



A Response to Rich Lowry's "Conservative" Defense of Abraham Lincoln II

In the most recent issue of *National Review*, Rich Lowry promotes his latest book, *Lincoln Unbound*, while blasting away at our 16th president's contemporary critics on the political right — those to whom he derisively refers as "Lincoln haters."

And here we have it: Staring back at him in the one-dimensional caricature to which Lowry reduces Lincoln's critics is the reflection of his own argument. Not surprisingly — self-awareness and self-righteousness do not a union make — Lowry doesn't see it. But if he weren't blinded by both the certainty of his own cause as well as his contempt for the "people-owning libertarians" who inhabit places such as "the fever swamp at Lewrockwell.com," he would have recognized that the path toward the destruction of one's opponents is almost always paved with lies and not a little irrationality.

Lowry's argument suffers from a poverty that is at once intellectual and moral.

His opponents, the "Lincoln haters," are people who, in Lowry's estimation, "apparently hate federal power more than they abhor slavery."

There are few topics in all of human history, to say nothing of American history, regarding which there exists as much literature as that of "the American Civil War." That is, it has always been and remains an immensely complex and, thus, controversial issue — for most people. For Lowry, however, the matter is quite simple: Either we join him in revering Lincoln as "perhaps the foremost proponent of opportunity in all of American history" or else we support slavery.

So, because they reject Lincoln, his "libertarian" critics support, or at least are not sufficiently opposed to, *the enslavement* of blacks. This is outrageous. It is also idiotic, so much so that even those upon whom he sets his sights should be more than a bit embarrassed for Lowry.

For Lincoln's critics, past and present, the abolition of slavery never trumped all countervailing considerations. This makes them wrong and disreputable, for the abolition of slavery is an end that justifies the use of any and all means. This is what Lowry appears to be saying. Yet before the tribunal of this reasoning, the country's founders whom Lowry praises stand equally condemned — whether they sympathized with slavery or abhorred it.

There would have been no America had those of the country's founders who opposed slavery insisted on its abolition. In other words, there would have been no *union* of colonies turned *independent* states had



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slavery's nemeses at America's birth pushed too hard for its demise. With the exception of hard leftists, everyone else, including neoconservatives such as Lowry, have long insisted upon this point in defending the founders. However, given his critique of the Old South and its contemporary apologists, Lowry undermines this defense.

Clearly, none of the founders ascribed categorical importance to ending slavery. Even when they acknowledged its evil, the men who ratified the Constitution nevertheless prized above all else the sovereignty of *these* United States. If the latter promised to come about only at the cost of tolerating slavery while seeking to phase it out *gradually*, then this was the cost that they were willing to pay.

If Lowry is right and Lincoln's critics must "hate federal power more than they abhor slavery," then the founders and framers must have been guilty of the same. If Lincoln's critics are disreputable, then the founders were as well. In fact, consistency demands that Lowry recognize the latter as retroactive or honorary Lincoln haters.

Philosophically speaking, the distinction between "federal power" and "slavery" is one without a difference. This, at any rate, is the verdict that the founders drew, and it is the one that "Lincoln haters" past and present would have to infer as well. In short, "federal power" is dreaded precisely because *it amounts to slavery* — the enslavement of the sovereign states by the central government.

The concept of a state implies the concept of sovereignty, and the latter in turn implies the existence of an authority that is indivisible. By the very logic of the notion, then, a state has the authority to unite with or disengage (secede) from other sovereign agents — for whatever reasons. This authority is denied once the sovereign in question is subject to compulsion by some force outside of itself. Its integrity as a state is then undermined, and it is reduced to a territory or a fief, i.e. the analog of a slave.

Perhaps none of this is worth delving into, for Lowry's essay makes it painfully clear that he is about as interested in logic and philosophy as he is interested in history.



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