

NATIONAL REVIEW

Getting Lincoln through College

Too few universities offer courses focused on the Great Emancipator.

By Allen C. Guelzo — February 12, 2009

On the day in 1858 that Abraham Lincoln squared off against Stephen A. Douglas in the fifth of their great debates across Illinois, the candidates spoke from behind platforms that had been hastily cobbled together and moved to the east side of Knox College's "Old Main," in Galesburg. Because of a quirk in the height of the platforms, the candidates were helped onto them through a seven-foot-high window in "Old Main," leading Lincoln (who'd never had more than a year's worth of formal schooling) to wisecrack, "At last I've gone through college."

The joke concealed the real mortification Lincoln felt as a 49-year-old lawyer facing the influx of a new generation of college-educated competitors from back east. "Ah, that is what I have always regretted," Lincoln told *New York Herald* reporter Stephen Fiske in 1861, "the want of a college education."

It might have tempered Lincoln's enthusiasm somewhat to know that by his 200th birthday, in a year when President Obama has called so much attention to the Lincoln legacy, he would still have trouble getting through college. In modern college curricula, too few courses are devoted to the study of his life and thought.

No history department in any Ivy League university—Princeton, Harvard, Yale, Brown, Dartmouth, Columbia, Cornell, and the University of Pennsylvania—offers any course of study focused on Abraham Lincoln. Neither do Howard University, Morehouse College, Spelman College, or even Lincoln University—historically black institutions. Nor does Knox College, the site of that classic debate. The same goes for many premier liberal-arts colleges, including Goucher, Smith, Scripps, Dickinson, and Haverford.

When a college does wrap a course around Abraham Lincoln, it's typically the result of an individual faculty member with both an interest in Lincoln and the initiative to share his interest with students. For example, Brooks Simpson, probably best-known for his erudite books on Ulysses S. Grant, teaches a senior research seminar on Lincoln at Arizona State University. Similar courses are taught by Jennifer Weber at the University of Kansas, Brian Dirck at Anderson University, Thomas

Turner at Bridgewater State University, Joseph Fornieri at the Rochester Institute of Technology, Stewart Winger at Illinois State University, Drew McCoy at Clark University, Vernon Burton at Coastal Carolina University, Ron J. Keller at Lincoln College (appropriately enough, in Lincoln, Ill.), and even Jörg Nagler of the Friedrich-Schiller-Universität in Jena.

Lincoln also enjoys dedicated seminars under Peter Shramm at Ashland University, Hadley Arkes at Amherst, and Colleen Sheehan at Villanova, although these three are in political science rather than history. There are also seminars at Georgetown under Chandra Manning, and at the University of Chicago in the Law, Letters and Society Program.

Additionally, Johns Hopkins University not only carries a course devoted to Abraham Lincoln, but hosted a Lincoln birthday event featuring Lincoln impersonator James Getty. And my own distinguished colleague Matthew Norman teaches a Lincoln seminar here at Gettysburg College.

There are some positive signs for the future. Michael Vorenberg at Brown and James Oakes at City University of New York are at work to introduce new Lincoln courses or revive older ones.

It is hard to judge whether this is a glass half-full or half-empty. Constructing courses around a single historic individual is not as easy as making courses around, say, ancient Rome. The depth and mastery of detail required is formidable, and the range of possible research assignments is very narrow. Perhaps it also contributes to this difficulty that Abraham Lincoln is a prime target of the Howard Zinn-ification of American-history teaching; Lincoln—dead, white, and male—is denounced as racist, elitist, and sexist in a style that would have done Madame Defarge proud. History faculty with short contracts and long obligations will think twice before suggesting a Lincoln course to a stony-faced department meeting.

Yet, in fairness to my own profession, Lincoln does receive at least some of the disproportionate attention he deserves. There are no courses on William McKinley, Chester Alan Arthur, John Tyler, Warren Harding, or William Henry Harrison anywhere I have looked.

Our 16th president is justly more famous than others of his era, but the fact remains that Abraham Lincoln is still having trouble, not just getting through college, but getting in.

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