



# Clio's Psyche

## of the Psychohistory Forum

### Call for Responses and Papers

### “The Psychobiography of Abraham Lincoln”

Symposium Responses and Articles for Winter 2019 Clio's Psyche

Due October 15, 2018

Dear Colleague:

Abraham Lincoln has intrigued historians and biographers—and Americans and the world generally—for 150 years. Over 16,000 books have been written about him. We hope you will write something psychoanalytically/psychologically new on Lincoln as you respond to the Strozier-Anderson “Psychology of Lincoln” dialogue or write a standalone article.

In the words of James William Anderson, what were “the inner psychological factors that motivated Lincoln”? Historian, biographer, and Lincoln scholar Charles B. Strozier and psychoanalyst and psychobiographer Anderson dialogue about the 16<sup>th</sup> president in “The Psychology of Lincoln,” which follows this Call for Responses and Papers. Strozier and Anderson talk about Lincoln's:

- childhood and family
- fantasy Founder grandfather
- depression
- empathy and compassion
- “aggressiveness” (or not)
- guilt over the deaths from the Civil War

We invite your 500-1000-word response to the dialogue.

Or you may wish to present your insights on what motivated Lincoln, especially as he felt, thought, and acted on issues such as:

- slavery and emancipation
- states' rights and union
- total war and unconditional surrender

What do attachment and mirroring in his youth reveal about the mature politician and president? What were the psychological origins of his authoritarianism? From where came the literary

Lincoln—his fondness for theater and Shakespeare, poetry and humor, and his increasing eloquence in speeches and writings?

Lincoln's relationship with Americans of his time and through the generations since also deserves analyzing. Why did a president initially so reviled become so revered? Would Lincoln have become so well regarded if he had not been assassinated and become a martyr? How do group fantasies about Lincoln compare with reality?

**Responses** to "The Psychology of Lincoln" dialogue should be 500-1000 words, including title, your affiliation, and a brief author credit ending in your email address.

**Articles** separate from the dialogue should be 1000-2000 words, including title, your affiliation, seven to ten keywords, a 50-100-word abstract, and a brief author credit ending in your email address.

Both are **due by October 15, 2018**. An expression of interest or abstract by September 1 would be appreciated. Send them as attached *Word* files to [cliospsycheforum@gmail.com](mailto:cliospsycheforum@gmail.com).

It is the style of our scholarly publication to publish thought-provoking, clearly written articles based upon psychological/psychoanalytic insight, developed with examples from history, current events, and the human experience. We prefer that articles be without psychoanalytic/psychological terminology or jargon. Submissions the editors deem suitable are anonymously refereed.

Clio's Psyche is in its 25th year of publication by the Psychohistory Forum, a 36-year-old organization of academics, historians, therapists, and laypeople holding regular scholarly meetings. To find back issues, meeting information, and other information, or to join the Forum, visit our website, [www.cliospsyche.org](http://www.cliospsyche.org).

Please forward this Call for Papers to any appropriate colleagues (including associations or electronic mailing lists) who may be interested. If you have any questions about our organization or journal, please e-mail Bob Lentz at [cliospsycheforum@gmail.com](mailto:cliospsycheforum@gmail.com).

Thank you.

Bob Lentz, Associate Editor, Clio's Psyche

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# A Dialogue on the Psychology of Lincoln

**Charles B. Strozier**—Graduate Center of CUNY

**James W. Anderson**—Northwestern University

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*Strozier (CBS) and Anderson (JWA) conducted this dialogue during the winter of 2018 by email.*

**JWA:** You told me, Chuck, that you are working on an extended article that could become a book about Abraham Lincoln and his relationship with his father—and with the Founding Fathers. I've been investigating Lincoln's childhood; so, the relationship of son and father seems like the place to start. I'm sure we'd agree that Lincoln had a troubled relationship with his dad. I have a concept I've thought of in relation to Lincoln, that he had what I call a "contra-identity," an identity built in part on his intention of being unlike his father. A key text for me is a report from William Herndon, his law partner. Lincoln remarked in about 1850, according to Herndon, that he believed his mother was the illegitimate daughter of "a well-bred Virginia planter or farmer". From this man, according to Lincoln, came his "power of analysis, his logic, his mental activity, his ambitions". He also thought that his "better nature and finer qualities" came from this ancestor whom he never met (Jesse W. Weik and William Herndon, *Herndon's Life of Lincoln*, 1888, 2-3). We as psychoanalysts, of course, are not primarily interested in whether his grandfather was indeed a well-bred Virginian, but rather we're intrigued that he had such a fantasy. Lincoln's comments here offer an entrée into his identity; they tell us what he valued about himself. It is striking that all the characteristics he names are contrary to what his father was like. His father lacked ambition, powers of analysis, and so on; he certainly did not have the "finer qualities" of Lincoln, such as Lincoln's compassion for others and appreciation of poetry. Unlike his father, who struggled just to get by, Lincoln was determined to be a man of importance, someone who would have accomplishments that would be remembered.

I wonder whether you agree or disagree with this construction and what you would add about Lincoln and his father.

**CBS:** First, thank you, Jim, for engaging in this discussion. I do want to note and thank my researcher, co-author, and friend, Wayne Soini, in the project. I do know of your deep interest in Lincoln and, of course, your longstanding commitments to psychoanalysis and psychohistory.

I would say that Lincoln's idea of his maternal grandfather as some Virginian planter and a distinguished figure was not entirely pure fantasy. One of the things that Wayne and I have found is that his biological mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, had a very clear image of her distinguished father throughout her chaotic childhood. This remarkable woman, "intellectual" by ALL accounts, even though she was illiterate, kept alive in her mind the image of the "Virginny blood" that separated her from what Lincoln called her "lascivious" relatives (William Herndon, *Herndon on Lincoln: Letters*, eds. Douglas Wilson and Rodney Davis, 2016, 204). It seems clear that she imparted that sense of his inherited greatness to him, and he in turn developed the core childhood fantasy that he was heir to Washington or Jefferson. That was a fantasy that was to have powerful meanings in terms of Lincoln's political thought.

**JWA:** That's significant, because the evidence of his mother's image of "Virginny blood" suggests Lincoln's aspiration to specialness might also be a fulfillment of what he imagined his mother would have wanted of him. But still, let me hear about your take on Lincoln and his father, and your reaction to my "contra-identity" concept.

**CBS:** Lincoln certainly developed an identity that was in contrast with that of his father. Thomas Lincoln, who was a perfectly respectable but somewhat hapless farmer, was for his son inadequate and unworthy to the task of serving as the fatherly source of idealized greatness for his own soaring ambitions. That, of course, tells us much more about Abraham Lincoln than about Thomas Lincoln. But that sense of shame in his father led to Lincoln's core fantasy, based, it seems, on his mother's shared image of the Founders' blood in them. In time, Lincoln's thought—from the Lyceum speech in 1838, through the debates with Stephen Douglas in 1858, the Cooper Union speech in 1860, the farewell speech at the Depot in 1861, the First Inaugural the next month, Gettysburg in 1863, and the soaring Second Inaugural not long before he died in 1865—developed around the idealization of the Founders. It can be said he brought new meaning to the Declaration of Independence that became, in his thought and work, inseparable from the Constitution. Psychologically, he connected at deep levels with the Founders. They were, after all, family.

**JWA:** You've mentioned Lincoln's mother Nancy Hanks Lincoln. We might speak some about her. Her death, when he was nine years old, had a profound impact on him. There is evidence of his deep sadness afterwards. I am not alone in being convinced that his lifelong tendency to severe depressions, especially after severe losses, owes much to her death. Would you care to comment on what stands out for you about Lincoln and his mother?

**CBS:** Yes, she was the lodestone of his life, intensely idealized, and her sudden death when he was nine was almost surely the source of his lifelong melancholy. Lincoln once described his mother to his law partner as "a heroic woman" (*Herndon on Lincoln*, 83). Lincoln, furthermore, felt Nancy acquired stellar qualities, despite the fact that she was surrounded by unchaste and unreliable relatives. For Lincoln, the Hankses were "lascivious – lecherous – not to be trusted" people (204). Lincoln seemed to bear a grudge against the Hanks family, which led Herndon to avoid mentioning the family name in Lincoln's presence. Herndon did add that Nancy, though "badly and roughly raised," was an "intellectual woman – sensitive and somewhat sad" (307).

Most certainly, of Lincoln's two parents, Nancy was the "smart one." Nobody ever called Thomas Lincoln "intellectual," although most everybody who knew Nancy called her so. That is

an interesting comment on frontier life, for she was illiterate. In that oral culture, she knew the Bible, for example, and could recite its stories for her adored and talented son. Nancy, however, had a chaotic childhood. It seems her mother Lucy's unwed pregnancy at the hands of a local distinguished planter forced the original move from Virginia. Lucy then surrendered her baby—or abandoned her—to be raised by her parents.

Those early years with her grandparents included a number of older children who were her aunts and uncles. After her grandfather's death when she was about nine, Nancy bounced around for the next decade and grew up in no fewer than three households. It seems her absent biological father long resided in her imagination and gave her hope during all this chaos. She created, it seems, a fantasy father of whom she could be proud, though it is not impossible that the identity of her biological father was well known to her (and therefore later that knowledge was shared with Lincoln).

**JWA:** Since I'm focusing on Lincoln's childhood, I've thought a lot about his mother, whom, as you note, he idealized. Biographers, like Herndon, have tended to see her as angelic, perhaps influenced by his having referred to her once to Herndon as his "angel mother," though I note that I see the phrase as referring primarily to her being dead (in contrast to his living stepmother), rather than to her being virtuous or kind.

She was known to be affectionate, and it may well be that she had a deep love for her son, but I picture Nancy's regard and approval as being highly conditional. Some pieces of evidence point in that direction. An early playmate recalled that, after he and Lincoln fell into a creek, Lincoln tried to dry his clothes but feared that no matter what, he'd get a "thrashing" (Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, 2008, 1:51, from <https://www.knox.edu/documents/LincolnStudies/BurlingameVol1Chap1.pdf>). When she was on her deathbed, she told Lincoln and his sister, Sarah, "to be good & kind" to their father, to each other, and to the world (Douglas Wilson and Rodney Davis, eds., *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln*, 1997, 40). One might see it as a question in her mind whether her children would behave well.

There is abundant evidence that later in his life, Lincoln was exquisitely sensitive to the feelings of women, and that characteristic may have derived from his concern about pleasing his mother. What comes to mind are the two absurd letters he wrote to Mary Owens in 1837. He wanted to call off their engagement but couldn't bring himself to do so. He argued in one letter that he would be willing to marry her, but she would be better off deciding not to marry him. In the other he stated, "I want in all cases to do right, and most particularly so, in all cases with women" (Douglas L. Wilson, *Honor's Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln*, 1998, 136). There is a parallel to what happened after he broke off his initial engagement with his future wife, Mary Todd. Some months after the break, he wrote his friend, Joshua Speed—I note here for the readers that you, Chuck, wrote a superb book about the Lincoln-Speed friendship—that his making Mary sad "still kills my soul" (Lincoln to Speed, 27 March 1842, from <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln1/1:298.1?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>). Lincoln's struggle to be good and kind, to master his tendency to aggressiveness and rage and attacking others, is a theme I'd like to get to later. But here I think we have to say something about Lincoln's other parent, who in her own way may have been as important as the other two: his stepmother, Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln. Would you care to comment about her?

**CBS:** She came into Lincoln's life when he was ten. He and his sister, Sarah, were scruffy and not well cared for after Nancy's death. Sarah immediately brought order to the bustling household that now consisted of her and Thomas, her three children from an earlier marriage, Abraham, Sarah, and Dennis Hanks, the illegitimate cousin who had been living as a member of the family for some time. As Dennis later put it, "Abe and his sister were wild, ragged and dirty... she [Sarah] soaped, rubbed and washed the children clean, so that they looked pretty, neat, well, and clean" (*Herndon's Informants*, 41). In general, Sarah could not have been a more loving, kind, and nurturing stepmother to the talented but sad young Abraham. She also kept Thomas at bay when he wanted to make his son work in the fields and stop reading, and in many ways that we can only guess at made Lincoln feel as happy and settled as he could be.

Later, when he lived in Springfield, Illinois, and the Thomas Lincoln clan lived 90 miles away near Charleston, Lincoln regularly passed through Charleston twice a year on the circuit he rode as a lawyer. He often stopped by to see Sarah and only grudgingly greeted Thomas and the rest of the family. Lincoln also made a special trip to see his stepmother in early 1861 just before traveling to Washington for his inauguration (Thomas had died a decade earlier). It was a moving parting that both knew portended much. He and his stepmother had a special understanding. She told Herndon in 1865: "His mind and mine, what little I had, seemed to run together, more in the same channel" (*Herndon's Informants*, 106-109). Carl Sandburg put it well: Sarah was "one of the rich, silent forces" in Lincoln's life (*The Prairie Years*, 1926, 1:50).

**JWA:** But fortunately, she wasn't always silent; in the 1865 interview with Herndon, to which you refer, she opened up. I find Herndon's notes on that interview to be possibly the most incredible and moving document among the rich materials relevant to Lincoln's life. To think that we have this woman who, as she said, cooked his meals for nearly 15 years (although it wasn't that many years), telling us what he was like during the second half of his childhood. One passage that stands out: "He was dutiful to me always—he loved me truly I think. I had a son John who was raised with Abe[.] Both were good boys, but I must say—both now being dead that Abe was the best boy I Ever Saw or Ever Expect to see" (108). Clearly, she preferred Lincoln to her own son.

I doubt that anyone made more of a difference in Lincoln's life than did his stepmother. He had lost his mother; he had a strained relationship with his father. The rest of his childhood would have been dreary indeed if she had not come into his life. They developed a deep love for each other.

In the latter part of this dialogue, Chuck, I thought that you and I might refer to some of the chief psychological themes we see in Lincoln's life. I'll start by expanding on the theme I mentioned earlier, the dynamic interaction between his explosive aggressiveness and his determination to be good and kind, a determination that drew on his deep empathy for others.

Usually Lincoln kept his hostility in check, but when there were special circumstances in which he felt he had a right to let himself go, he could be ferocious. Here's one of my favorite episodes. In 1840 an opponent in the election for the Illinois state legislature, named Jesse Thomas, criticized and made fun of Lincoln, who then no doubt felt he had a right to reply. With Thomas sitting nearby, Lincoln went all out. A skilled mimic, Lincoln exaggeratedly imitated Thomas, including the man's awkward way of walking. Continuing, he made a fool of Thomas and held him up to ridicule. The audience was yelling and cheering. Lincoln's performance was remembered as "the 'skinning' of Thomas." Thomas was so overwhelmed he started crying. Lincoln felt remorse afterwards and apologized (*Herndon's Life*, 159-160).

We can see the same dynamic during the war years. Lincoln believed deeply in preserving the Union and opposing the extension of slavery, and he directed the army to fight fiercely, but he hated the bloodshed and mourned the Southern dead while being mortified over the Union losses. As I see it, he was in pain throughout the war and challenged to come to grips with his having played so central a role in bringing about and executing the Civil War.

I have more to say, but I'll stop here and ask you, Chuck, would you care to comment on what I said, or might you discuss one or more psychological themes that for you stand out in Lincoln's life?

**CBS:** I must say I have to question any idea of Lincoln's "explosive aggressiveness." I know that is a theme in the work of Michael Burlingame, whose work I question. The most famous example is the one you quote, "the 'skinning' of [Jesse] Thomas," but I think it is interesting only by way of contrast with his normal way of relating to the world. Lincoln was a mimic. As a child, he loved to repeat the preacher's sermon in humorous ways for the other children. He could be very playful. For some reason Jesse Thomas got under his skin, and Lincoln's mockery of him went too far. Lincoln immediately felt bad, apologized, and never repeated such an attack (the exception might be his mockery of James Shields in the late summer of 1842 that almost led to a duel, something I describe in detail in my book on the Lincoln-Speed friendship, but the whole Shields affair and his not illegitimate disdain for him was an artifact of his courtship of Mary Todd and should be seen in that context). There are precious few other such examples. He was much beloved in court on the circuit, in large part because he never spoke down to his fellow citizens, who were mostly illiterate. He was also nearly always funny and empathic with friends and colleagues, in speeches, and in politics at all levels. In fact, I would say it is his empathy that shines forth brightly from his life, not his aggressiveness.

What is true was his constant moodiness and depression that always lurked at the edges of his self-experience. That was surely connected with the trauma of losing his "angel" mother at nine, as we noted before. It left him uncertain about love and intimacy. He seemed to fear at some level that those he most loved died. He postponed love, sex, and intimacy into his early 30s, and managed to work through those issues to a remarkable degree because of his loving (but not sexualized) relationship with Joshua Speed. That male friendship provided the bridge to his marriage with Mary Todd. After that, he remained prone to depression but was never again suicidal or clinically depressed. Incidentally, "the 'skinning' of Thomas" occurred during his worst emotional crisis around these larger issues.

**JWA:** This wouldn't be much of a dialogue if we didn't differ on anything; so, I won't discuss Lincoln's aggressiveness any further, and I'll just accept that on this issue we can agree to disagree.

Now I'll turn to something more specific, a formulation I've come to about the Lincoln of the war years. It builds on my view of the dynamic within Lincoln between his aggressiveness (which I realize you, Chuck, dispute) and his capacity for empathy (with which you heartily agree).

In the Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln declared, years into the blood-soaked Civil War, that, if God so decided, the war might continue for some time, and he revealed his idea of why there had been so much carnage, both in the North and the South:

If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and

South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

Lincoln's belief was that God willed the war—and its immense devastation—as a kind of gigantic punishment to both warring sides for the offense of slavery. The war was also God's way of removing slavery. One only needs to think about this passage for a moment to realize that God needed an instrument on earth to spearhead this chain of events, and that there is only one person who could be that instrument: President Abraham Lincoln. There is no way Lincoln truly could know God's purpose; he formed what I will call an *imaginative construct* to provide a master explanation for the Civil War and the freeing of the slaves. As a psychologist and psychoanalyst, I consider this question: why would he create this construction? What role did it play in his psyche?

My hypothesis is that Lincoln was threatened with the possibility of experiencing overwhelming guilt during the Civil War. He could feel that he was responsible for the war. The states that became the Confederacy seceded specifically because of his election. He may well have thought that he could have done more to make peace with the southern states before the fighting broke out. His inner tendency to aggression, especially when he felt justified, could have contributed to his willingness to make military decisions that resulted in thousands of deaths. A sense of his inner hostility might have exacerbated his guilt. But with his empathy, he found the rivers of blood to be excruciating.

There is extensive evidence for these factors, such as his guilt over the deaths of the Civil War. I will give just one small anecdote here that is illustrative. While in the White House, Lincoln often met with people who came to talk with him. He instructed his secretaries not to let widows in to see him because he felt unable to resist any requests they might make (*Herndon's Life*, 262). I see both his empathy and his guilt over his role in these deaths at work in this anecdote.

In unconsciously forming his imaginative construction, I argue, Lincoln found a way to avoid suffering from guilt about the devastation of the Civil War. He did not have to feel, "I am responsible for all this death." He believed, as indicated by what he said in the Second Inaugural Address, that God chose him as His instrument to accomplish two divine purposes: first, to free the slaves and second, to bring a just punishment on both the North and South for the centuries of suffering heaped onto the slaves. The effect of Lincoln's explanation is that he is not responsible for this war in which more than 620,000 soldiers died (William F. Fox, *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War*, 1889). Instead, Divine Providence is responsible. Lincoln gets the credit for being the person through whom God acted. Lincoln, who long desired to make a mark on history, can see himself as having done so through his central role in a surpassingly valuable achievement: the emancipation of the slaves.



Chuck, you are free to comment or not on my thesis, but, in any case, you have a final opportunity, as we near the end of the space allotted for this dialogue, to comment on Lincoln's motivations as you see them.

**CBS:** I agree it is good to have some respectful disagreement. On his guilt, I would basically agree, though I would frame it somewhat differently. He was, in fact, responsible in a real sense for the war. Others would have compromised in 1861, from every Democrat in the land and many in the middle opposed to slavery but hating the idea of war. He felt it would be inconceivable, as he says in the First Inaugural, for the Union to break apart and for there to be two countries from one. Unlike a married couple who can divorce, he says, we cannot separate. Why not, one can ask? Europe is certainly a patchwork of countries on one land mass. But he retained this mystical sense of the Union that made it impossible to let the Confederate States of America—a fully formed country by the time Lincoln assumed the presidency—go its own way. Since the North won the war AND the point of the war was to become one for human freedom, few now question his impulse to preserve the Union at almost any cost. But he knew well and owned his responsibility for the policies (including a strategy of demanding unconditional surrender) that directed the war. That left him with a measure of guilt and remorse for the enormous suffering and death as the war progressed. He reflected on things in general and understood his all-important role in making the war that unfolded. The best manifestation of his torment was less those letters to widows than his fascination with *Macbeth*. Always his favorite Shakespeare play, he turned to this greatest portrayal of guilt in the English language with increasing frequency as the war progressed, quoting from it, attending performances of it, and corresponding with one of the leading actors of the day (James H. Hackett) about the interpretation of various lines in it.

As for the Second Inaugural, certainly he turns to God in it for an explanation of the deeper meaning of the war. As I put it, the war brought him eye to eye with the Founders, those intensely idealized others who had sustained him through his childhood and adulthood as an alternative to his disparaged biological father. One can see the change in Lincoln's thought as early as his farewell speech to his friends and neighbors in Springfield from the back of the train on February 11, 1861. He had a task before him, he says, greater than that which rested upon George Washington. As the war progressed, I would argue, his gaze drifted upward, and only God could provide ultimate meanings. But note that, in the part that you quote of the long third paragraph, Lincoln actually speaks for God to explain what the war was all about ("every drop of blood drawn with the lash"). It shows, I think, more than a touch of grandiosity. He speaks as an Old Testament prophet, and, as they did, he explains what God's purpose was in bringing the war and all its misery, namely the end of slavery. Then in the final paragraph, the one all about "with malice toward none," he adopts more the tone of Jesus and the New Testament. That sequence was not lost on his audience steeped in biblical discourse.

There is so much else to discuss, Jim. We could make a book of this conversation.

**JWA:** As I see it, you bring in (convincingly, I might add) the political factors that complement the inner psychological factors that motivated Lincoln. Your mentioning "with malice toward none," prompts me to say something more about my thesis of the dynamic within Lincoln's psyche between his aggressiveness and his determination to be good and kind. I see him as continually struggling to hold his aggressiveness at bay. His admonition of "with charity for all" is all the more striking if we picture him as endeavoring to contain his own malice (along with the malice, of course, of a great many Northerners, including Congressmen and cabinet members, who were enraged with the South). I also look to his famous appeal to "the better angels of our

nature” in the First Inaugural Address. His overt message is an encouragement to his “dissatisfied fellow-countrymen” to find a way to preserve the Union. But I imagine Lincoln turning to this image because he himself was aware of his struggling against the worse devils of his nature.

While you may not agree with my final point, Chuck, I’m sure you agree that Lincoln is endlessly fascinating. He was far from the benign, simple “rail-splitter” and “Great Emancipator” of his public image, but rather a complicated, brilliant, empathic, at times troubled and afraid, driven, and ambitious human being, and I think we have taken some small but significant steps in getting at the flesh-and-blood Lincoln. [END]