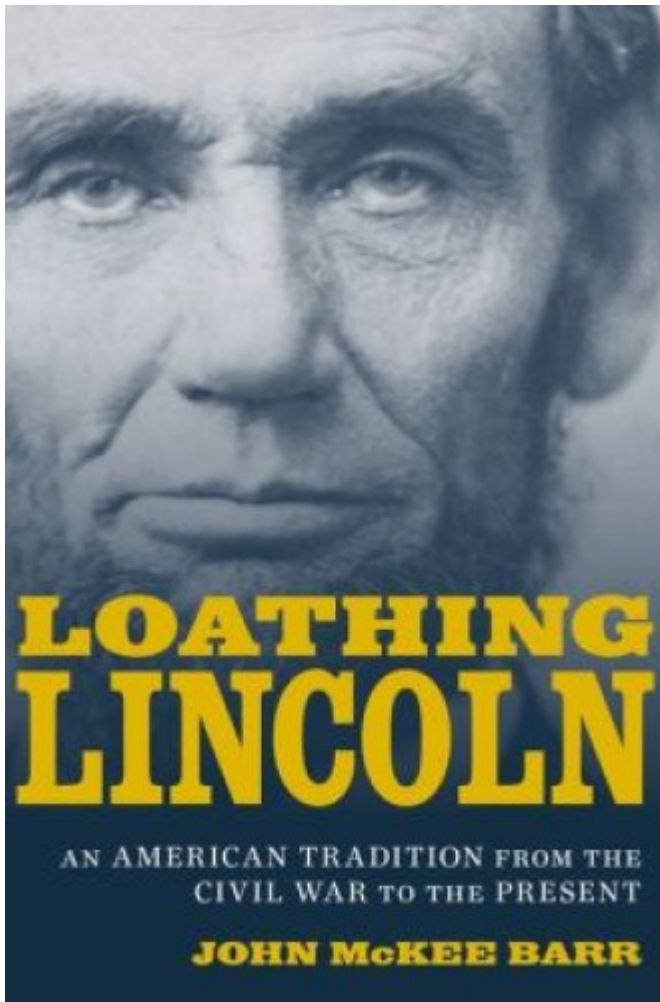


With malice toward Lincoln

by [Paul Harvey](#) in the [September 17, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Loathing Lincoln

By John McKee Barr

Louisiana State University Press

One year after Lincoln was assassinated by the pioneering Lincoln loather John Wilkes Booth, an ex-Confederate Texas fighter made this toast to his fellow former fighters: “Here is to the man that pulled the *Trigger* / That killed the man that freed

the *Nigger*.”

In the early 20th century, the historian-general of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, Mildred Lewis Rutherford, and the president of the College of William and Mary, Lyon Gardiner Tyler, led the charge against what Tyler called “Lincolnolatry.” Rutherford exalted the sainted memory of Confederate president Jefferson Davis in comparison with the deceitful tyrant Lincoln and led a relentless campaign to purge school textbooks of any suggestion that the rise of the Confederacy might somehow have been tied to slavery. She was possibly the most effective guardian of political correctness in schoolbooks in American history—at least until recently when certain Texans decided to become arbiters of what children should learn about history, science, and other fields of study.

Meanwhile, Tyler portrayed Lincoln as both magically tyrannical and a “pitiful failure” who “sat around juggling with words and doing nothing.” That is, Lincoln somehow managed to centralize government and wield all power in his hands and yet was too incompetent to run an army (unlike George B. McClellan, a wonderful general in Tyler’s estimation). Writers to publications such as the *Confederate Veteran*, and later the famous “southern agrarians” (or “Fugitives”) of the 1930s, depicted Lincoln as the great “centralizer” and the progenitor of federal despotism, making arguments that showed how much they identified Lincoln with Woodrow Wilson.

Nearly 150 years later, Fox News commentator Andrew Napolitano, former member of the New Jersey Superior Court, condemned Abraham Lincoln as a “racial supremacist” in his tirade *The Constitution in Exile*. Napolitano’s absurd assertions were recently voted off the island by a panel of historians (including Eric Foner and his student Manisha Sinha) who appeared with him on the *Daily Show*. But that view keeps getting aired at Fox News.

Libertarians have been furiously debating Lincoln’s legacy since World War II. Thomas DiLorenzo’s *The Real Lincoln* presents the brief for the prosecution, while the conservative political philosopher Harry Jaffa and outstanding conservative historian Allen Guelzo lead the defense. In the world of academia, the well-researched views and thoughtful analysis of Guelzo and numerous others have long since prevailed, but in the realm of popular belief and political polemics, figures such as Ron Paul, his son Rand, and others from the libertarian right have taken DiLorenzo’s assertions about Lincoln’s tyranny and the alleged real meaning of the

Civil War to vast audiences.

Little wonder, then, that a recent poll showed that most Americans under age 30 think that the main cause of the Civil War was a dispute over states' rights. The views of Rutherford, Tyler, and the Texas ex-Confederate live on, like Banquo's ghost, even though there is an abundance of well-documented refutations from the best scholarly conservative and libertarian thinkers.

John McKee Barr has constructed a detailed, deeply analytical, and persuasively argued narrative that connects these instances of Lincoln loathing. He makes it clear that although Lost Causers, neo-Confederates, and the libertarian right have dominated the literature of Lincoln loathing, the liberal left has also contributed on occasion. Barr cites critical essays on Lincoln by anti-imperialists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, by W. E. B. Du Bois and others on the black radical left, and most extensively by Lerone Bennett Jr. The latter blasted Lincoln—in words far harsher than Frederick Douglass's—for the president's statements in defense of white supremacy and black colonization. And as in the case of abolitionist Lysander Spooner, one criticism from the left was that emancipation emerged accidentally, as a war measure, and that Lincoln's heart was never fully invested in the cause of racial equality.

The best scholarship on Lincoln and the Republicans—most recently Eric Foner's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography and James Oakes's commendation of Civil War-era Republicans for their commitment to addressing issues of racial justice—has mostly exonerated Lincoln from these charges. Particularly important is Foner's insistence that we examine Lincoln's growth and change over time, especially his remarkable advance from some embarrassing statements on race as late as the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates to his endorsement of at least limited black suffrage toward the end of the Civil War.

The liberal left has never loathed Lincoln; critics from this perspective simply point out his shortcomings much as abolitionists of Lincoln's own era frequently did. As Barr makes clear in his conclusion:

The struggle over Lincoln's image has always been rooted in contesting visions of America, one envisioning freedom and equality for all, the other envisioning freedom and equality for some, with subordination to authority, or their so-called natural superiors, for the rest. . . . Abraham Lincoln's enemies have always tried

to define who he was, but in their loathing for the president, they more often than not defined themselves.

In the process of tracing the arguments of the Lincoln loathers, particularly those from the neo-Confederate and libertarian right, Barr also patiently takes apart those arguments, making this a book in which objectivity is not a false neutrality. All the worse, then, that in 2010 the Texas Board of Education began requiring students to study the inaugural addresses of both Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, not so students will understand them as historians would, but to pose yet another false equivalency. As Barr writes, it's one thing to study the documents of the past in order to understand the past, but it's "another thing entirely if Davis and the cause he advocated—the perpetuation of inhuman bondage—is characterized instead as resistance to centralized government in the name of states' rights" and then "placed on the same moral plane" as Lincoln's wish to end slavery. Barr's work fairly summarizes the views of the Lincoln loathers and also devastates them.