
The Problem of Lincoln in Babbitt's Thought

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Half a century ago, Lincoln biographer David Herbert Donald surveyed the pious pleadings of an unlikely assortment of politicians who testified to Abraham Lincoln's certain endorsement for their policies. Agreeing on little else, they were all "getting right with Lincoln." The struggle to define Lincoln's place in American history began immediately with his death. Squabbling Republicans fought for the title to Lincoln's legacy as each side claimed to be the rightful heir to Lincoln's true intentions. Lincoln's memory was invoked to support or oppose any number of legislative or reform proposals no matter how remote from the America of the 1860s. By the 1930s, according to Donald, Lincoln was "everybody's grandfather"—whether New Dealer, communist, socialist, vegetarian, or prohibitionist.¹ The question "What would Lincoln Do?" had become as common in political circles as the soul-searching query "What Would Jesus Do?" among earnest social gospel reformers.

*"Getting right
with Lincoln."*

Given his impatience with sentimentalists, humanitarians, and "uplifters" of all kinds, it is surprising at first glance to find Irving Babbitt among those "getting right with Lincoln"—even to a modest degree—especially at the height of the Progressive Era's dreamy infatuation with the Lincoln mystique. To be sure, Babbitt offered few direct comments about Lincoln and his legacy. Beyond

¹ David Donald, "Getting Right With Lincoln," in *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays of the Civil War Era*, 2d ed. (New York: Vintage, 1961), 3-18.

one reference in *Literature and the American College* (1909) and a handful in *Democracy and Leadership* (1924), Lincoln hardly appears in his works. In contrast with his extensive treatment of Woodrow Wilson, for instance, Babbitt's near silence regarding the Great Emancipator hardly seems to merit passing comment let alone close analysis. Nevertheless, what little Babbitt did say about Lincoln is so sweeping that it cannot be ignored.

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Lincoln appears in *Literature and the American College* within Babbitt's stinging criticism of the false conception of democracy then being experimented with at Charles Eliot's Harvard in the form of the elective system. Babbitt traced this misguided enthusiasm for autonomy, impulse, and immature judgment to Rousseauist assumptions. A Rousseauist "pseudo-democracy," he warned, exalts the will of an individual or of a momentary popular majority and jettisons the time-tested and slowly accumulated "standards of judgment" of civilized society. In contrast to this temperamental romanticism, Babbitt chose Lincoln to represent "true democracy" built on the "permanent element of judgment" and what he called a "selective democracy of the sober second thought" that resists the easy temptation of the "passing impression."² While Babbitt nowhere in this context mentions the South and secession, presumably the South's bid for independence stood in his mind for the contrasting spirit of false liberty and restless, willful democracy.

Building on this early insight, Babbitt used Lincoln much more extensively sixteen years later in *Democracy and Leadership*. By this point, Lincoln had come to represent one side in the ongoing conflict in American culture and constitutional thought between impulsive democracy and restrained "unionism." Babbitt carefully distanced Lincoln from the Rousseauist and Jeffersonian temperament, denying that he allowed his Arcadian dreams to affect his conduct in office. Far from a utopian demagogue frolicking in the Elysian fields with Rousseau, Lincoln represented the self-restrained, model statesman and ethical realist who preserved the true "liberty of the unionist" as the nation stood on the brink of dissolution. Babbitt projected onto American history as a whole the dualism of the individual human heart. He found two prin-

² Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College: Essays in Defense of the Humanities*, Introduction by Russell Kirk (Washington, DC: National Humanities Institute, 1986), 115.

ciples at war in the American soul: tugging in one direction, a passionate Rousseauist temperament revealed in the political principles of Thomas Jefferson, a tendency to overestimate human goodness, the abstractions of the Declaration of Independence, a fondness for direct democracy, the impulsive states' rights doctrine of John C. Calhoun, and the anarchy of secession; pulling against all this, a restrained Burkean spirit manifested in the political principles of George Washington, a recognition of human frailty, the institutional bulwarks of the Constitution, the need for a veto power somewhere over individuals and states, the jurisprudence of John Marshall, and the sanity of unionism. "By his preoccupation with the question of the union," Babbitt wrote, "Lincoln became the true successor of Washington and Marshall."³ As the culmination of the "unionist" tradition at the moment of its greatest crisis, Lincoln occupied a particularly important niche in Babbitt's constitutional and ethical thought. He represented the man of ethical control who passed the test of leadership that Woodrow Wilson so miserably failed elsewhere in the pages of *Democracy and Leadership*.⁴

Lincoln described as "true successor of Washington and Marshall," not Jefferson.

Anyone even casually familiar with Babbitt's work knows that certain historical figures often served him as convenient shorthand for an entire cultural tendency or intellectual current. Most extensively, Babbitt used Francis Bacon as the embodiment of scientific naturalism and Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the embodiment of romantic sentimentalism. Babbitt wrote first and foremost as a literary and cultural critic, not as a historian. Figures like Bacon and Rousseau mattered most to him as cultural types who represented tendencies far beyond the scope of their narrow context of time, place, and circumstance. Babbitt's use of Lincoln, therefore, needs to be approached with this rhetorical device in mind. The elusive "real Lincoln" mattered less to Babbitt than it would to the historian or biographer. And yet, Babbitt claimed to be rescuing Lincoln from the sentimentalists of his day; he claimed that he knew the "real Lincoln." He protested in *Democracy and Leadership* that Lincoln was being remade in American memory into "the great

³ Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, Foreword by Russell Kirk (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1979), 272-77.

⁴ For Babbitt's assessment of Wilson's leadership in the context of the First World War, see Richard M. Gamble, "The 'Fatal Flaw' of Internationalism: Babbitt on Humanitarianism," *Humanitas*, Vol. IX, No. 2 (1996), 4-18.

*Babbitt's
Lincoln
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emancipator instead of the great unionist," resulting in a distorted "Lincoln myth." Since Babbitt explicitly rejected this myth, it is fair to ask if his Lincoln holds up to historical scrutiny any better than the sentimentalists'. Babbitt offered a Lincoln faithful to true constitutionalism, motivated by an authentic "religious humility" as revealed in his Second Inaugural, and possessing at his core "an element of judicial control." The "great unionist" was a man of genuine character, an authentic leader equipped with a sound moral imagination—not the prototype of an expansive imperialist like Teddy Roosevelt.⁵

Babbitt's published comments on Lincoln appeared in the decades surrounding the First World War when the Lincoln myth reached its most exaggerated proportions.⁶ Since at least the 1890s, Progressive reformers had embraced the martyred president as an idealist, a harbinger of the future, an emancipator of labor, and the noble champion of democracy, equality, brotherhood, human rights, world peace, and social "uplift." For a surprising number of the Progressives, their earliest childhood memories included their parents' shock and grief over Lincoln's assassination. As historian Robert Crunden found, the Progressive generation was raised to idealize and emulate Lincoln; he became their role model and standard of comparison, and, longing for an emancipatory crusade of their own, they maintained a lifelong "devotion to the figure and example of Lincoln." Indeed, such enduring high regard for Lincoln helped define what it meant to be a Progressive.⁷ Muckraking journalist Ida Tarbell, for example, who earned an honored place in the culture of exposure for her series of articles in *McClure's* on John D. Rockefeller and Standard Oil, followed up her success with a laudatory series on Lincoln for the magazine in the 1890s, later published as a two-volume biography and followed years later with *The Boy Scout's Life of Lincoln* (1921) and *In the Footsteps of Lincoln* (1924).⁸

When Babbitt published *Literature and the American College* in

⁵ Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 275-76.

⁶ The most complete treatment of the historical development of the Lincoln myth is Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁷ Robert M. Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization, 1889-1920* (New York: Basic Books, 1982) ix, 4-6, 276.

⁸ Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 148-55. Peterson concludes, uncon-

1908, preparations were well underway for the following year's Lincoln Centennial. Publishers, advertisers, statesmen, college presidents, foreign dignitaries, and international celebrities joined in the tribute. The familiar Lincoln penny appeared in 1909, the first U.S. coin to bear the image of an actual person (as opposed to a symbolic figure) and a choice none too popular with some Southern newspaper editors. When Leo Tolstoy, the living embodiment of sentimental humanitarianism, was asked by the press to say a few words in honor of the centennial, he characterized Lincoln as "a Christ in miniature, a saint of humanity." "Lincoln was a humanitarian as broad as the world," he continued expansively. "He was bigger than his country—bigger than all the Presidents together. Why? Because he loved his enemies as himself."⁹ Evidently no tribute, no matter how close to blasphemy, was too extreme for the occasion.

Progressive era made Lincoln a symbol of global expansiveness.

Comments like these became even more common during the First World War as Lincoln was drafted for the American and Allied cause to symbolize world unity, the progressive triumph of democracy, and emancipation from atavistic militarism and autocracy. Allied leaders Marshal Joffre, Clemenceau, and Lloyd George all paid tribute to his words and deeds. The rhetoric and symbolism of the Civil War—including, with surprising frequency and vigor, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"—were carefully revived and universalized during the war. Lincoln not only belonged to the ages; he now belonged to the world. He was made into a saint and seer of Woodrow Wilson's war for world freedom and democracy. Lincoln became so recognized as a symbol of the Allies' war aims that a statue of him was shipped to Parliament Square, London, in 1918 as a gift of the American people.¹⁰

Even before the U.S. entered the war in 1917, American reformers and social gospel clergy had instinctively reached for Lincoln as their ideal of the humanitarian crusader. Edwin Keigwin, pastor of the West End Presbyterian Church, New York City, claimed in a sermon published in 1915 that Lincoln embodied the spirit of the "New Patriotism," an expansive sentiment that united every

vincingly, that "other than as an ideal of democracy and brotherhood, Lincoln had little to do with [Tarbell's] reform activities" (p. 155).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 182, 185-86.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 198-200, 213.

people and nation.¹¹ In his eyes, Lincoln spoke for a boundless unionism generous enough to embrace all of humanity and achieve world brotherhood, permanent peace, and universal emancipation. The reconciliation Lincoln had brought to the “house divided” in the 1860s was but the first fruits of his visionary, heartfelt longing for the brotherhood of man. With utopian optimism, this pastor found it possible in 1915, deep into the grim carnage of the Great War and with the anguish of Verdun and the Somme yet to come, to preach that “everywhere, the march of events is toward Lincoln’s goal. The world is moving upward and outward. America is moving outward and forward.”¹²

*The messianic
Lincoln not
acceptable to
Babbitt.*

This beatific vision of a world transformed by a Messianic America, repeated longingly and insistently by Progressives and social gospel clergy during the war, promoted a unionism radically opposed to Babbitt’s ethical and constitutional principles. The humanitarian Lincoln of “upward and outward” and “outward and forward” could never be Babbitt’s Lincoln. A difficulty for students of Babbitt, then, is that Lincoln was most admired (or at least one version of the Lincoln myth was most admired) by the very people Babbitt most despised. Babbitt warned against the “sham spirituality” of humanitarianism at the very moment that Lincoln was being fashioned by the apostles of the gospel of service into a divine figure, complete with altar, ritual, sacrifice, and liturgy.¹³ Indeed, Babbitt published *Democracy and Leadership* just two years after the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial, the none-too-subtle neoclassical temple that enthroned Lincoln as a sort of wise, serene, benevolent American Zeus.

¹¹ A. Edwin Keigwin, “The Unfinished Task of Abraham Lincoln,” in *The New Patriotism: An Interpretation* (New York: The Rayon Company, 1915), 119-130. Keigwin claimed that Lincoln pointed the way to the ultimate fulfillment of the Apostle Paul’s hope for the Church (Colossians 3:11): “Where there cannot be Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bondman nor freeman; but Christ is all, and in all.” Keigwin drew an explicit link between this Scriptural promise and Lincoln’s “House Divided” speech, itself an appropriation of Jesus’ declaration in the Gospels that the kingdom of Satan would not stand.

¹² *Ibid.*, 129.

¹³ Keigwin, for example, assured his congregation that “the hope of St. Paul, the prayer of Jesus, and the dream of Abraham Lincoln are well within the realm of possibility” and urged them “to light your torches at Lincoln’s altar fire and dedicate your lives to the completion of Lincoln’s task” (pp. 129-30).

Babbitt's desire to restore the "real Lincoln" as a useful model of authentic unionism and constitutionalism in the midst of this outpouring of humanitarian sentiment is understandable. Nevertheless, he may have succeeded in doing nothing more than devising yet another variation on the Lincoln myth. If Babbitt's image of Lincoln is to hold up to historical and ethical scrutiny, then it has to confront some hard questions, not least of which are Lincoln's use and interpretation of the Declaration of Independence, his means of maintaining the union, and his handling of the Constitution in wartime.

Babbitt sought to make Lincoln a symbol of constitutional restraint.

If Babbitt was right to place Lincoln within the tradition of Burke, Washington, and the Constitution and outside of the tradition of Rousseau, Jefferson, and the Declaration of Independence, then we would necessarily expect to find Lincoln distancing himself from the expansive abstractions of the Declaration. In fact, we find him doing precisely the opposite. From the 1830s onward, Lincoln often quoted (and at times misquoted¹⁴) the Declaration's second paragraph. By the 1850s, as the sectional controversy promised to make his political career as it unmade the union, Lincoln appealed more and more often to the Declaration's assertion that "all men are created equal" and therefore entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." According to his law partner and early biographer William Herndon, Lincoln carried in his pocket a copy of the Declaration's second paragraph pasted into a leather book, ready for quick reference during his series of debates with Stephen Douglas in 1858.¹⁵ In this celebrated contest, the Declaration of independence became a battleground as Lincoln and Douglas fought in city after city over the original intention of the phrase "all men," with Lincoln arguing for the broadest possible political construction and application of these two words.

In speeches from the 1830s through the 1860s, Lincoln turned

¹⁴ In a speech at Springfield, Illinois, in 1854, Lincoln seemed to confuse the language of the American Declaration of Independence with that of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man: "The theory of our government is Universal Freedom. 'All men are created free and equal,' says the Declaration of Independence." *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Roy P. Basler, ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), II: 245. Lincoln repeated this mistaken formula on July 4, 1856, attributing the phrase "all men are born free and equal" to the Declaration of Independence (*Collected Works*, II: 346).

¹⁵ Harold Holzer, ed., *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates: The First Complete, Unexpurgated Text* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 17.

Lincoln's
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to the Declaration, not the Constitution, for his first principles of government. Fidelity to this document—and only to the most abstract promises within this document—defined America, its people, and its destiny. Lincoln upheld a boundless Declaration that belonged to all men everywhere—an open-ended promise of future emancipation, progressive amelioration of the human condition, and “Universal Freedom.” Its words were nothing less than “a hope to the world for all future times.” In a speech at Independence Hall just days before his inaugural in 1861, Lincoln provided the clearest summary of the Declaration’s place in his political imagination: “All the political sentiments I entertain have been drawn, so far as I have been able to draw them, from the sentiments which originated, and were given to the world from this hall in which we stand. I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence.”¹⁶

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Whether Lincoln *ought* to have drawn all his political principles from the Declaration of Independence is a matter for conservatives, neoconservatives, libertarians, and liberals to debate for as long as they have life and breath. The fact that he did so puts him clearly at odds with Irving Babbitt. Babbitt unambiguously opposed the egalitarianism of the Declaration, and his open skepticism about the Declaration’s promises placed him much closer to Douglas and the South than to Lincoln. In *Democracy and Leadership*, for example, he warned against the dangers of promising people an effortless equality derived from natural right: “this country committed itself in the Declaration of Independence to the doctrine of natural equality. The type of individualism that was thus encouraged has led to monstrous inequalities and, with the decline of traditional standards, to the rise of a raw plutocracy.” Further on, just before his longest comment on Lincoln, Babbitt unfavorably contrasted the spirit of the Declaration with the Constitution. Indeed, he linked the Declaration’s appeal to “abstract rights” with the radicalism of the French Revolution.¹⁷ Lincoln, therefore, was most drawn to, and drew the most from, the very language of the Declaration that Babbitt categorically rejected, placing it squarely on the passionate, intemperate, centrifugal side of American history.

¹⁶ See *Collected Works*, II: 245, 406, 407, 499-500; IV: 240.

¹⁷ Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 229, 272.

Babbitt's estimation of Lincoln must also confront the possibility that the North did not reluctantly take up the gage of battle in self-defense but instead, as a restless, ambitious nation-state driven by an outward-directed sense of mission, indulging its lust for dominion, waged an offensive war to remove any impediment to its vision of economic, political, and moral greatness. Babbitt's characterization of Lincoln as a man of "judicial control" becomes implausible at best if secession is not defined, as Lincoln would have it, as a rebellion, conspiracy, insurrection, or faithless act of treason against the Constitution. If the Civil War is instead framed in the larger context of the other successful wars of national consolidation in Italy and Germany in the 1860s, then Lincoln has to be compared with Mazzini and Bismarck, not Burke and Washington. In the company of other mystic or realist state-builders of the mid-nineteenth century, Lincoln appears more as the founder of a new nation than as the defender of the old republic. The confederated republic designed in 1787, entered into voluntarily by the states, and sustained by a deliberate act of will for over seventy years, was replaced in 1865 by a unitary nation-state held together by an act of externally imposed force and the ongoing threat of violence.

Unionism in and of itself need not be an expression of ethical control, self-restraint, and a check on appetite. Inspired by political, economic, and cultural nationalism, it can manifest "expansive living" and the will to power at their worst. To be sure, Babbitt's own unionism was decidedly nationalistic, siding with Marshall and fearing states' rights and localism more than consolidation. But his unionism was not imperialistic. Applying Babbitt's Socratic method of analysis, unionism needs to be divided into true and false unionism. True unionism—the unionism advocated by most of the Founders—embodies and sustains Babbitt's cherished Burkean principles of self-restraint, moderation, compromise, and institutional checks on appetite; it preserves constitutional government and limits power. False unionism, in contrast, yields to the lust for dominion; it destroys constitutional government and feeds insatiable power. The South, rather than tearing to pieces the Founders' Constitution and the union, attempted to construct an alternative constitutional order—really, in their minds, to preserve a more authentic constitutionalism that would improve upon and perpetuate the Founders'

True and false unionism.

achievement of ordered liberty. They chose George Washington, after all, to grace their national seal. They stood self-consciously within the unionist tradition.

Lincoln placed preserving the Union above the Constitution and even emancipation.

Lincoln's use of power presents further difficulties for Babbitt's alignment of him within the tradition of Burke, Washington, and the Constitution. Lincoln certainly portrayed himself as a constitutionalist, reminding the South in his First Inaugural Address that he had an "oath registered in Heaven" to "preserve, protect and defend" the Constitution.¹⁸ But while quick to cite the Constitution, he was willing to put aside constitutional procedure and transgress constitutional boundaries if doing so helped him preserve the union, a goal he unapologetically placed even above emancipation.¹⁹ He asked Congress on July 4, 1861, justifying his conduct in office since his inauguration four months earlier, whether "all the laws, *but one*, [were] to go unexecuted, and the government itself to go to pieces, lest that one be violated."²⁰

Lincoln was determined to hold the Southern states within the union, and he acted quickly and alone before Congress could convene. That Lincoln expanded executive authority, exercised powers belonging to Congress and the courts, and abridged civil rights is beyond question. Historians by and large have excused this conduct, however, accepting Lincoln's own Machiavellian argument from necessity and contrasting him favorably with power-mad rulers who went much further in wartime. One of the most careful studies of Lincoln and the Constitution appeared in 1926, just two years after Babbitt's *Democracy and Leadership*. In *Constitutional*

¹⁸ *Collected Works*, IV: 271.

¹⁹ In a famous letter to Horace Greeley, August 22, 1862, Lincoln explained his determination to preserve the union: "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slaves I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that" (*Collected Works*, V: 388-89).

²⁰ *Collected Works*, IV: 430. On May 26, 1862, Lincoln returned to this theme, explaining again to Congress that "it became necessary for me to choose whether, using only the existing means, agencies, and processes which Congress had provided, I should let the government fall at once to ruin, or whether, availing myself of the broader powers conferred by the Constitution in cases of insurrection, I would make an effort to save it with all its blessings for the present age and for posterity" (*Collected Works*, V: 241). Lincoln failed to mention that the "broader powers" he used had been conferred on Congress, not the President.

Problems Under Lincoln,²¹ a sympathetic but cautious James G. Randall showed in detail how Lincoln claimed emergency “war powers” to determine the means, scope, and duration of his war against the South, expecting the eventual concurrence of Congress and the courts, which he got. The list of Lincoln’s maneuvers is long: he declared a state of rebellion, suspended habeas corpus, declared martial law, called up the militia, expanded the size of the army, authorized the draft, declared a blockade, suspended due process, seized property, dispersed funds from the Treasury, abridged freedom of the press, and through an unprecedented use of proclamations and executive orders became in effect a legislature of one.²²

Constitution shredded to wage war.

Randall, even though he believed Lincoln had no other choice, found the irony of his conduct inescapable: “It is indeed a striking fact that Lincoln, who stands forth in popular conception as a great democrat, the exponent of liberty and of government by the people, was driven by circumstances to the use of more arbitrary power than perhaps any other President has seized.”²³ But more than irony emerges when Babbitt’s praise of Lincoln is set against Randall’s near-contemporaneous documentation of Lincoln’s breezy transgression of constitutional limits, redefinition of the Presidency, and assumption of powers belonging to the other branches. Oddly, Babbitt singled out Lincoln’s respect for institutional boundaries as one of his finest attributes. “The man who has studied the real Lincoln,” Babbitt admonished, “does not find it easy to imagine him advocating the recall of judicial decisions.”²⁴ In light of the evidence, however, the man who has studied the real Lincoln finds it very easy indeed to imagine Lincoln advocating all sorts of innovations and irregularities if it suited his purposes. Regrettably, Babbitt either did not know or failed to grasp the real Lincoln.

Perhaps it is unreasonable to expect a more accurate assessment of Lincoln from a descendent of New England Puritans, liv-

²¹ James G. Randall, *Constitutional Problems Under Lincoln*, rev. ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964).

²² *Ibid.*, 36-37, 514.

²³ *Ibid.*, 513. The fact that Randall worked in the Wilson administration during World War I gives his sweeping conclusion about Lincoln’s use of power even greater force.

²⁴ Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 276.

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ing in a suburb of Boston and teaching at Harvard, who may not have been able to form a complete picture of Lincoln through the biographies and published papers available at the time he wrote. Certainly, Lincoln's shadow was too imposing, then as now, for him to ignore. Responding to what he saw as an opportunistic misappropriation of an American symbol, Babbitt defended a Lincoln of ethical control and sound principles as an alternative to the cultural and spiritual disintegration of his day. Even more urgently today, an emerging post-constitutional America needs to recover the conditions that make authentic constitutionalism possible in the first place and sustainable in the long run. Essential to that renewal is an honest reckoning with the past, an acknowledgment of the landmark points of departure from true democracy, unionism, and constitutionalism, and an inculcation of the qualities of leadership indispensable to ordered liberty. To these ends, any Babbitt-inspired effort to rebuild American culture has to come to terms with Babbitt's use of Lincoln as a model. While Babbitt upheld Lincoln as an exemplary figure in the best American tradition of true democracy and unionism, the Lincoln of record falls short of his standards of judgment. Guided by Babbitt's own principles, his intellectual heirs ought to feel no obligation to be "getting right with Lincoln."