



Lincoln President-Elect: Abraham Lincoln and the Great Secession Winter, 1860-1861

Harold Holzer

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One of our most eminent Lincoln scholars examines the four months between Lincoln's election and inauguration, when the president-elect made the most important decision of his coming presidency — there would be no compromise on slavery or secession of the slaveholding states, even at the cost of civil war.

Abraham Lincoln first demonstrated his determination and leadership in the Great Secession Winter — the four months between his election in November 1860 and his inauguration in March 1861 — when he rejected compromises urged on him by Republicans and Democrats, Northerners and Southerners, that might have preserved the Union a little longer but would have enshrined slavery for generations. Though Lincoln has been criticized by many historians for failing to appreciate the severity of the secession crisis that greeted his victory, Harold Holzer shows that the president-elect waged a shrewd and complex campaign to prevent the expansion of slavery while vainly trying to limit secession to a few Deep South states.

During this most dangerous White House transition in American history, the country had two presidents: one powerless (the president-elect, possessing no constitutional authority), the other paralyzed (the incumbent who refused to act). Through limited, brilliantly timed and crafted public statements, determined private letters, tough political pressure, and personal persuasion, Lincoln guaranteed the integrity of the American political process of majority rule, sounded the death knell of slavery, and transformed not only his own image but that of the presidency, even while making inevitable the war that would be necessary to make these achievements permanent.

Lincoln President-Elect is the first book to concentrate on Lincoln's public stance and private agony during these months and on the momentous consequences when he first demonstrated his determination and leadership. Holzer recasts Lincoln from an isolated prairie politician yet to establish his greatness, to a skillful shaper of men and opinion and an immovable friend of freedom at a decisive moment when allegiance to the founding credo "all men are created equal" might well have been sacrificed.

Lincoln President-Elect: Abraham Lincoln and the Great Secession Winter, 1860-1861 Details

Date : Published October 21st 2008 by Simon & Schuster

ISBN : 9780743289474

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Format : Hardcover 623 pages

Genre : Military History, Civil War, History, Biography, North American Hi..., American History, Politics, Presidents

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Jerome says

A readable, well-written history of the four months between the 1860 election and Lincoln's inauguration. Holzer's Lincoln comes off as a decisive, strong-willed statesman with a clear idea of his goals, uncertainty about his methods, and a shrewd grasp of how to achieve his objectives. Holzer argues that Lincoln exerted more power and influence before his formal swearing-in than any other president-elect, and that Lincoln was unprepared to sacrifice his party's position on slavery in order to save the Union that had existed before. Holzer's Lincoln comes off as "great" before the war even started.

Holzer's prose moves along at a crisp pace, and his rendition of the daily grind of Lincoln's life at this time is very enjoyable. His retelling of the facts is clear and his arguments are well-supported. Holzer clearly describes all of the issues faced by Lincoln and how he managed to retain a grip on reality throughout, as well as retain a good deal of energy. Some historians have portrayed Lincoln during this era as self-doubting, indecisive, and on the verge of being overwhelmed; Holzer clearly disagrees, although he does describe all of the incidents where Lincoln's rhetoric seemed clumsy and contradictory. Also, this was the same period where Lincoln made the poor choice of Simon Cameron as secretary of War.

As a lame-duck president, it did not seem like there was all that much Lincoln could do during this period. Holzer does not address this in much detail; to the extent that he does, he seems to strongly disagree. He thoroughly covers all of Lincoln's activities during this period; however, there is relatively little coverage of other players, many of whom arguably may have had more of an impact than Lincoln. The book's narrow focus is one drawback, and Holzer doesn't always put Lincoln's rhetoric and actions into any wider context.

There is little analysis of Lincoln's speeches, which seems inappropriate given that the whole country was paying attention at the time. Holzer calls the compromise movement "unprincipled," and calls Buchanan's willingness to give concessions to the South "astonishing," even though Buchanan blamed the crisis on antislavery radicals. He calls Millard Fillmore's support for the Fugitive Slave Act, "inexplicable," although even Lincoln and Chase would have supported it. Holzer also writes that the Republican proposal to admit New Mexico "embraced nearly all the key Southern demands." It did? What about Dred Scott, the slave code issue, and the territories issue? Also, most of Holzer's discussion of Lincoln's anti-compromise attitude is about Lincoln's views on slavery. There is little on Lincoln's constitutional views.

Also, Holzer mostly only covers these events from Lincoln's perspective; if word of them got back to Lincoln, Holzer usually covers it. If it didn't, Holzer mostly doesn't. The course of the seceding states and the Buchanan administration is worthy of coverage, but Holzer's discussion of these seems inadequate. Also, Holzer's themes sometimes seem repetitive. The constant discussion of this or that office seeker seems mostly irrelevant. Mary Boykin Chesnut is at one point called a "Virginia" diarist, and Holzer writes that the South Carolina secession convention took place in Charleston (it was first Columbia, then Charleston).

There are also a few typos, like "ant-slavery," and no doubt some readers will roll their eyes at Holzer's indulgence in trivia: Lincoln's decision to grow a beard takes up seven pages for some reason; Holzer even claims that this was a ploy to distract the public debate about secession (huh?). His preparations to leave Springfield for Washington take up no less than twenty pages.

Still, a vivid, well-written, very well told story that fully captures the daily grind, chaos, expectations, and

strain of this period.

Martin says

The golden rule of book reviews is to not criticize an author for not writing the book he didn't write. While I was somewhat disappointed in Harold Holzer's 460-page tome on the four months between Lincoln's election victory and his highly anticipated inauguration (attended by a whopping 25,000 people, an unprecedented crowd in 1861), it is a worthy, enlightening, easy read.

The scope of the book is intentionally narrow. It deals only with Lincoln, his thoughts, his words, his grinding day-to-day routine, and closest advisors and allies during the four months of his life between Nov. 1860 and March 1861 (the four-month lame duck period was done away with during FDR's presidency).

Holzer sought to debunk what he contends is an inaccurate historical representation of Lincoln during this interregnum: that he was "too conspicuous, sequestered, careless, conciliatory, calculating, coercive, sloppy" and even preening! Lincoln grew a beard for the first time after his election victory.

Holzer successfully re-examines the record and paints a much different picture of a shrewd, politically skilled leader without yet the responsibility, or burden, of office-- who faced an overwhelming crisis. Lincoln had to pull off the juggling act of all juggling acts, with northern Republicans demanding he stand firm in the face of insurrection, northern Democrats begging him to compromise, southern Democrats accusing him of belligerence, and abolitionists spitting out their frustration any time Lincoln reminded them he would not seek to end slavery where it existed, where it had been Constitutionally protected.

You are taken into the meeting rooms where Lincoln personally met patronage job seekers, into his correspondence with political allies and foes, and into his incredible mind as he drafts and re-drafts his first inaugural address. This aspect of the book is most rewarding; Lincoln's writing skills were unparalleled among contemporary politicians. He was a man of principle, even if some of those principles may be hard to understand today. For instance, Lincoln supported the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act, although he detested the law.

You need only a cursory knowledge of American history to understand the context in which Lincoln operated in his "masterly inactivity" (he remained publicly silent for weeks after Election Day so he would not inflame southern fire-eaters, among others). For example, Holzer mentions briefly how Lincoln studied Jackson's handling of the Nullification controversy over the tariff of 1832. You get very little detail of that past battle between Jackson and the Nullifiers, but enough to understand it was an important moment on the road to disunion. Never heard of Edwin Ruffin? You'll learn a little about him here.

And that is where my disappointment lay. I wanted Holzer to stray outside Lincoln's world more often-- and examine Secession with a broader scope. Instead, he gives you enough to understand the incredible challenges Lincoln faced from all angles-- which was the intention of his work anyway. You will come away with a clearer understanding and better appreciation of Lincoln's marvelous intellect.

There are a lot of colorful characters here, too, like Frederick Douglass, Horace Greeley, and Lincoln's wife Mary.

Another bonus of reading a book like this is you taste what American life was like 150 years ago, a world

without electronic amplification (how did anyone hear Lincoln's speech?), where women had to sit behind the men in their own area at the inaugural ceremonies, and a world in which blacks were non-persons, even in Lincoln's Illinois.

And Old Abe wasn't the best speller!

Norman McLaughlin says

Great behind the scenes view point.

Enjoyed learning about how Abraham Lincoln handled the secession crisis while still being powerless to really do anything about it.

Christian says

A little too much minutiae for the casual reader, but ideal for the civil war/Lincoln fan. Holzer is a big fan of Lincoln -- and rarely leaves his topic to visit other events happening contemporaneously -- but you get real insight into the President-elect by the focus. Some of the repetition gets annoying (way too much time is spent on office-seekers in my opinion), but at the same time you get to view a lot of the living and political conditions of the times, not just the march to Civil War.

If you haven't read Team of Rivals yet, I honestly suggest you do that first. But if you have read it and are looking for another bio on Lincoln to read, you can't go wrong with this one.

Jeff says

Having read some of the other reviews, I don't know how much I can add.

This is a well-researched, well-written account of Abraham Lincoln's life and actions during the time between his election and his inauguration. This is an unique time in our history; states were seceding, the sitting President (Buchanan) was completely immobilized, and the President-Elect (Lincoln) had four long months during which he had no power and during which he wisely recognized that anything he said would probably only serve to make the situation worse. All through this time, Lincoln dealt with a tidal wave of job-seekers and dispensers of (usually) unwanted advice. As Mr. Holzer so accurately points out, it's amazing how astute and wise Lincoln was in how he proceeded, and yet he rarely receives the credit he deserves for getting through those four months with as little damage as he did.

I enjoyed the volume of detail Mr. Holzer provides and especially appreciated that he rarely drifted off into baseless speculation in the way that so many other historical authors are tempted to do. He backs up his speculations with first-hand accounts and even goes so far as to cast doubt on his source's veracity when the occasion calls for skepticism.

This is not a book for the casual reader. In order to fully appreciate the material, it's essential to already have a familiarity with the time period and with the chain of events of those four months, because Mr. Holzer does not dive into much detail outside the world of Springfield, the train trip from Illinois to DC, and the days in Washington City leading up to Inauguration Day. Along the way, Mr. Holzer provides insights into 19th Century practices (for example, the inauguration parade and address were customarily held *before* the new President received the oath of office) that add to the sense that you are there.

Bottom line: this book is well worth the time.

Guy Priel says

This is a great addition to any collection of Lincoln biographies written by one of the preeminent Lincoln scholars writing today. I have always found Holzer's works to be well researched and very well written. This was a smooth flowing book that covers a relatively under covered periods in the life of Lincoln. Sure, we know a lot about Lincoln during his presidency, but very little about his experiences and life between the election of 1860 and the inauguration. This book fills the gap very well.

Chaim Shapiro says

Holzer is one of the best on Lincoln. While this book is engaging, I believe he overstates the argument in support of Lincoln's silence during the "Secession Winter."

I do believe that part of it was strategy, but I am also convinced that Lincoln underestimated the crisis, at least at the beginning of his time as President-Elect.

Aaron Million says

Interesting book about Lincoln's handling of his long interregnum between his election in early November 1860 and his inauguration on March 4, 1861. It is incredible to read that, almost daily, he would hold public visiting hours to allow people the chance to come in and talk with him. These sessions were not just for party luminaries and big-wigs, they were for anyone who wanted to see him (most of them came asking for a job as they knew Lincoln would soon command a vast amount of political patronage to dispense). It truly is a wonder that he lived as long as he did since so many people had access to him and someone easily could have killed him even before he took office. But Lincoln refused to believe that many people really intended to do him harm.

Especially interesting was Lincoln's inaugural journey from Springfield to Washington. The supposed assassination plot against him in Baltimore has never been proven nor disproven.

I do think the book suffers from over-reliance on newspaper editorials and commentaries. I understand Holzer wanting to paint a scene showing the disparate factions, and their mouthpieces (who back then were largely newspapers as they were more partisan than today) either praising or criticizing everything that Lincoln said or did (or did not say or do). However, after reading what, for instance, the New York Herald Tribune had to say about Lincoln's latest rumored cabinet choice, became somewhat overdone.

Donna says

Just like in Civil War readings you can go from the general (multi-volume military histories) to the specific (how one regiement fought at a particular hour on a particular day in a particular battle), so with Lincoln. One can read the 10-volume work by Nicoly and Hay or more narrow works like this.

This volume focuses on Lincoln as president-elect, from the night of his election until the delivery of the First Inaugural Address. Like Obama, he believed in the "one president at a time" mode of operation. Unlike Obama, he made no final cabinet appointments and very few official speeches. He stood on the platform on which he was elected and suggested people read his prior speeches to know what he believed.

A fine biography with a some details that I had not known before. (no jokes about that)

Matt says

"I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

Dick says

This book is close to a five star book for me. I am very picky about giving 5 stars, though.

Harold Holzer knows the subject of the book - his depth of knowlege is widely acknowledged and it shows in the book. Four four months - Lincoln with no power - had to try to put a cabinet together, write speech that would mark his direction and that of the country - all the while states are seceding and setting up their own separate nation with governments to support that effort. And by the way, they were also seizing federal property in defiance of the government duly elected in Washington D.C. Lincoln literally toiled over his inaugural address - hoping against hope that war could be averted and that the states in rebellion would be convinced that something could be worked out. Lincoln had no intention of abolishing slavery where it existed, but was in his heart determined to stop the spread of that awful institution. Here is Lincoln trying to put a cabinet together that would consist of a number of political opponents all the while the south is a powder keg that he has no influence on. He spoke only briefly during the LONG 4 month delay to inauguration, so as to avoid inflaming things further - either in the south or the north. And remember that Lincoln had a staff of . . . only two. John Nicolay and John Hay (www.lincolntogo.net)

To keep this in perspective, this was probably the most dangerous transition from one president to another. On one hand we have an outgoing president who is paralyzed by events and refusing to act and the incoming president with no constitutional authority whatever. The country is literally fragmenting during the 4 months from election to the March inauguration of Lincoln.

Lincoln comes out as a strong, resolute and determined man. 4.8 stars for this book. Great addition to my

"Lincoln Library".

Ryan Bach says

I thought this book was fantastic! Holzer's argument is simply that historians who play Lincoln as aloof in the four months between his election and inauguration as President of the United States are wrong. Holzer shows a Lincoln willing to play party chief: filling patronage jobs, dictating policy to congressional Republicans (no compromise on the free soil policy outlined in the 1860 Republican platform), researching past speeches/actions made in order to placate or deal with the South, as well as issue essays anonymously. It was thought unseemly for a president-elect to give any real policy preferences while the lame duck president still held power, since he had no real power anyway.

Even if you're not a history or Lincoln buff, you will enjoy this book. It's structured like a narrative, and flows very nicely. It has a plethora of "Lincolnian" jokes and phrases that he reportedly made to newspaper reporters at the time, and they make for an enjoyable read.

Tim says

author is respectful to his subject and gives lincoln a lot of praise for his difficult journey from the election of 1860 to his inauguration in march 1861. the book reveals lincoln's thoughts concerning his cabinet choices as well as his deliberations of the genesis, writing, and editing his inaugural address. i put the book down often, but i always was able to pick it up again and not lose the author's train of thought or narrative. i give this 5 stars because it shows WHY lincoln is an american hero, and why he deserves our appreciation and praise!

Joe says

After seeing Harold Holzer on the Lou Dobbs show talking about his new book, I decided to read it, in part, to be able to reflect and compare how Lincoln used his time as President-Elect with the current President-Elect status of Barack Obama we are living in today. Harold goes to great lengths to detail every single moment, if possible, into weekly chunks, of Lincoln's excruciatingly long 4 month's as President-Elect. Harold Holzer did a great job with this book, and it was highly readable. The constant office seekers, the photo and sculptor sitting sessions, the telegraph office visits, the press hounding him to speak out about the status of secession, the hide-away where he worked on his first inaugural address, and his mistake laden victory train ride to Washington, are all vividly described in this biography. And yes, the never ending theme of the unqualified office seeker who shows up in Lincoln's presence asking for great favors are written into almost every page, almost to nausea. But I only had to read about it. Lincoln had to live it.

Bo Crowell says

Very academic

