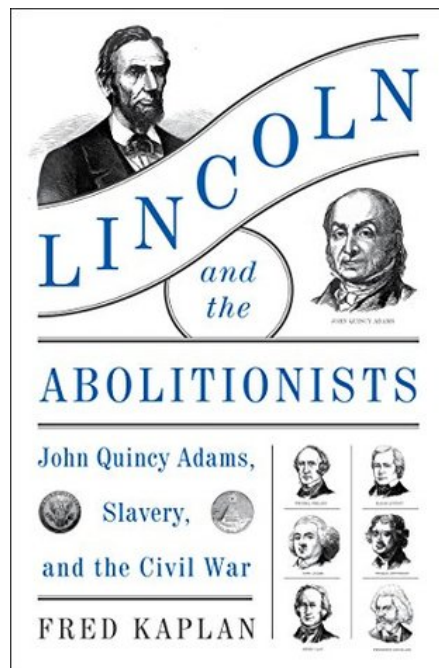




Lincoln and the Abolitionists: John Quincy Adams, Slavery, and the Civil War

Fred Kaplan

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From Reader Review Lincoln and the Abolitionists: John Quincy Adams, Slavery, and the Civil War for online ebook

Steve says

Unless you get your history from Ken Burns or Steven Spielberg, you are probably aware that Abraham Lincoln was in no way, shape, or form an abolitionist when it came to slavery in the United States. A supporter of the American Colonization Society which promoted the removal and resettling of freed slaves out of the United States, Lincoln never envisioned former slaves and whites being able to live peaceably, side by side. Lincoln went to war to preserve the Union, not to free the slaves. In fact Kaplan makes it clear that Lincoln fought the first two years of the Civil War with the aim to lure rebellious states back into the Union, allowing them to retain their slaves and preferring to deal with the 'unsolvable' problem at a much later date.

In these times of Black Lives Matter and African-American NFL players kneeling during the playing of the national anthem, and most recently the violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, Fred Kaplan's "Lincoln and the Abolitionists" is a sobering, and ultimately mournful, read. The American Union existed only because the North agreed to allow the South its institution of slavery. There was a gag order in Congress forbidding any discussion of the matter and the thirty years leading up to Lincoln's 1860 election were tense and fraught with sectional rivalry over the extension of slavery as the nation's boundaries expanded west.

John Quincy Adams, a former president now a representative of Massachusetts in Congress, figures largely in the first half of the book. Adams was the most strident voice against slavery, calling the Constitution "a menstruous rag" for protecting slavery and was what Kaplan calls an "anti-slavery activist" as opposed to Lincoln whom Kaplan labels an "anti-slavery moralist." According to Kaplan, Adams saw an approaching "American apocalypse" over the issue of slavery, just as Lincoln devoted his life seeking to avoid just that.

Kaplan makes it quite clear that the main issue, was, in fact, all about race. Early on he notes that the prospect of Haitians mingling with whites on the streets of Washington, D.C. during the Panama Conference was seen as highly undesirable. "Their presence, their touch, would pollute white purity. It was not a matter of politics or diplomacy or international law. It was a matter of visceral disgust." Kaplan notes that even Abigail Adams, on seeing a theatrical production of Shakespeare's "Othello," felt herself recoiling in horror as Othello touches his white wife: "I could not separate the color from the man."

As for the Confederacy, "the end of slavery would mean the death of the South, at least as all living Southerners and their ancestors had known it. That was the same as their own death. And after living with Negroes as slaves for so long, how could Southern whites safely live alongside Negroes if they were free?"

"There is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together in terms of social and political equality," Lincoln stated during one of the famous debates with Stephen Douglas. And late in the book Kaplan writes that in August of 1862, as the war raged, Lincoln met with a committee of free blacks, Northern clergymen. "His message to them was that both races suffer from the physical proximity of each other. 'The white population doesn't want you here.' That, he emphasized, was an undebatable given."

"As God made us separate," Kaplan quotes Lincoln earlier, "we can leave one another alone and do one another much good thereby."

As statues of Robert E. Lee and other prominent figures of the Confederacy are threatened with destruction or removal, it should be remembered that Lincoln offered the command of the Union army to Lee, despite the fact that he was a slave owner. Lee, like most Southern officers, favored his home state of Virginia over

the Union. "Rejecting Lincoln's offer did not feel to Lee as much like treason as fighting against the Confederacy would have felt," Kaplan writes, noting that "his every virtue and talent acknowledged, Lee was not about to give up his slaves." He also notes that Lee could not fathom fighting against the Confederacy alongside what most in the South viewed as "Yankee foreigners."

Lincoln's face in late photographs, Kaplan asserts, not only shows the burdens of a bloody War Between the States, but reflects the prospect of what Lincoln feared was in store for the nation on the racial front once the fighting had ceased. "Lincoln deeply feared a multi-racial future in which whites would find it difficult, if not impossible, to co-exist with free blacks as equal citizens. It would be, he feared, a future in which a race war, both physical and psychological, would become a permanent feature of American life."

Kaplan's "Lincoln and the Abolitionists" makes quite clear that the founding fathers, as well as Lincoln, feared the United States would pay a high price for African slavery, noting also that "slavery put money into innumerable pockets." It is a remarkable book that pulls no punches and serves as something of a corrective to commonly held views of one of the pivotal events in American history. It examines the motivations of the leaders and citizens of both the North and the South, slave and free, black and white, letting nobody off the hook. One does not put it down feeling hopeful.

Lynn says

I was given a copy of this book by HarperCollins in exchange for an honest review.

Today's post is on Lincoln and the Abolitionists: John Quincy Adams, Slavery, and the Civil War by Fred Kaplan. It is 352 pages long and is published by HarperCollins. The cover is white with pictures of the different people that are discussed in this book on it. The intended reader is someone who is interested in American history and the people behind the myths. There is mild foul language, no sex, and violence in this book. There Be Spoilers Ahead.

From the dust jacket- The acclaimed biographer, with a thought-provoking exploration of how Abraham Lincoln's and John Quincy Adams' experiences with slavery and race shaped their differing viewpoints, provides both perceptive insights into these two great presidents and a revealing perspective on race relations in modern America.

Lincoln, who in afterlife became mythologized as the Great Emancipator, was shaped by the values of the white America into which he was born. While he viewed slavery as a moral crime abhorrent to American principles, he disapproved of anti-slavery activists. Until the last year of his life, he advocated "voluntary deportation," concerned that free blacks in a white society would result in centuries of conflict. In 1861, he had reluctantly taken the nation to war to save it. While this devastating struggle would preserve the Union, it would also abolish slavery—creating the biracial democracy Lincoln feared. John Quincy Adams, forty years earlier, was convinced that only a civil war would end slavery and preserve the Union. An antislavery activist, he had concluded that a multiracial America was inevitable.

Lincoln and the Abolitionists, a frank look at Lincoln, "warts and all," provides an in-depth look at how these two presidents came to see the issues of slavery and race, and how that understanding shaped their perspectives. In a far-reaching historical narrative, Fred Kaplan offers a nuanced appreciation of both these great men and the events that have characterized race relations in America for more than a century—a legacy that continues to haunt us all.

The book has a colorful supporting cast from the relatively obscure Dorcas Allen, Moses Parsons, Violet Parsons, Theophilus Parsons, Phoebe Adams, John King, Charles Fenton Mercer, Phillip Doddridge, David Walker, Usher F. Linder, and H. Ford Douglas to Elijah Lovejoy, Francis Scott Key, William Channing,

Wendell Phillips, and Rufus King. The cast includes Hannibal Hamlin, Lincoln's first vice president, and James Buchanan and Andrew Johnson, the two presidents on either side of Lincoln. And it includes Abigail Adams, John Adams, Henry Clay, Stephen A. Douglas, and Frederick Douglass, who hold honored places in the American historical memory.

The subject of this book is slavery and racism, the paradox of Lincoln, our greatest president, as an antislavery moralist who believed in an exclusively white America; and Adams, our most brilliant statesman, as an antislavery activist who had no doubt that the United States would become a multiracial nation. It is as much about the present as the past.

Review- Another interesting yet hard read from Kaplan. In this book I learned a lot of abolitionists, more about John Q. Adams, and a little about Lincoln. Lincoln is not the real focus of this book and that does not hurt it all, surprisingly. His policies are talked about and why he was not an abolitionist was discussed but he is not the real focus of this book. Abolitionism is the real focus of this book and what it meant in its time. Why so many Americans were afraid of abolitionists and of abolition itself was explained over the course of the narrative. But Kaplan does get bogged down in the details. He wants to give as complete a picture as possible and the book does suffer for that in parts. The Civil War itself is talked in only sixty pages of this almost 400 page book and the notes are excellent if you want to do more personal research. A solid if exhausting read.

I give this book a Three out of Five stars.

Larry Davidson says

A historical account of the abolition of slavery in the US. The focus is on John Quincy Adams and Abraham Lincoln. Adams of course precedes Lincoln but is firmly for the abolition of slavery. Lincoln has a more nuanced view and is in favor of colonization where the liberated slaves are resettled in Africa. America's expansion west exacerbates the disagreement over the issue of slavery as the Southern States are for slavery in the new States while the Northern States wish to limit it to those States that initially have slavery.

Lincoln is a Whig politician whose party became the Republican Party. The Democrats are for slavery but in the 1860 presidential election are split between the Deep South and the North and their candidate Steven Douglas. This paves the way for the Lincoln victory.

We see Lincoln more focused on preserving the Union than being focused on slavery until later in his presidency. The author criticizes Lincoln for his failure to put a good General in command to prosecute the Civil War in the first two years and for selecting a pro-slavery Vice President Andrew Johnson in his second term.

The author makes this historical account very interesting. My only criticism is that he seemed to make the same points over and over again. But on balance, this is a very worthwhile read.

George Heidemark says

Fred Kaplan is an accomplished author who has written critically praised books on Dickens, Vidal and James. This book examines Lincoln as an abolitionist. It is not a biography. It is not hagiography. It is based on the premise that Lincoln's sudden death made him into a secular saint and transformed into the Great Emancipator. Kaplan's Lincoln is a conservative politician who is fairly risk adverse and who does not want

to wade into the waters surfed by the radical anti-slavery abolitionists. His hero is John Q Adams who the author feels took a principled anti slavery stand and who dreamt of a multi-racial America. He is in Kaplan's view the opposite of the overly cautious, tepid Lincoln who can't not commit to an America that will ever something that does not depend on white hegemony.

Other stars in the abolitionist firmament include Frederick Douglass, Henry Clay, Elijah Lovejoy and many others. The Lincoln in this book is a man who prefers colonization to emancipation and who tepidly walks toward ending slavery. Perhaps we have sanitized Lincoln, however, although he was not an abolitionist he always saw slavery as evil. Others may have been purer in their views than Lincoln, but he was dealing with an America in which both North and South harbored racist views toward the enslaved. Lincoln knew that and knew the limitations of his various offices. His North Star was the Declaration of Independence and he used it as the promissory note to chip away at slavery. Because he was a lawyer he knew that a wartime measure such as the Emancipation Proclamation needed the added protection of a Constitutional amendment. Perhaps Reconstruction would have had problems under Lincoln. Who is to know. Perhaps Lincoln is not a saint but he was a gifted and principled leader who navigated a difficult terrain in a manner which few politicians could have accomplished. JQ Adams was a gifted man and a man of principle but he did not bring about the end of slavery in the US. The flawed man born in a log cabin in Kentucky helped in that cause. He did not do it alone, he had an ocean of assistant's but he steered the vessel and he deserves the credit. This is a good read and a thoughtful book but it does not give Lincoln the full credit he merits. He may have not been flawless, but he was also not a poll driven, risk adverse milk toast interested in the status quo.

Jud Barry says

First, the negatives: You'll get your exercise reading this book, which lunges and jumps around in its presentation of political attitudes on race from the Federalist period through the Civil War. It also could have used a stronger editing hand--I once counted three consecutive sentences each one of which said the same thing in a slightly different way. Most damningly for a work of history, it contains at least one glaring and basic error of fact: "Tennessee had never left the Union," the author says on p. 322; it's impossible for mistakes like this not to affect one's assessment of a book.

Those things said, however, the book is redeemed by the simple fact that it provides 21st century readers with a useful overview of the racial attitudes that existed in the US up to the time of the Civil War. The "device" used to accomplish this is the contrast between Lincoln and J. Q. Adams--both "antislavery" presidents--on the issue of the whether a multiracial society was possible in the United States. Adams the abolitionist believed in some kind of civil status for blacks, but up until the very end of his life, Lincoln did not: the end of slavery would require blacks somehow to be "colonized" elsewhere, out of the United States. While it is possible that the dire effects of all-out war caused Lincoln to re-think this--after all he did finally approve the use of black soldiers whose contributions would need to be recognized and rewarded were the war to conclude successfully--author Kaplan's skillful discussion of the political, strategic components of the Emancipation Proclamation make it more likely that Lincoln was improvising a solution to the war first without formulating any kind of comprehensive approach to how the African-American population should be treated after the war was over. This book offers little support for those who think that Lincoln would have championed black rights during Reconstruction.

As often is the case in a book like this, it is the "minor" characters who call out for further dramatic (fictional?) development: Lincoln's law colleague and outspoken racist Usher Linder, whose aggressive repugnance towards all blacks was probably typical of most white Americans of the time; Elijah Lovejoy, the first anti-slavery martyr--he died at the hands of an Illinois lynch mob--whom Lincoln defended not for his views on slavery but for his right to express his opinions without being killed for them; Wendell Phillips, the

abolitionist advocate of the kind of multiracial society that the US has eventually become; and David Walker, "America's first black intellectual," whose 1830 "Appeal" asserted the claim of African-Americans to racial equality.

There is to me no more abiding lesson in human nature than the racial history of the United States. This book makes a signal contribution to the teaching of that lesson.

Lynn says

The interesting part of this book for me were the sidelines in which the author describes the life and work of several abolitionists and especially details the work of John Quincy Adams. The boring part is the way he incessantly tries to debunk the reputation of Abraham Lincoln because he wasn't an abolitionist or at the forefront of the racial debate. I especially found it annoying when he would attack Lincoln's reputation not with evidence but merely by raising long lists of questions about what he might or might not have been feeling, leading the reader to assume the worst. I came away with a much richer understanding of Adams but didn't change my views on Lincoln, who I know took a long time to move toward racial enlightenment (as perhaps do we all.) I am also reading Sydney Bloomenthal's four part biography of Lincoln's political life, half of which has been published. Read that instead.

Kusaimamekirai says

"The bloodiest war ever waged is infinitely better than the happiest slavery which ever fattened men into obedience. And yet I love peace. But it is real peace; not peace such as we have had; not peace that meant lynch-law in the Carolinas and mob law in New York; not peace that meant chains around Boston Court-House, a gag on the lips of statesmen, and the slave sobbing himself to sleep in curses. No more such peace for me; no peace that is not born of justice, and does not recognize the rights of every race and every man." - Wendell Phillips

Slavery was from the founding of the American republic, the issue that always threatened to blow it apart. While the majority of Southerners were intransigent about its necessity and their willingness to defend it at all cost, many in the North shared their sentiment albeit for different reasons. Of course, not all men North or South, fell lockstep into a pro-slavery or anti-slavery binary worldview. Prominent Southerners like Thomas Jefferson and Henry Clay (both slaveholders) and Northerners like Lincoln (although born in Kentucky) publicly lamented the morality of slavery while insisting it was a necessary evil and doing little to confront it.

Then there was John Quincy Adams. Son of founding father John Adams, secretary of state, president, senator, congressman, and yes, badass abolitionist.

What set Adams apart from men like Jefferson, Lincoln, Clay and others was that he was willing to back up his rhetoric with action. Adams submitted anti-slavery petitions to Congress like a madman. The author cites one January where he submitted 195 of these alone. Not a typo, 195. That is just insane. One imagines that being under a Congressional gag rule that prevented any member from introducing any anti-slavery petitions just motivated him even more to give them a big "screw you". The image of him churning these out at his desk brings a smile to my face. There is a very humorous story in the book where after a speech by Henry Clay decrying slavery but also imploring the abolitionists to stop agitating to end slavery, Adams presented a

resolution to...end slavery. Ok, I'll stop my Adams fanboying here and get on with the review but along with John Brown, he's one of my new heroes.

While effusively praising Adams, the author is not so enamoured with Lincoln. He often sees him through a prism of political calculation, self interest, and at times an inability to recognize the determination of the South to secede. While it is a wholly valid criticism to say that Lincoln's views on slavery were based primarily on a moral dislike of slavery that never exceeded the political calculations of inaction, it is perhaps unfair on Lincoln to say he was unwilling to take action on slavery. It is never easy to step back from the present and assess events of the past without the prejudices of time and experience.

However, Lincoln was faced not only with a hostile South but a North who was less than sympathetic to abolition as well. Were Lincoln for example to unilaterally free all the slaves (the Emancipation Proclamation in fact only freed slaves in Confederate States, not in border states such as Kentucky, Missouri, Delaware and Maryland) it's easy to imagine more states defecting to the Confederacy immediately and Northern soldiers throwing down their guns and going home (many in fact did this anyway). Could the Union who in the early days of the war was reeling from several heavy defeats have survived four more states joining the Confederacy? Particularly with Maryland and Delaware being on the doorstep of the capital? The author argues Lincoln had a moral imperative to do more than he did. Perhaps so.

My only defense of Lincoln would be that while his stance lacked the courage of a John Quincy Adams or a William Lloyd Garrison, they did not have the power he possessed and therefore he needed to consider his rhetoric far more carefully. That Lincoln's path was ultimately the one that emancipated the slaves and saved the Union is perhaps the metric best used to judge whether he was right or wrong.

John Munro says

The author compares the views on slavery of John Quincy Adams to those of Abraham Lincoln, and describes the contribution to their perspectives by a number of lesser known abolitionists, such as Wendell Phillips and Elijah Lovejoy. Despite the fact that Lincoln faced enormous challenges in preserving the Union during the Civil War, he comes up short in the presidential comparison. While the author goes into great detail to show how their views evolved over time and were influenced by events of the day, I felt he could have devoted more time to the evolution of Lincoln's views on slavery during the Civil War, especially to the passage of the 13th Amendment. Lincoln's maneuvers to get it passed are not mentioned. The book has a general chronological flow, but suffers from frequent jumps back and forth in time. All in all, it's a worthwhile read, as it sheds some light on the moral and political views of the Great Emancipator

Kathryn says

For anyone with even a modest interest in events leading to the Civil War, this was a disappointing read. I doubt that many people reading this book will be surprised to learn that Thomas Jefferson was a hypocritical elitist, that Abraham Lincoln was actually not in favor of abolition, and that most slave-owners wanted to keep slavery alive.

The only reason I am giving this two stars instead of one is because it was well-researched -- even though this research seemed to focus mainly on unimportant and unenlightening minor details.

The book also jumps back and forth in time (it has very poor flow) and is poorly edited (awkward sentences). It also seemed to me that Kaplan was frequently more interested in inflaming his readers than in educating them.

In my opinion, reading this book was a waste of my time.

Jeff Javid says

Kaplan does not give Lincoln his due as being a politician from Illinois, whose southern half was settled by Southerners mainly. He felt that "a universal feeling, whether well- or ill-founded, can not be safely disregarded." Public opinion had to be considered when seeking any change. At the outset of the Illinois senatorial campaign of 1858, Abraham Lincoln pleaded with his audience, "let us discard all this quibbling about this man and the other man; this race and that race and the other race being inferior, and therefore they must be placed in an inferior position; discarding our standard that we have left us. Let us discard all these things, and unite as one people throughout this land, until we shall once more stand up declaring that all men are created equal..I leave you, hoping that the lamp of liberty will burn in your bosoms until there shall no longer be a doubt that all men are created free and equal." In an 1855 private letter to his best friend Lincoln had written that he "abhors" "the oppression of Negroes," as he does the "degrading" of white immigrants and Catholics, and yet he and other Northerners "crucify" their feelings for the sake of Union. As is implied from this, and from a private memoranda of how pro-slavery arguments could also be used to justify white enslavement, Lincoln in using the word "oppression" was not just referring to slavery (Know-Nothings were not proposing to physically enslave either group, immigrant or Catholic). Lincoln further stated in that letter that slavery had "the power to make me miserable," because it denied African-Americans the right, the hope, to rise in life, something that at his core he held dear. Yet, Lincoln in 1858 was running against the territorial expansion of slavery, opposing the increasingly race-baiting incumbent Senator Stephen A. Douglas, and before racist voters in Illinois, and thus had to adjust his rhetorical stance. Lincoln never said blacks were inherently inferior. But, if he had advocated, or left unanswered charges of being for, full equality in 1858, he would most certainly have committed political suicide. As one historian has said, had Lincoln not made the concessions on race he did when he did "the Lincoln of history simply would not exist." Lincoln did however state that the purpose of the Declaration of Independence is to "augment the happiness and value of life to all people, of all colors, everywhere."

Worried that the Emancipation Proclamation would be ruled unconstitutional and that he would not be re-elected, Lincoln asked Frederick Douglass to devise a plan to get as many slaves out of the South as possible. Once re-elected, Lincoln used all his powers of persuasion and patronage to get the 13th Amendment through Congress to ensure slavery's total abolition in the U.S. He was deeply involved with issues of reconstruction, including race relations. Lincoln had said the treatment of blacks in the US did not "accord with justice." He never categorically said America should be an all-white republic. Colonization was always to be voluntary; Lincoln felt white prejudice so intractable that as President he urged black leaders to consider it. Colonization was abandoned as ventures failed, and African-Americans rejected it. It is not inconceivable that Lincoln still wished to afford those blacks who wished to escape white racism the choice, even as he was working to include blacks in the American polity. As president, Lincoln approved of bills abolishing segregation on omnibuses in D.C.; for allowing black witnesses in federal courts; for equalizing penalties for the same crime; for equal pay for black soldiers; and outlawing discrimination on the basis of color in the carrying of the US mail. He welcomed, for the first time, an ambassador from Haiti; African-Americans picnicked on the White House grounds. He supported the activities of the Freedmen's Bureau. Frederick Douglass was "impressed with his entire freedom from popular prejudice against the colored race" after meeting with Lincoln three times in the White House, and in 1865 called him "emphatically the black man's president."

On January 16, 1865, General Sherman issued Special Field Order No. 15, subsequent to a meeting, called

by Lincoln's Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, to ascertain from a group of African-American leaders of Savannah, Georgia, the needs of the community of the newly freed. The leaders mentioned land, and in an unprecedented and revolutionary action, the order confiscated 400,000 acres of abandoned coastal land in South Carolina and Florida, including Georgia's Sea Islands, for the use of families of freedmen. Lincoln had sent Stanton to Savannah to meet with Sherman over the issue of the planters' lands, and Lincoln approved S.F. #15. When he visited occupied Richmond, Virginia, President Lincoln took off his hat and returned the bow of an elderly black man--an act of equality and respect noted by sullen white onlookers and the press alike. In what was to be his last public address, Lincoln called for public schooling for blacks, and for the vote for black soldiers and the well educated. John Wilkes Booth, in the crowd, seethed "that means n--citizenship", and vowed that the speech would be Lincoln's last. As the historian Eric Foner has said, Lincoln, by the latter stage of his presidency, envisioned the beginnings of a biracial democracy. I have long thought John Q. Adams is one of the great unsung heroes of American history, both as President and Congressman, but Lincoln fully deserves his historical reputation in the struggle for freedom, and, yes, towards creating a biracial republic.

Miles Smith says

This is an unusual book. It's thesis is clear: Lincoln was not an abolitionist. Although he was noble in his own way, he was limited to being a morally anti-slavery politician.

The work's biggest strength is Kaplan's comparisons of Lincoln to various abolitionist politicians, most notably John Quincy Adams, who championed actual abolition despite the possible problems it entailed for the constitutional order.

The book's underlying and near debilitating weakness is its organization. Which detracts from the argument and makes it difficult for the reader to view the text as a unitary narrative.

Tyler says

Had to quit this halfway through. The introduction is strong and sets out some interesting points but it quickly goes off the rails to infodump town. There is no focus to this book and no explanations either. It seems like it is setup like a popular history but it reads like a historian on cocaine, very boring cocaine. It hits you with U.S. policy and speeches one after another that vaguely relate to the introduction. When we got into George Washington's involvement with Haiti, I had to stop. It spews out so much information but it never connects back to any ongoing storyline other than just slavery in general. I normally wouldn't care too much about tangents but these tangent ratio is way off. It's mostly tangents that don't directly related to Lincoln or Adams. It confusing because you never get an idea of why this particular policy or quote is immediately important. It was just never ending. I give this book credit for making my early U.S. history ignorance clear and did make me look up some things that it never cared to explain. For example if you, like me, don't know what Federalists stood for or if Jefferson was one of them from the start then this probably isn't for you. There's just too much work figuring out what is going on on my part to make this book make any sense first of all and second the wikipedia articles are more interesting and not surprisingly more coherent. I just noticed the cover should have been a warning, so much on there. What is this about again? So many people on the cover. haha.

David Kent says

As a Lincoln scholar, this was a tough book to read for a variety of reasons. Kaplan is obviously enamored of John Quincy Adams, the subject of one of his previous biographies. The book contrasts Adams's attitudes and actions regarding slavery with Lincoln's, finding Lincoln sorely lacking because he wasn't an active abolitionist. The author also seems to channel abolitionist Wendell Phillips, the northern abolitionist that mirrored the extremism of the southern pro-slavery firebrands. Phillips also happens to be one of Lincoln's greatest critics, and at times it appears Kaplan is Phillips in his treatment of Lincoln.

Much of the first half of the book focuses on John Quincy Adams, while the latter half focuses on Abraham Lincoln. This is entirely appropriate as the two are found in two different eras of political strife, with Adams literally dying in the House chambers while Lincoln likely sat in the back of the same room as a single-term Congressman. Adams likely listened to Lincoln's extended speechifying in the House during his "spot" resolution discussions, which attacked President Polk's decision to invade Mexico. Adams would have agreed with Lincoln's views, including the argument that the rationale for the Mexican War was to gain territory in which to expand slavery.

Kaplan's writing almost deifies Adams's contribution to the abolition debate, not the least of which included pressuring despite the "gag rule" that forbade even the discussion of how to end slavery. In contrast, Kaplan barely gives Lincoln credit for any contribution to the end of slavery. Kaplan paints Lincoln as "an anti-slavery moralist who believed in an exclusively white America" and Adams as "an antislavery activist who had no doubt the US would become a multiracial nation." He threads this rather tenuous premise throughout the narrative, using it repeatedly to drive his opinion that Lincoln was a reluctant emancipator who did nothing until he was pushed to do so by others and by circumstances. He carries this premise and repeats it ad nauseam throughout the book. Lincoln is to blame, in Kaplan's opinion, for the war, for slavery continuing, and for taking the chance that the South might come back into the Union after the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, thus potentially returning the Union to a pre-war status, i.e., with slavery intact.

There is certainly room for debate on the various issues discussed, but while Kaplan says in his preface that the book honors both Adams and Lincoln, he clearly honors one and holds back credit for the other. The perspective is worth reading, but should not be taken at face value; additional knowledge of events must also be brought in to make the discussion more fact-based.

Regarding fact, Kaplan makes many errors of fact, from minor (Lincoln's first inaugural was on March 4, 1861, not March 6) to horrendous (he discusses for several pages that Tennessee had not left the Union [It did]). He also claims "Confederates had been driven out of Louisiana early in the war" which isn't true; only part of Louisiana returned to Union hands. He discusses in depth how Lincoln actively replaced Hamlin with Johnson, which is overstating the case tremendously as Lincoln's role was likely very limited. He states that Lincoln "called Hannibal Hamlin to Springfield" and told him he wanted him as a running mate, which isn't true. Lincoln didn't meet Hamlin until after the two of them had been separately nominated at the Republican convention in Chicago (where neither of them was present). Other errors are laced throughout the book.

Which is a bit confusing because otherwise the book is well researched and documented. Likely Kaplan had a greater understanding of Adams because of his previous biography, but he also wrote a "Biography of a Writer" about Lincoln, so the errors are a mystery. The organization of the book also makes it a tough read. Kaplan hops around in time and space, not only from page to page but paragraph to paragraph. This makes it sometimes difficult to follow the thought processes. At one point, for example, he starts to talk about the Matson case, in which Lincoln co-counseled with noted racist (and family friend) Usher Linder on the side of a man trying to retain his slaves. But after a few lines indicating he would discuss it, he veers off on a tangent, then returns to it a few pages later, only to give a quick introduction and veer off again before finally coming back to the case several pages down the road.

So would I recommend the book? Yes, and no. I do think he provides some interesting perspectives and good background, especially about John Quincy Adams, Wendell Phillips, and a cast of lesser known characters important to the slavery discussion. But I would caution that prior to digging in, readers should have a broader understanding of Lincoln's attitudes and roles, and be careful of significant errors of fact. As I know less about Adams I can't determine if there are errors or premise conflicts in the sections dealing with him. But readers without a good understanding of Lincoln should be wary of taking the ideas presented in the book at face value. Those with knowledge might find that knowledge challenged, though not always correctly or persuasively.

Richard says

Lincoln wasn't John Quincy Adams. End of story.

Darcia Helle says

Interesting how the distorted lens of history gives us a rose-colored view of Abraham Lincoln as a slave-fighting hero. He was not, at least not in the way he's typically portrayed. While he found slavery morally troubling, without the threat of secession by the south he likely would have been content to leave things as they were. In our modern-day terms, Abraham Lincoln could easily be described as a White Supremacist. Of course, we can't judge past generations by current standards, though it is important to note that Lincoln was not all that different from many of his contemporaries in this respect. He was not unique, nor was he particularly concerned with the suffering endured by the millions of slaves

John Quincy Adams, on the other hand, had remarkably progressive opinions on the issues of slavery and (de)segregation. He was outspoken and passionate, and today would be considered an activist. Yet our textbooks and history lessons largely leave out Adams while putting Lincoln on a pedestal, simply because Lincoln happened to be president when the country was forced to decide between a united nation and slavery.

Fred Kaplan lays the truth out for us in this exceptionally researched book. The author's focus is not on the war itself, but on the people and politics leading up to and surrounding it. We see the nation and its people as they really were, absent the shiny polish and pedestals we tend to give our historical heroes.

Kaplan's writing is an intelligent narrative without the academic pretense. This is an in-depth but easy book to read.

Kaplan gives us a gift here by giving us the truth. We need to know and to acknowledge the truth of where we've been if we ever hope to create a better future.

I received an advance copy from the publisher, via Amazon Vine, in exchange for my honest review.
