the author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *April 1865* and *The Great Upheaval*.

For Lincoln, Kansas-Nebraska was a profound turning point in his own life as well as in the nation's history. By repealing the 34-year-old Missouri Compromise, the patchwork measure that had effectively divided North and South, it raised the dreadful specter of the spread of slavery everywhere. It was here, on the back of slavery, that Lincoln would reenter the political arena. And it was here, by some combination of design and fate, that Lincoln was destined to make his lasting mark.

Lincoln's seminal speech in Peoria on October 16, 1854, was actually one of a series of little-known Lincoln-Douglas debates, four years before the famous Senate-campaign debates that history more often recalls. With a painter's hand, Lehrman sets the stage: A crowd gathered and Douglas spoke first, carrying on for three hours, so long that he would later lose his voice; the famished throng then broke for dinner—this was at Lincoln's shrewd suggestion—and by the time Lincoln started at seven o'clock, it was already dark, the only light coming from the flicker of candles and lanterns flanking the square.

In Lehrman's telling, the scene was perhaps a fitting metaphor for the national struggle to come. Equally fascinating, Lehrman persuasively argues that Lincoln's words at Peoria would foreshadow his oratorical masterpieces at his first and second inaugurations, as well as at Gettysburg, and lay the very foundation for his presidential decision-making.

In effect, Peoria represents Lincoln's coming of age. Gone are the sly quips and sarcasm, gone are the usual banalities in Whig thought about protective tariffs and internal improvements. And for the first time, as Lehrman demonstrates, we see Lincoln's deep philosophical commitment to the principles of 1776 and the "all men are created equal" doctrine of the Declaration of Independence, which Lincoln called "the sheet anchor of American republicanism." No less remarkable, we see Lincoln presciently warning that if Kansas-Nebraska was not repealed, America would slip into the unfathomable dangers of a civil war.

Consider just a few of Lincoln's words. "Through all this," he warned, "Bowie knives and six shooters are seen plainly



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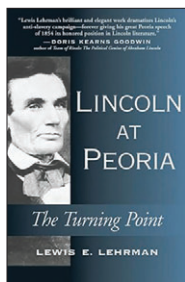
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enough; but never a glimpse of the ballot box.” And: “I do not charge . . . that such was intended by Congress; [but] if this fight should begin, is it likely to take a very peaceful, Union-saving turn? Will not the first drop of blood so shed, be the real knell of the Union?” And then his timeless invocation: “Allow ALL the governed an equal voice in the government, and that, and that only is self-government.”

Throughout *Lincoln at Peoria*, Lehrman shows a journalist’s eye for the telling detail. Douglas spoke with “polished elegance,” while Lincoln spoke with a “thin, high-pitched” voice. Lehrman also demonstrates a scholar’s appreciation for the ambiguities surrounding Lincoln: He quotes one woman’s asking upon Lincoln’s election, “Is it *certain* Mr. Lincoln is an uncompromising anti-slavery man?” And finally, Lehrman keenly appreciates the poignancy of his story: We see Lincoln strolling in Springfield with a colleague in 1849, when the friend ruefully observes, “Lincoln the time is coming when You & I would have to be Democrats or Abolitionists.”

Lincoln at Peoria is a marvelous hybrid of a book. Beyond the narrative and an extensive analysis of the speech itself, Lehrman draws out the rest of Lincoln’s career, his political resurrection and Amer-

ica’s political realignment, the coming of the war and Lincoln’s surprise election as president, and his presidency itself, never losing sight of that magical moment at Peoria when Lincoln became Lincoln. Lehrman’s editorial hand is light, and he is careful to judge Lincoln by the standards of his own day, rather than of ours. He also goes to great lengths to quote succeeding generations of distinguished Lincoln scholars. In this sense, more than simply a fascinating exegesis, *Lincoln at Peoria* stands as a rich resource for scholars.



Lewis Lehrman’s support for American history has been unflagging. Among other things, along with Richard Gilder, he co-founded one of America’s finest historical societies, the Gilder

Institute of American History, as well as the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University; and he has undertaken efforts to preserve original historical manuscripts. For most philanthropists, this would be more than enough, but not for Lehrman. That he would take the time to write this ambitious and endlessly absorbing book stands as fitting testimony to his long love affair with Abraham Lincoln. An enormously important contribution to the Lincoln literature, this book belongs in the library of all Lincoln aficionados. **NR**

POEM

So, you imagined I would be the kind
it would be possible you could forget,
that I would throw myself, out of my mind,
beneath the hooves of a bay thoroughbred;

or beg some local sorceress for spoken
incantations over a water root,
and send it to you with a shocking token—
my cherished shawl, scented with perfume.

But curse you. Neither one cast of an eye
nor moan I touch to your damned soul, but swear
by the passion of our nights which used to burn,
by the garden of sacred seraphim, and by
the icon of stupendous power there,
I swear to you, I never will return.

—ANNA AKHMATOVA
July 1921, Petersburg
translated by Jennifer Reeser

The Emperor of Common Sense

Samuel Johnson: The Struggle, by Jeffrey Meyers (Basic, 400 pp., \$35)

Samuel Johnson: A Biography, by Peter Martin (Harvard, 608 pp., \$35)

JOHN DERBYSHIRE

ENGLISH writer, opera producer, and all-round high-culture panjandrum Jonathan Miller once scoffed at his fellow countrymen for their refusal to take deep thinking seriously. An Englishman’s idea of an intellectual, Miller sniggered, was Samuel Johnson. (Asked to name someone he considered an intellectual, Miller offered Boileau.)

This low opinion of Johnson is widely shared amongst the cerebral portion of humanity. I was once slapped down across a dinner table by Roger Scruton when I ventured a Johnsonism. “Johnson had his opinion, no doubt,” murmured the philosopher as he turned away, his manner suggesting that I might as well have quoted Paris Hilton at him.

The scoffers have a point. Johnson was no intellectual in the modern sense (which was not current in his time, and does not appear in his great *Dictionary*). He established no theory, built no system, started no movement. The fascination of Johnson is not in his ideas about society, politics, or even literature, but in his singular character, in his deep understanding of human nature, and in the peculiar vigor and clarity with which he expressed himself.

With the tercentenary of Johnson’s birth looming (September 2009), we may expect more books about him. Here are two fine ones by seasoned and capable scholars. Much of the material in them is of course the same, but their methods of approach have a few interesting differences.