



Understanding Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln, by George McGovern

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Review by M.H. Fryburg

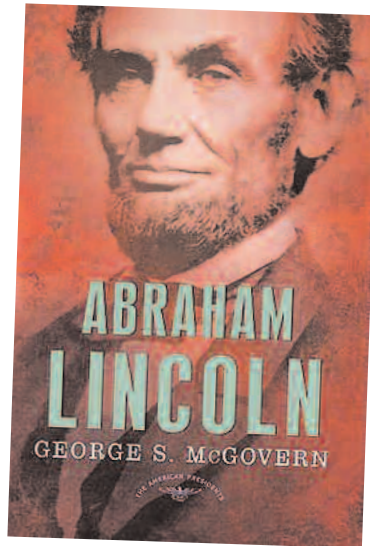
Here's what most Americans know about George McGovern, if anything: The Democrats nominated him for President in 1972, and Nixon buried him in a landslide, carrying 49 states. ("Don't Blame Me, I'm From Massachusetts," was a popular bumper sticker after the Watergate scandal drove Nixon from office, in the only state that voted for McGovern for President.)

Yet McGovern has been far more influential in American politics than his status as a Presidential also-ran suggests: He helped create the modern Presidential nominating system. From 1969-71, then-Senator McGovern headed a Democratic Party commission that reformed the Presidential nominating process, creating today's hybrid system of primaries or caucuses, where individual voters control the outcome of the nomination battles, instead of party bosses.

In the Senate, McGovern worked with Bob Dole to expand the school lunch program that today feeds 30 million children.

Since he was defeated for re-election to the Senate in the 1980 Reagan landslide, McGovern has continued working with Dole to expand the free school lunch program in the U.S. and abroad; in 2008, they jointly won the 2008 World Food Prize. McGovern keeps busy at the McGovern Center For Leadership and Public Service, located at his alma mater, Dakota Wesleyan University (online at <http://www.mcgoverncenter.com/>).

Having run for President, it's altogether fitting that McGovern, a prolific author, has just published a



biography of his favorite president, *Abraham Lincoln*. Here's how McGovern sums up Lincoln:

"In Lincoln, we see what is possible. We look to the humble circumstances of his birth, the disappointments that marked his middle years, and the unlikely rise from relative obscurity to presidential power. He struggled through his prejudices and emerged a better man. From reasoned, sober introspection he found a strength and determination that enabled him to overcome repeated disappointment."

In his short (150 pages) but comprehensive biography, McGovern chronicles Lincoln's life, from birth to death, but always focuses on politics. McGovern's *Abraham Lincoln* is a must-read, especially since this year is the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth.

Excerpts of my interview with Senator McGovern are below.

What do you think Lincoln's greatest strength was?

His tenacity in overcoming very difficult problems both in his own life and in the life of the country. We could have lost America in the 19th century had it not been for Lincoln's leadership. Lincoln had strength of character and keen sense of direction; he knew where he wanted to go.

What do you think Lincoln's greatest weakness was?

The biggest mistake Lincoln made during the civil war was in waiving the writ of habeas of corpus. He used the wartime crisis to close several newspapers that were critical of his administration, violating the First Amendment. He sacrificed civil justice for what he thought was national security.

You ran for President as the peace candidate, opposing the Vietnam War. Yet you never mentioned that you were a decorated bomber pilot in World War II. Why not?

I suppose I should have talked about my military service when I ran for President. American participation in WWII was fully justified; otherwise, Hitler might have won. As a bomber pilot, I learned how cruel warfare is. So I work to create the conditions that reduce the danger of war. I think hunger drives the kind of desperation that leads to war, so I'm working for peace by fighting hunger.