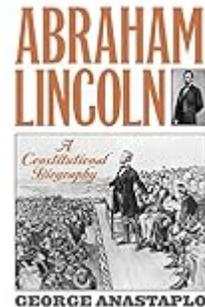




**George Anastaplo.** *Abraham Lincoln: A Constitutional Biography.* New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999. x + 373 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-9431-0.



**Reviewed by** Ethan S. Rafuse (Department of History, University of Missouri-Kansas City)

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This is not a book about military strategy, tactics, organization, or operations. It is not a description or analysis of the use of presidential power during the Civil War; nor is it a study of the Constitution in wartime. In other words, it is hard to discern why this book was sent to H-War for review. There is also a problem with the title, although this is understandable from a certain standpoint. After all, there is a large market for Civil War literature, and calling this book a biography of Lincoln may well be sound marketing. But this is not in any sense of the word a biography of Lincoln. Lincoln is a prominent figure in many, but not all, of the book's chapters. And although the general idea of the book (not so clear in some of the first few chapters) is that the other material is prologue to and provides a context for understanding Lincoln and his actions and ideas, the Great Emancipator is not the central figure in this study.

Rather, the central figure in this book is the author himself, George Anastaplo. *Abraham Lincoln: A Constitutional Biography* is a collection of lectures and essays in which Anastaplo uses documents and events in pre-Civil War America as points of departure for presenting his own ideas on larger questions of public morality, political philosophy, and the law. Among the matters subjected to Anastaplo's scrutiny are the Declaration of Independence, the Northwest Ordinance, Alexis de Tocqueville's

*Democracy in America*, the writings of John C. Calhoun, the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and the great documents from Lincoln's presidency: the First and Second Inaugural Addresses, Fourth of July (1861) Message to Congress, Emancipation Proclamation, and Gettysburg Address.

The essays reflect the perspectives Anastaplo has gained in the course of a long, distinguished, and highly productive career as a teacher and scholar of the law, political science, and philosophy. They address enduring questions about government, the polity, and the challenge of balancing a desire to promote morality and ideals against political realities, or what Anastaplo calls "the dictates of prudence".(67) The latter theme is introduced in a chapter on the 1772 *Somerset* decision, which Anastaplo applauds for casting a shadow over the institution of slavery in the British Empire while acknowledging the practical complications ending slavery entailed. Anastaplo also observes that the American Revolution, undertaken to defend liberty and equality, actually may have had the ironic effect of delaying the end of slavery in the United States, as it got "Americans out of an imperial system that was to be governed a half-century later by a general act of emancipation of all slaves."(8) These are but representative of the consistently intriguing insights that appear throughout this book. Students of philosophy, political science, and the law will indeed find much

food for thought here.

Anastaplo's research, however, invites a few criticisms. On the one hand, his endnotes indicate that he has consulted of a wide range of sources (and indeed many of the notes offer essays that are worth reading in and of themselves). However, it is curious to see the author make frequent references to his own extensive writings and those of Harry V. Jaffa, yet ignore works on Lincoln and nineteenth-century politics by (to name but a few) David Herbert Donald, Robert Johannsen, William Gienapp, and Philip Paludan. Particularly conspicuous by its absence, considering an entire chapter is devoted to the Gettysburg Address, is any reference to Garry Wills's prize-winning *Lincoln at Gettysburg*. The book also lacks a general bibliography.

In the final analysis, this is a fine book that contains much of interest. But as mentioned above, for a person looking for information and insights on military history

(i.e. the typical subscriber to H-War) it is a disappointment. It is certainly not unreasonable to expect that a "constitutional biography" of the man who led the North to victory in the Civil War would devote some attention to the war and how Lincoln executed his constitutional duties as commander-in-chief. Moreover, discussion of Lincoln's hiring and firing of generals, approach to the matter of internal security, and formulation of strategy would have also provided excellent opportunities for Anastaplo to further drive home his point that leadership in the American democracy involves finding a proper balance between ideals and practical considerations.

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