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Author(s): Allen C. Guelzo

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# Abraham Lincoln and the Doctrine of Necessity

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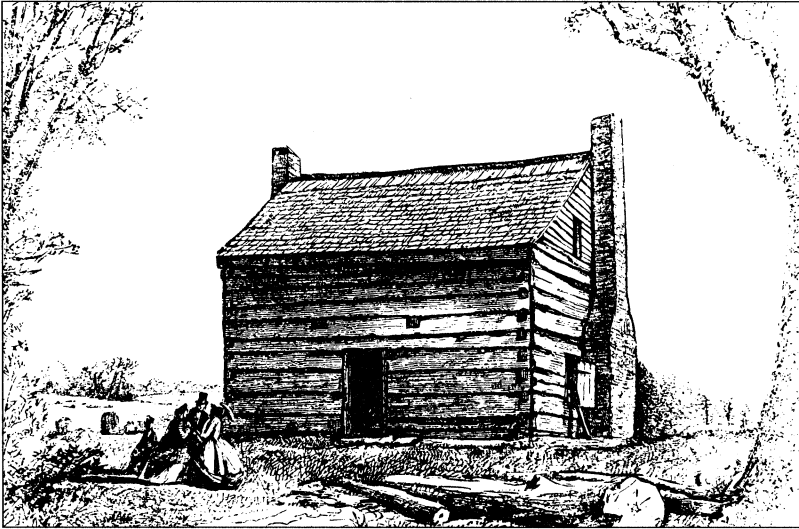
ALLEN C. GUELZO

Abraham Lincoln was a fatalist. That, at least, was what he told many people over the course of his life. "I have all my life been a fatalist," Lincoln informed his Illinois congressional ally, Isaac Arnold. "Mr. Lincoln was a fatalist," remembered Henry Clay Whitney, one of his Springfield law clerks, "he believed . . . that the universe is governed by one uniform, unbroken, primordial law." His Springfield law partner William Henry Herndon, likewise, affirmed that Lincoln "believed in predestination, foreordination, that all things were fixed, doomed one way or the other, from which there was no appeal." Even Mary Todd Lincoln acknowledged that her husband had been guided by the conviction that "what is to be will be, and no cares of ours can arrest nor reverse the decree."<sup>1</sup> What this meant in practical terms, as Herndon discovered, was that Lincoln believed that "there was no freedom of the will," that "men had no free choice":

Things were to be, and they came, irresistibly came, doomed to come; men were made as they are made by superior conditions over which they had no control; the fates settled things as by the doom of the powers, and laws, universal, absolute, and eternal, ruled the universe of matter and mind. . . . [Man] is simply a *simple tool*, a mere cog in the wheel, a part, a small part, of this vast iron machine, that strikes and cuts, grinds and mashes, all things, including man, that resist it.<sup>2</sup>

1. Isaac Arnold, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1884; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 81; Henry Clay Whitney, *Life on the Circuit with Lincoln* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1892), 267, 276; William H. Herndon to Jesse Weik, Feb. 6, 1887, Herndon-Weik Papers, Group 4 [reel 10], #2031-34, Library of Congress; Herndon, "Lincoln's Philosophy and Religion," in *The Hidden Lincoln from the Letters and Papers of William H. Herndon*, ed. Emmanuel Hertz (New York: Viking, 1938), 406.

2. Herndon to Weik, Feb. 25, 1887, Herndon-Weik Papers, Group 4 [reel 9], #1893-96.



Little Pigeon Baptist Church. This church was the Thomas Lincoln family's place of worship while Abraham Lincoln grew up in Indiana.

Even as president, Lincoln often described himself as “but an accidental instrument, temporary, and to serve but for a limited time.”<sup>3</sup> He compared himself over the years to “a piece of floating driftwood”: even at the height of the Civil War in 1864, he told Canadian journalist Josiah Blackburn that he had “drifted into the very apex of this great event.”<sup>4</sup>

This does not strike us as a particularly cheerful or heroic way of looking at the world. Of course, fatalism—the idea that all future events have a pattern that is preestablished and unchangeable—did not always show itself negatively in Lincoln, since it sometimes seems to have given him the assurance he needed to persist in whatever course of action he believed had been thus preordained. “I feel quite sure that there was not a moment when he

3. Lincoln, “Reply to Oliver P. Morton at Indianapolis, Indiana,” Feb. 11, 1861, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols., ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953–55), 4:194.

4. William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Abraham Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life*, 20 vols. (New York: D. Appleton, 1917), 1:70; Josiah Blackburn, in *Conversations With Lincoln*, ed. Charles M. Segal (New York: Putnam Press, 1961), 336.

despaired of success in putting down the rebellion," Joseph Gillespie told Herndon in 1866, "and he came to believe that he himself was an instrument foreordained to aid in the accomplishment of this purpose as well as to emancipate the slaves." As far back as Lincoln's New Salem days, Herndon told Ward Hill Lamson in 1870, Lincoln had been confident "that he would be a great man," and Orville Browning recalled Lincoln's certainty in the 1850s that he had before him "what he considered some important predestined labor or work . . . nobler than he was for the time engaged in."<sup>5</sup> But more often, Lincoln's fatalism seemed to his friends to weigh him down in gloom rather than buoy him up in hope. Lincoln's private predictions of greatness were accompanied by confessions of powerlessness and passivity. In 1864, anxious over his prospects for reelection, he claimed no feeling of having "controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me."<sup>6</sup> And those confessions were often tinged with the kind of "foreboding of his fate" that led him to put a "somewhat superstitious" value on the meaning of dreams and caused him "more than a dozen times" to tell Herndon, "I feel as if I shall meet with some terrible end."<sup>7</sup>

Accounting for Lincoln's "fatalism" has generally produced an uneasy shrug of the shoulders among his interpreters and biographers.<sup>8</sup> For one thing, the term "fatalism" is fairly vague in its connotations; and just going as far as I have in describing Lincoln's fatalism has drawn a host of related terms and problems onto the

5. Gillespie to Herndon, Dec. 8, 1866, in *Hidden Lincoln*, ed. Hertz, 322–23; Michael Burlingame, *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 237, 239.

6. Lincoln, "To Albert Hodges," Apr. 4, 1864, in *Collected Works*, 7:282.

7. Herndon to Weik, Feb. 6, 1887, in Herndon-Weik Papers, Group 4 [reel 10], #2031–34; see also Herndon to Weik [n.d.], Group 4 [reel 11], #2906.

8. J. G. Randall led the way in dismissing Lincoln's fatalism as simply a function of his "melancholy"—and therefore impervious to explanation—in *Lincoln the President: Springfield to Gettysburg* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1945), 2:28, 48; Carl Sandburg, in similar fashion, wrote it off as an expression of Lincoln's "mysticism" in *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, 4 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939), 3:370–82, as did one of the early attempts at Lincoln psychobiography, L. Pierce Clark's *Lincoln: A Psycho-Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933), 531–32, 540–42; Stephen B. Oates deals with it as an expression of Lincoln's depression over the deaths, first of Ann Rutledge, and then of William Wallace Lincoln, in *With Malice toward None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 29, 293.

board.<sup>9</sup> Fatalism suggests that all events are controlled by “fate,” which is to say that they are “determined” or “necessary” (and fatalism, in nineteenth-century philosophical discourse usually had such pejorative antireligious overtones that “determinism” or “necessitarianism” became the prevailing philosophical terms of choice). But who or what, then, does the determining? During his presidency, Lincoln frequently spoke of “an all-wise Providence” or “the Divine Being who determines the destinies of nations” as the intelligent and self-conscious dictator of human fates, but he also told Herndon that “motives”—a significantly more secular term—“ruled the man always and everywhere under the sun.”<sup>10</sup> And if all events are determined, and everything happens by necessity, do people really have a free will? Herndon insisted that Lincoln did not think so, and so did Henry Whitney, who remembered Lincoln declaring “that we were impelled along in the journey of life with no freedom of the moral will.”<sup>11</sup>

This vagueness of definition, in turn, opens doors into other questions about Lincoln. The “free will” problem, in its classic form, has been a constant feature of Western philosophy from Aristotle onward, but free will took on an added political sharpness for Americans in the early republic as they struggled to reconcile Jefferson’s affirmation that human liberty was a self-evident political and metaphysical truth with the need to create a new republican structure of law and responsibility that would ensure order and curtail riot, chaos, and disunion.<sup>12</sup> “Government and law” in the United States, wrote Lincoln’s contemporary and admirer, Henry

9. For surveys of the problem of fatalism and free will, see Vernon K. Bourke, *The Will in Western Thought: An Historico-Critical Survey* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964); Bernard Berofsky, ed., *Free Will and Determinism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); Sidney Hook, ed., *Determinism and Freedom in the Age of Modern Science* (New York: New York University Press, 1958); Maurice Mandelbaum, *Purpose and Necessity in Social Theory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Gary Watson, ed., *Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); and Linda Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

10. Lincoln, “Response to Evangelical Lutherans,” May 13, 1862, in *Collected Works*, 5:212–13; Herndon, “Lincoln’s Philosophy and Religion,” 407–8.

11. Henry Whitney, *A Life of Lincoln*, 2 vols., ed. M. M. Miller (New York: Baker & Taylor, 1908), 1:105–6.

12. Jon Pahl, *Paradox Lost: Free Will and Political Liberty in American Culture, 1630–1760* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 163–76; Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 98–106, 169–70.

Philip Tappan (the president of the University of Michigan in the 1850s), are “based upon human freedom,” and the direction the mind takes in defining “reason and free will” inevitably winds up, according to Tappan, affecting “the idea of right and wrong and consequently law and responsibility.”<sup>13</sup> In that atmosphere, Lincoln’s sharp denial of free will presents a disturbing picture. To see the man who urged “work, work, work” as the formula for professional success, who lauded the Declaration of Independence as his political inspiration, and who gave political freedom to millions through the Emancipation Proclamation—to see *this* man turn and disavow any belief in the individual’s freedom to choose, or create alternatives of choice, at best fosters an image of a mind divided within itself and at worst whispers an underlying moral cynicism about the meaning of Lincoln’s most important deeds.

All of this metaphysical turning and twisting raises in its wake another major problem: where did Lincoln get these ideas about fatalism? Herndon alternately blamed Lincoln’s fatalism on “his early Baptist training,” on “a defective physical organization,” and even on a sort of crude genetic determinism, based on what Lincoln suspected was the possibility of his mother’s illegitimate birth.<sup>14</sup> Lincoln himself was sometimes inclined to chalk up his fatalism to simple temperament: he told Josiah Grinnell, “You flaxen men with broad faces are born with cheer, and don’t know a cloud from a star. I am of another temperament.”<sup>15</sup> But accounting for Lincoln’s fatalism in terms of something as psychologically vague as “temperament” tempts us to trivialize it; and trivializing the mind of Abraham Lincoln was exactly what David Davis and other Lincoln intimates guaranteed would land anyone foolish enough to do so with their backs in a ditch.<sup>16</sup> The persistence and depth of Lincoln’s comments on the subject of free will and determinism are too heavy and too complex to have emerged from nothing more than the romanticized psychological ills of “melancholy” or “temperament.” What is more, Lincoln had easier access to formal intellectual resources in theology, metaphysics, and law for his fatalism than Lincoln biographers have usually been interested in

13. Henry Philip Tappan, “A Course of Moral Philosophy,” in Henry Philip Tappan Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

14. Herndon to C. O. Poole, Jan. 5, 1886, Herndon-Weik Papers, Group 4 [reel 9], #1885; Jesse Weik, *The Real Lincoln: A Portrait* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1922), 112.

15. Burlingame, *Inner World of Abraham Lincoln*, 106.

16. David Davis, quoted in Weik, *Real Lincoln*, 129.

exploring. Finding that Lincoln had “a little-indulged” inclination to philology took both Joseph Gillespie in Springfield and the young John Hay in the White House off-guard; we have less excuse than Gillespie or Hay for finding that Lincoln’s fatalism may have sprung from an equally recondite taste for problems in nineteenth-century American moral philosophy.<sup>17</sup>

Herndon is the most important source for analyzing Lincoln’s fatalism, and much of the significance that this idea held for Lincoln can be seen just by how often Herndon referred back to his discussions with Lincoln about it in the years Lincoln and Herndon shared their Springfield law office. According to Herndon, Lincoln “was a fatalist and believed that fatalism ruled the world.” What Lincoln meant by this, Herndon explained, was that “the great leading law of human nature is motive.”<sup>18</sup> All human action, in other words, begins with a reason for that action; and actions that occur without seeming reason are just what we are wont to call irrational or even insane (and even then, most irrational individuals imagine that they have “reasons” for what they are doing). These reasons for action are what Lincoln called “motives,” and he was very clear that motives did more than simply provide the occasion for action. “Motives moved the man to every voluntary act of his life,” Lincoln told Herndon.<sup>19</sup> During the Civil War, Lincoln fastened on the connection between motives and actions in order to explain why black soldiers had to have political rights guaranteed to them as part of the inducement to enlist. “Negroes, like other people, act upon motives,” Lincoln explained in terms that he plainly thought were axiomatic. “Why should they do any thing for us, if we will do nothing for them? If they stake their lives for us, they must be prompted by the strongest motive—even the promise of freedom.”<sup>20</sup>

Motives, therefore, ruled (or, if you will, *caused*) human action, and they possessed that power because motives appealed at the

17. John Hay, quoted in *Lincoln and the Civil War in the Diaries of John Hay*, ed. Tyler Dennett (1939; Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, reprint, 1972), 72; Gillespie to Herndon, Dec. 8, 1866, Herndon-Weik Papers, Group 4 [reel 8].

18. Herndon to Weik, Feb. 25, 1887, Herndon-Weik Papers, Group 4 [reel 9], #1893–96; Herndon and Weik, *Abraham Lincoln*, 2:306.

19. Herndon to Weik, Feb. 25, 1887, Herndon-Weik Papers, Group 4 [reel 9], #1893–96.

20. Lincoln, “To James Conkling,” in *Collected Works*, 4:409.

most basic level to human self-interest. "His idea," recalled Herndon, "was that all human actions were caused by motives, and at the bottom of these motives was self."<sup>21</sup> Lincoln evidently had little patience with the idea that human behavior could arise spontaneously from some inherent human goodness, or even that it could be educated to guide its choices by some rule of otherworldliness, impartiality, or (to use a favorite nineteenth-century term) disinterested benevolence. "At bottom," Herndon told the audiences for his controversial Springfield lectures on Lincoln in 1866, Lincoln always expected that "the snaky tongue of human selfishness will wag out."

We often argued the question [Herndon remembered], I taking the opposite view. . . . I once contended that man was free and could act without a motive. He smiled at my philosophy, and answered that it was impossible, because the motive was born before the man. . . . He defied me to act without motive and unselfishly; and when I did the act and told him of it, he analyzed and sifted it to the last grain. After he had concluded, I could not avoid the admission that he had demonstrated the absolute selfishness of the entire act.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, Lincoln found no evidence in human behavior that the process of choosing or willing could be broken down into stages that might soften or divert the attractive power of motives. He did not, for instance, believe that willing involved two separate stages, one of perception or attraction and then one of cool, quiet deliberation, in which we decide whether or not to yield to the motive that has attracted us. "He maintained that there was no conscious act of any man that was not moved by a motive, first, last, and always," Herndon wrote. Thus, "there was no freedom of the will," and "men are made by conditions that surround them, that have somewhat existed for a hundred thousand years or more."<sup>23</sup>

21. Herndon, "Analysis of the Character of Abraham Lincoln," *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* 1 (Sept. 1941): 371–72; Herndon and Weik, *Abraham Lincoln*, 2:306.

22. Herndon, "Analysis of the Character of Abraham Lincoln," *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* 1 (Dec. 1941): 411; Herndon and Weik, *Abraham Lincoln*, 2:148, 306; for a similar description, probably also retailed by Herndon, see Josiah G. Holland, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Springfield, Mass.: Gurdon Bill, 1866), 79.

23. Herndon to Senator Fowler, Feb. 18, 1886, in *Hidden Lincoln*, ed. Hertz, 141–42; Herndon to Weik, Feb. 6, 1887, Herndon-Weik Papers, Group 4 [reel 10], #2031–34.

In fact, the self-interested response to motive was so regular and predictable that it mounted to the force of law, "continuous and unchangeable," and it led Lincoln to reduce a good deal of the variety of human behavior to "a calculation of the law of forces and ultimate results."<sup>24</sup> The key word in this was "forces," since nowhere in Herndon's description of Lincoln's fatalism is there any inference that the causation of human action might be attributed to an intelligent causer, to God or divine Providence. "His idea of God was a kind of 'Sufficient Cause,'" Herndon told Lamon in 1870, and it was the simple operation of cause-and-effect, not a supreme sovereign creator, that "ruled both matter and mind" for Lincoln.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Lincoln seems to have been unconcerned that, in attributing all action to a comparatively impersonal *cause* or *force* rather than a supernatural and reasonable being, he was subverting a moral sense of right or wrong, or any possibility of attributing blame or praise for human actions. To the contrary, Lincoln, according to Herndon, was inclined by his fatalism to soften or excuse what appeared to be the most obvious examples of human guilt or responsibility. He "quoted the case of Brutus and Caesar, arguing that the former was forced by laws and conditions over which he had no control to kill the latter, and vice versa, that the latter was specially created to be disposed of by the former."<sup>26</sup>

Herndon had a well-known weakness for embroidery and exaggeration in some of his memories of Lincoln, but it is not likely in this case that he was guilty of misrepresentation, since Lincoln himself provided one large piece of confirmation for Herndon's description of his fatalism. This appears, however, in a peculiar place in Lincoln's writings—the so-called "Handbill Replying to Charges of Infidelity," which Lincoln printed and distributed during his 1846 campaign for the seat of the newly created Illinois Seventh Congressional District. Lincoln had experienced considerable anxiety about this election, first because the Seventh District was the only one then in Illinois where a Whig had a clear opportunity of winning (and Lincoln had taken no small amount of trouble to persuade a potential Whig rival, John J. Hardin, to leave him a clear field), and second, because the Democratic nominee for the Seventh District seat, Peter Cartwright, was a popular and brass-

24. Herndon, "Analysis of the Character," *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* 1 (Sept. 1941): 366.

25. Herndon, quoted in David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 291.

26. Herndon and Weik, *Abraham Lincoln*, 2:146.

lunged Methodist preacher who would be certain to play his religious cards for all they were worth.<sup>27</sup> Lincoln's own failure to establish a recognizable religious profile had long been, as he well knew, a major political liability: as early as 1837, he was aware that his political enemies were asking "an old acquaintance of mine" whether "he ever heard Lincoln say he was a deist," and in 1843 he acknowledged that "because I belonged to no church," he had suffered "a tax of a considerable per cent. upon my strength throughout the religious community."<sup>28</sup> Now, in addition to that liability, he was dealing with a representative of one Protestant Christian community—the Methodists—for whom free will was a nonnegotiable fundamental of religious faith.

Worried by rumors that Cartwright had instigated a "whispering campaign" that urged pious Whigs to vote their piety and not their politics, Lincoln drew up on July 31, 1846, a formal statement for inclusion in several central Illinois newspapers. This "handbill" has been intensively studied ever since its rediscovery by Harry E. Pratt in 1942 in the back files of the *Illinois Gazette* for its somewhat disingenuous statement of Lincoln's religious preferences: that he was not a member of any Christian church, but that he had never actually denied the truth of Christianity or spoken with "intentional disrespect of religion in general," and that he would never himself contemplate supporting any politician who did.<sup>29</sup> What is usually missed is the central part of the document, where Lincoln turns, without any warning, to an explanation of his belief in "the 'Doctrine of Necessity.'" Lincoln defined this "doctrine" in terms very close to those used by Herndon in describing Lincoln's idea of motives: "that is, that the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power, over which the mind itself has no control."<sup>30</sup> Presumably, Cartwright must have added (or else Lincoln believed that he had added) to his accusation of Lincoln's general distaste for churchgoing the charge that Lincoln was guilty of a particularly nasty form of "infidelity," the notion that all human

27. Donald W. Riddle, *Lincoln Runs for Congress* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1948), 51, 58; on Lincoln's rivalry with Cartwright, as far back as the 1830s, see Robert Bray, "The Power to Hurt: Lincoln's Early Use of Satire and Invective," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 16 (Winter 1995): 43–50.

28. Lincoln, "Second Reply to James Adams," Oct. 18, 1837, and "To Martin S. Morris," Mar. 26, 1843, in *Collected Works*, 1:106, 320.

29. See the original republication of this text in "Abraham Lincoln's Religion: His Own Statement," *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* 2 (Mar. 1942): 1–4.

30. Lincoln, "Handbill Replying to Charges of Infidelity," in *Collected Works*, 1:382.

conduct is the forced result of natural laws, with the possible implication that Lincoln believed that there was no such thing as right or wrong human action, only action compelled by faceless and impersonal motives. To a nineteenth-century audience, grilled on evangelical Protestant notions of moral responsibility and the natural-law moralisms of Francis Wayland, Francis Bowen, Mark Hopkins, Eliphalet Nott, Thomas Upham, and Joseph Haven, this was negative campaigning at its worst.

It is important to note, however, that in the "Handbill" Lincoln carefully sidestepped the accusation rather than denied it. It is true, he conceded, "I have sometimes (with one, two or three, but never publicly) tried to maintain this argument," but he did not repudiate his "Doctrine of Necessity"; to the contrary, he struck back at Cartwright by reminding his readers that some form of "this same opinion" was held by several of the Methodists' rivals among "the Christian denominations."<sup>31</sup> If Lincoln's "necessity" horrified Methodists like Cartwright, then by way of reply, Lincoln was indirectly suggesting that Cartwright's free willism horrified a good many righteous Presbyterians and Congregationalists. Likewise, it is also important to underscore the basic similarity between Lincoln's protestation in the "Handbill" and Herndon's account of his discussions with Lincoln on necessity and free will: Lincoln believed that human choice is caused, and caused in such a way that the mind is compelled, without the countervailing power of deliberation or free will, to cooperate with the cause.

This raises the second question about Lincoln's fatalism, concerning the possible sources for this "Doctrine of Necessity," especially since the rather well-developed vocabulary he deployed in arguing with Herndon and "with one, two or three" others like Whitney, Lamon, and Arnold lifts Lincoln's fatalism above the level of mere law-office chitchat. Herndon supplied part of the answer when he claimed that Lincoln's fatalism stemmed in some measure from "his early Baptist training," although he muddled what that "training" could have amounted to by identifying Thomas Lincoln as a "Free-will Baptist," which would have been the very antithesis of "necessity."<sup>32</sup> Thomas and Nancy Lincoln, in fact, were members in Kentucky of the Little Mount Separate Baptist Church, a congregation linked to a rigidly predestinarian Baptist subgroup; Thomas Lincoln declined to join the Pigeon Creek Baptist Church in Indiana for seven years until, in 1823, it affiliated with the Sep-

31. *Ibid.*

32. Herndon and Weik, *Abraham Lincoln*, 1:8.

arates (Sarah Bush Lincoln was received into membership by the Separates on the same day "by experience" and Lincoln's sister, Sarah, was admitted to the Separates' fellowship in 1826).<sup>33</sup> The Separate Baptists, who were also known as the Primitive Baptists (and, more colorfully, as the "Anti-Mission" or "Hard-Shell" Baptists) and who amounted to almost 20 percent of all American Baptists by the 1840s, prided themselves on a radical Calvinism that had "no Mission Boards for converting the heathen, or for evangelizing the world" since God had already determined "from before the foundation of the world" who, in his wisdom, he would have evangelized and who not.<sup>34</sup> The Pigeon Creek Church, for example, established as part of its articles of faith that "we believe in one god the father, the word & holly gost who haith created all things that are created by the word of his power for his pleasure" and that "we believe in Election by grace given us in Christ Jesus Before the world began & that God Cawls, generates and sanctifies all who are made meat [meet] for Glory by his special grace."<sup>35</sup> Add to this the fact that Thomas Lincoln was "one of the five or six most important men" among the Indiana Separates, and it becomes clear that, for all effective purposes, Abraham Lincoln's life in Indiana was lived in an atmosphere of what William Barton called "a Calvinism that would have out-Calvined Calvin."<sup>36</sup>

33. William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People: A Study of the Religion of Abraham Lincoln* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), 34–37; William E. Barton, *The Soul of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: George H. Doran, 1920), 36–41; J. G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History* (New York: Century, 1890), 1:32–33; Louis A. Warren, *Lincoln's Youth: Indiana Years, Seven to Twenty-One, 1816–1830* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), 11, 13, 114–15, 206, and "Pigeon Creek Church," in *Lincoln Lore*, no. 661 (Dec. 8, 1941); Francis Marion Van Natter, *Lincoln's Boyhood: A Chronicle of His Indiana Years* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1963), 12.

34. R. H. Pittman, *Biographical History of Primitive or Old School Baptist Ministers of the United States* (Anderson, In.: Herald Printing Company, 1870), 30; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Antimission Movement in the Jacksonian South," *Journal of Southern History* 20 (Nov. 1970): 501–29; M. L. Houser, "Some Religious Influences which Surrounded Lincoln," in *Lincoln Group Papers: Twelve Addresses Delivered before the Lincoln Group of Chicago*, 2d series (Chicago: J. Henri Ripstra, 1945), 16–20; "Primitive Baptists," in *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1958), 1114–15; "Primitive or Old School Baptists," in *The Baptist Encyclopedia*, ed. William Cathcart (Philadelphia: n.p., 1883), 77–78.

35. D. Raymond Taggart, *The Faith of Abraham Lincoln* (Topeka, Kans.: Service Print Shop, 1943), 278.

36. Ida Tarbell, *In the Footsteps of the Lincolns* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1924), 143–44; Charles Garnett Vannest, *Lincoln the Hoosier: Abraham Lincoln's Life in Indiana* (St. Louis, Mo.: Eden Publishing House, 1928), 7–8; William E. Barton, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 2 vols. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1925), 2:460.

Abraham Lincoln never became a Baptist, although in the 1846 congressional campaign his friends noticed that he did not hesitate to point out, in religious self-defense, that "his parents were Baptists, and brought him up in the belief of the Baptist religion."<sup>37</sup> But what Barton called "the ultra Calvinism of his boyhood" stayed with him, most obviously in the sense that it laid the groundwork for his later argument that all events were necessarily predetermined: "Mr. Lincoln seldom said anything on the subject of religion," recalled Joseph Gillespie in 1882, but the one theological opinion Gillespie remembered hearing from him was that he "could never reconcile the 'prescience of Deity with the uncertainty of events.'"<sup>38</sup> Separate Calvinism also stayed with Lincoln in the way that it allowed him, as the case required, to switch rhetorical gears between talking about a divinely ordered necessity and a cause-and-effect necessity.<sup>39</sup> The same Lincoln who in 1846 could write about the "Doctrine of Necessity" without any reference to supernatural causality could just as easily, less than five years later, compose a farewell letter to his stepbrother John D. Johnston for his dying father, assuring Thomas Lincoln in predestinarian terms Thomas would have been much more comfortable with, that "He who notes the fall of the sparrow, and numbers the hairs of our heads . . . will not forget the dying man, who puts his Trust in him."<sup>40</sup> A year later, Lincoln eulogized Henry Clay as "a man the times have demanded, and such, in the providence of God was given us."<sup>41</sup> And it is well known that during his embattled presidency, Lincoln's allusions to "the Divine Being who determines the destinies of nations," to "an all-wise Providence," and to "Divine assistance" without which "all must fail" multiplied.<sup>42</sup> He repeatedly described himself as nothing more than "a humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty" and expanded that on at least one occasion to claim that "we are all agents and instruments of Di-

37. Thomas Mostiller to B. F. Irwin, 1874, in Irwin, *Lincoln's Religious Belief* (Springfield, Ill.: Privately printed, H. E. Barker, 1919), 7.

38. Gillespie, quoted in *The Lincoln Memorial: Album-Immortelles*, ed. Osborn H. Oldroyd (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1883), 457.

39. Barton, *Soul of Abraham Lincoln*, 271-72; Richard N. Current, *The Lincoln Nobody Knows* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), 71.

40. Lincoln, "To John D. Johnston," Jan. 12, 1851, in *Collected Works*, 2:97.

41. Lincoln, "Eulogy on Henry Clay," Apr. 6, 1852, in *Collected Works*, 2:132.

42. Lincoln, "Response to Evangelical Lutherans," May 13, 1862; "To Baltimore Methodists," May 1862; "Annual Message to Congress," Dec. 3, 1861; "Remarks to Baltimore Presbyterian Synod," Oct. 24, 1863; "Remarks to a Delegation of Progressive Friends," June 20, 1862, all in *Collected Works*, 5:53, 212-13, 215-16, 279, and 6:535-36.

vine Providence."<sup>43</sup> Providence, in time, became a term of convenience for Lincoln: without committing him to any specific form of theism, it allowed him the psychological comfort of referring all events to an unseen control, a control that might also enjoy at least some form of recognizability as the God of his parents.

For these invocations of "Providence" were too oft-repeated and too absolute in the powers he ascribed to Providence to be mere political window dressing. The purposes of that Providence were, as he informed Eliza Gurney in 1864, "perfect and must prevail"—meaning that they were completely formed and irresistible. On those occasions when Lincoln derived some measure of confidence from this he chided those of little faith, like Congressman James Wilson and his Iowa delegation in 1862, with the assertion that "my faith is greater than yours" because "I also believe He will compel us to do right in order that He may do these things, not so much because we desire them as that they accord with His plans of dealing with this nation."<sup>44</sup> However, when the war news turned disastrous, he frequently surrendered to a sense of helplessness in the face of an inscrutable cosmic will. In a private memorandum during the dark September of 1862, Lincoln admitted that "the will of God prevails," but that God's purpose in doing so was deeply puzzling, "something different from the purpose of either party." In 1864, he pointed out that "now at the end of three years' struggle the nation's condition is not what either party, or any man devised, or expected" and that "God alone can claim it." More dramatically, he "moaned and groaned in anguish" to Pennsylvania governor Andrew Curtin, "saying over and over again: 'What has God put me in this place for.'"<sup>45</sup> Whether or not this meant that Lincoln actually believed in a personal God (and Herndon was quite explicit in stating that Lincoln did not) or merely that Lincoln habitually personalized with the term "God" the gigantic fate that he believed relentlessly ruled and judged all human events is almost beside the point. What is clear is that, even if we grant Herndon's skeptical conclusion that the Johnston letter was "merely a message of consolation from a dutiful son to his dying father," or

43. Lincoln, "Reply to Eliza P. Gurney," Oct. 26, 1862; "Address to the New Jersey Senate at Trenton, New Jersey," Feb. 21, 1861, in *Collected Works*, 4:236 and 5:279; see also Barton, *Soul of Abraham Lincoln*, 332.

44. Lincoln, "To Eliza P. Gurney," Sept. 4, 1864, in *Collected Works*, 7:535; Wolf, *Almost Chosen People*, 146; see also Lucius E. Crittenden, *Recollections of President Lincoln and His Administration* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1891), 448–50.

45. Lincoln, "Meditation on the Divine Will," Sept. 1862, and "To Albert G. Hodges," Apr. 4, 1864, in *Collected Works*, 5:403–4, and 7:282; Burlingame, *Inner World of Abraham Lincoln*, 105.

heed Charles H. Ray's warning to Ward Hill Lamon not to let "Calvinistic theology a chance to claim him as one of its saints and martyrs," Lincoln remained gripped throughout his life by the same sense of things that the Separate Baptists of his youth preached, of a universe whose order eluded human control.<sup>46</sup>

These Calvinistic origins and overtones, however, do not go very far in explaining the specific shape of Lincoln's fatalism, with its intricate vocabulary of motives, necessity, and self-interest, all of which were foreign to the discourse of the Separate Baptists. It would be easier to trace the subsequent development of this fatalism if we had a clearer idea of what Lincoln was reading once he left his father's new farm in Illinois in 1830 and struck out on his own. One thing that we do know is that, as early as the mid-1830s, Lincoln had repudiated what little he might have earlier embraced of Separate Baptist theology beyond that looming sense of "necessity."<sup>47</sup> Some of the fuel for that repudiation, according to Herndon, came from Lincoln's reading of such provocative arguments for deism and "infidelity" as Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason*, Constantin-Francois Volney's *Ruins, or, A Survey of the Revolution of Empires*, and by the mid-1840s, Robert Chambers's proto-Darwinian *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*.<sup>48</sup> All of these books would

46. Angle, *Herndon's Life of Lincoln*, 352–53; Herndon to Weik, Nov. 24, 1882, in *Hidden Lincoln*, ed. Hertz, 87; C. H. Ray, quoted in Lamon, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln from His Birth to His Inauguration as President* (Boston: James E. Osgood, 1872), 489–90. There were, of course, other brands of Calvinism on offer in the early republic that might have exercised influence on the young Lincoln. Jonathan Edwards, the most formidable of early American Calvinist divines, laid the groundwork for a major reconciliation of absolute predestination and a thinly defined version of free will in his great treatise on *Freedom of the Will* (1754), which was easily the most carefully read American philosophical work before 1850 and which also described human actions as a response to "motives." But in Lincoln there is no sign of any reconciliation between necessity and free will, or at least nothing resembling Edwards's formulas; and nothing in Lincoln's use of the term "motives" that shares any ground with Edwards's (see Allen C. Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will: A Century of American Theological Debate, 1750–1850* [Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989], 154–75).

47. Herndon to Lamon, Feb. 25, 1870, in *Hidden Lincoln*, ed. Hertz, 64–65; Cogdal to B. F. Irwin, in Irwin, *Lincoln's Religious Belief*, 8; Matheny to Lamon, in Lamon, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 487–88, 495; Joshua Speed, *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln; and a Visit to California* (Louisville, Ky.: J. P. Morton, 1884), 32–33; Rankin, *Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1916), 324–25.

48. Angle, *Herndon's Life of Lincoln*, 347; Herndon, "Lincoln's Philosophy and Religion," in *Hidden Lincoln*, ed. Hertz, 407; John Hill to Herndon, June 6, 1865, Herndon-Weik Papers, Group 4 [reel 7], #118; William Elroy Curtis, *The True Abraham Lincoln* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1903), 376; Kunigunde Duncan and D. F. Nickols, *Mentor Graham: The Man Who Taught Lincoln* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), 143; Barton, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 2:459; Albert J. Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809–1858*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1928), 1:138–40.

have confirmed a basic skepticism about Christian dogma and, if Herndon has the story right, Lincoln may have even written an essay of his own in the mid-1830s on "infidelity" that "denied the miraculous conception of Christ, ridiculed the Trinity, and denied that the Bible was the divine special revelation of God."<sup>49</sup> Another thing, quite incidentally, that all of these would have confirmed would have been a thoroughgoing secular determinism. Virtually all of the major deistic or "infidel" literature published in America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century incorporated some form of determinism, largely as a way of accounting for order in the universe without invoking a personal God to create and provide for it. Paine, for instance, mocked predestination as a theological doctrine, but he just as quickly described the operation of the universe as a "vast machinery" that "still goes on . . . whether wake or sleep," and his favorite model for explaining universal motion was a mechanical orrery.<sup>50</sup> Robert Chambers, whose *Vestiges* went through eleven editions between 1844 and 1860 (including a cheap fifty-cent American paperback), believed in a universal order so all-encompassing that "man is now seen to be an enigma only as an individual; in the mass he is a mathematical problem" and all "mental action, being proved to be under law, passes at once into the category of natural things."<sup>51</sup> Free will, fatalism, and de-

49. Herndon to Bartlett, Oct. 1887, in *Hidden Lincoln*, ed. Hertz, 209; see also John Hill to Herndon, June 6, 1865, which includes Hill's Feb. 15, 1862, article in a Petersburg, Illinois, newspaper, describing Lincoln's "dissertation," Herndon-Weik Papers, Group 4 [reel 7], #118.

50. Thomas Paine, "Predestination" and "The Age of Reason," in *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, 20 vols., ed. M. D. Conway (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1896), 4:31, 193, 424-27.

51. Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, ed. James A. Secord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 331. Lincoln also acquired a taste for poetry, especially Burns and Shakespeare; and it is worth remembering in this context that Burns was read in the early nineteenth century as a religious skeptic, while the Shakespeare Lincoln liked best had a strong whiff of fatalism to it. Lincoln's comment to the actor James Hackett in 1863 that he preferred the king of Denmark's "soliloquy in Hamlet commencing 'O, my offence is rank'" to the more celebrated "To be, or not to be," is usually treated as an embarrassing but amiable example of an amateur's enthusiasm. Not enough interpreters of Lincoln have taken the trouble to read the soliloquy (act 3, scene 3) and notice that it speaks in agonizing tones about the inability of human beings to choose, on their own, even the most desirable ends:

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven . . .  
 . . . what then? what rests?  
 Try what repentance can: what can it not?  
 Yet what can it when one can not repent?  
 O wretched state! O bosom black as death!  
 O limned soul, that struggling to be free  
 Art more engaged!

terminism left their tracks throughout Lincoln's reading in the two middle decades of his life in Springfield; and the imprint they made on Lincoln was deep enough that he appeared in 1849 to Springfield Presbyterian pastor James Smith to be "very depressed and downcast" and "perplexed and unsettled by the fundamentals of religion, by speculative difficulties, connected with Providence."<sup>52</sup>

But the determinism of Chambers, Volney, and Paine had little of the sophistication and none of the specific vocabulary of "motive" and "self-interest" that Lincoln's fatalism possessed, and while they may have helped to de-nature Lincoln's youthful Calvinism and redress it in secularized garb, they certainly could not have given it the configuration it assumed in Lincoln's 1846 "Hand-bill." Instead, the rhetorical clues in Lincoln's fatalism point to a source that may lie unsuspectingly close at hand, in the debates among American lawyers in the early Republic over the shape of a republican jurisprudence.

Lincoln began the practice of law in Springfield in 1837, and like most lawyers in the United States outside of major urban centers, he acquired his legal education more-or-less on the job as a junior partner in an already established law practice (in this case, that of John T. Stuart) and through reading a list of basic texts that began with the *Commentaries* of the English jurist, Sir William Blackstone, and later included Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story's *Commentaries*.<sup>53</sup> Given the recognition that Blackstone's name manages to

52. James Smith, quoted in Taggart, *Faith of Abraham Lincoln*, 51; Barton, *Soul of Abraham Lincoln*, 162–63. Another possible "infidel" influence on Lincoln may have come in the form of Robert Owen, whose communal experiment at New Harmony, Indiana, lay about fifty miles from the Lincolns' Pigeon Creek settlement and only ten miles from a parcel of land that Thomas Lincoln bought for speculative purposes in 1827. Owen was a Paine-ite determinist who staged a sensational debate with Alexander Campbell in Cincinnati in 1829 in which Owen frankly and skillfully defended a nontheistic determinist position. Years after Lincoln's death, Dennis Hanks claimed that Lincoln had visited and admired New Harmony. See Owen, *Debate on the Evidences of Christianity*, 2 vols. (Cincinnati, Oh.: Robinson and Fairbank, 1829), 1:22–24; E. H. Madden and D. W. Madden, "The Great Debate: Alexander Campbell versus Robert Owen," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 18 (Summer 1982): 207–26; Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 124, 171–72; Van Natter, *Lincoln's Boyhood*, 118–24.

53. Lincoln composed a sample reading list in a letter to James T. Thornton on Dec. 2, 1858 (*Collected Works*, 3:344) that included, beyond Blackstone, Joseph Chitty's *Treatise on Pleading and Parties to Actions . . . Containing Precedents of Pleadings, and an Appendix of Forms* (3 vols., 1844), Simon Greenleaf's *Treatise on the Law of Evidence* (3 vols., 1842–53), and Story's *Commentaries on Equity Jurisprudence as Administered in England and America* (2 vols., 1836) and *Commentaries on Equity Pleadings, and the Incidents Thereof, According to the Practice of the Courts of Equity, of England and America* (2d ed., 1840).

command even among nonlawyers, it is ironic that his was actually the most embattled figure on that list, for Blackstone was an English Tory whose principal labor had been to establish the supremacy of king and common law over natural law and religious dissent and to secure the protection and preservation of property ownership as the supreme duty of the law.<sup>54</sup> Blackstone encoded, in effect, many of the notions of sovereignty and property that the American revolutionaries had fought to resist. Much of the history of American law in the early republic is the story of how American jurists, led by Story and John Marshall, sought to Americanize and domesticate Blackstone and the English common law and, on the other hand, how a pugnacious minority, under the inspiration of the English utilitarians James Mill and Jeremy Bentham, struggled to repel the imposition of common law and instead make law a matter of positive legislative statute that served the interests, not of property holding, but (in Bentham's phrase) of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number."<sup>55</sup>

Although Bentham recruited the support of only a comparatively small portion of the American legal profession before the Civil War—only Louisiana, which had no previous experience of English common law, adopted a Benthamite law code—his attractions were not limited to legal theory, for Bentham had also written on metaphysics, and his comments on free will and necessity have what will by now seem a familiar ring. In general, Bentham professed

54. J. C. D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty, 1660–1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 5, 83, 110, 140.

55. On Blackstone and the struggle to incorporate English common law into American jurisprudence, see Gregory S. Alexander, "Time and Property in the American Republican Legal Culture," *New York University Law Review* 66 (May 1991): 273–352; Morton J. Horwitz, *The Transformation of American Law, 1780–1860* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), 9–15; R. Kent Newmyer, *Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story: Statesman of the Old Republic* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 272–73, 280; G. Edward White, *The Marshall Court and Cultural Change, 1815–1835* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 68–71, 95, 119, 151–52, 489–91, 493, 676–77. On Bentham, see D. B. Crook, "The United States in Bentham's Thought," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 10 (1964): 196–204; John Dinwiddie, *Bentham* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 55, 85; H. L. A. Hart, "The United States of America," in *Essays on Bentham: Studies in the Jurisprudence and Political Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 53–78; Rogers M. Smith, *Liberalism and American Constitutional Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, MA, 1985), 39. On the "greatest happiness" formula, see Jeremy Bentham, *Deontology Together with a Table of the Springs of Moral Action*, ed. Amnon Goldworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 60.

to be irritated by the need to talk about free will and necessity, although he admitted that any jurisprudence worth its salt had to come to terms with these problems if only to have a clear notion of what responsibility before the law meant. Bentham's irritation grew from his insistence that the entire problem was really quite simple: "On every occasion, *conduct*—the *course* taken by a man's conduct—is at the absolute command of—is the never-failing result of—the *motives*."

It is an acknowledged truth, that every kind of act whatever, and consequently every kind of offence, is apt to assume a different character, and to be attended with different effects, according to the nature of the *motive* which gives birth to it. This makes it requisite to take a view of the several motives by which human conduct is liable to be influenced.<sup>56</sup>

What gave these "motives" their power over human willing was, precisely as it had been for Lincoln, the self-interest to which they appealed: "on every occasion, [an act] is at the absolute command of *motives* and corresponding *interest*." Thus, every choice—and neither Bentham nor Lincoln made any exceptions—was a motivated one, and the fundamental characteristic of human nature to which motives played was a plain, bleak concern for one's own self-interest. "No human act ever has been or ever can be *disinterested*," wrote Bentham, "for there exists not ever any voluntary action, which is not the result of the operation of some *motive* or *motives*, nor any motive, which has not for its accompaniment a corresponding *interest*, real or imagined."<sup>57</sup>

It is hard to miss the extraordinary resemblance between Lincoln's and Bentham's descriptions of the operation of motives and self-interest. All that is lacking to seal the identification of Benthamite utilitarianism as the ultimate source of Lincoln's fatalism would be a cameo appearance by Bentham on the streets of Springfield in, say, about 1846. Unhappily, Bentham died in 1832, and although Bentham gave John Quincy Adams twenty-five copies of each of his principal writings in 1817 to distribute to "strategic repositories" in the United States, there is no evidence that Lincoln read them, and no direct citation of Bentham occurs anywhere in

56. Bentham, *Deontology*, 112; Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (London: Methuen, 1982), 96; Douglas E. Long, *Bentham on Liberty: Jeremy Bentham's Idea of Liberty in Relation to His Utilitarianism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 41, 231.

57. Bentham, *Deontology*, 19, 99–100.

Lincoln's writings. Still, Lincoln need not have studied Bentham to have absorbed him, for Bentham's ideas were available through other American lawyers and legal reformers, including Richard Hildreth, William Beach Lawrence, Edward Livingston (the author of the Benthamite Louisiana law code), the Philadelphia lawyer John Allyn, and the Louisiana Supreme Court jurist Henry Carleton.<sup>58</sup> The latter two, not coincidentally, also published treatises on free will, frankly hawking the Benthamite line on necessity. "Necessity varies with motive," wrote Carleton, and "when once the motive is fixed, it is no less certain in its effects than the forces of physical necessity."<sup>59</sup>

Lincoln was much too committed to the defense of property rights and land tenure to have become an outright utilitarian like Allyn, Carleton, or Hildreth. In fact, the only political theorist we know Lincoln studied in detail was Francis Wayland, who was the mortal enemy of both moral and political utilitarianism, and Lincoln's recommended legal reading was anchored to both Blackstone and Story.<sup>60</sup> But the presence of a mediating utilitarian discourse within the American legal profession does remove the obstacle of remoteness from Lincoln's recognition of Bentham's musings on free will (being a lawyer, in fact, placed Lincoln more directly in the track of Bentham than had he been part of any other professional community). Certainly, one has to say that Lincoln, although he won his fame and fortune as the protector of railroad property for the Illinois Central in the 1850s, also gave a utilitarian twist to the ultimate purpose of property jurisprudence. "The democracy of today hold[s] the *liberty* of one man to be absolutely nothing, when in conflict with another man's right of *property*," wrote Lincoln in 1859, "Republicans, on the contrary, are for both the *man* and the *dollar*; but in cases of conflict, the *man before* the dollar."<sup>61</sup>

58. Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943), 373–75.

59. Henry Carleton, *Liberty and Necessity; In Which Are Considered the Laws of Association of Ideas, the Meaning of the Word Will, and the True Intent of Punishment* (Philadelphia: Parry and McMillan, 1857), 148; John Allyn, *The Philosophy of Mind in Volition; or, An Essay on the Will* (Oberlin, Oh.: J. M. Fitch's Press, 1851), 30, 32, 50, 53–54, 61, 64.

60. Olivier Frayssé, *Lincoln, Land, and Labor, 1809–60*, trans. Sylvia Neely (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 91–92; Gabor S. Boritt, *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream* (1978; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 121–52; D. H. Meyer, *The Instructed Conscience: The Shaping of the American National Ethic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 46–49.

61. Lincoln, "To Henry L. Pierce and Others," Apr. 6, 1859, in *Collected Works*, 3:375; Frayssé, *Lincoln, Land, and Labor*, 170–71.

Even if Benthamite utilitarianism gets no explicit credit from Lincoln in his arguments with “one, two or three” about fatalism, we cannot dismiss lightly the striking similarity of vocabulary and meaning on free will between the Springfield lawyer and the London jurist.

That the sources of Lincoln’s “Doctrine of Necessity” could easily run an intellectual gamut from Calvinistic Baptists to Benthamite utilitarianism throws onto Lincoln a differently angled light than that in which we have been accustomed to seeing him. Herndon’s comments that Lincoln “read *less* and thought *more* than any man in America”—that “politics were his Heaven and his Hades metaphysics”—have usually been read as Herndon’s claim that Lincoln was a raw, untutored genius, making up in native political intuition what he lacked in educated sophistication. But Herndon also described Lincoln in reasonably conventional philosophical terms as “a realist as opposed to an idealist . . . a sensationalist as opposed to an intuitionist, a materialist as opposed to a spiritualist,” and above all, a man who “was moved and controlled by his philosophy,” whatever kind of eclectic shape that “philosophy” may have taken. Lincoln’s speculations on fatalism indicate that he burrowed deeper into the mazes of Anglo-American intellectual life in the nineteenth century—through the competing Springfield lyceums, the religious conflicts of predestination and perfection, and the distribution networks of books and the culture of print in the trans-Appalachia before 1860—than his interpreters have given him credit. Even granting that Lincoln’s intellectual life was dominated by questions of politics and law, it was not always simple politics or simple law, and the next biographer of Lincoln is going to have to pay far closer attention than has been the habit (especially since J. G. Randall) to the bits of cultural substance that lie scattered and unsystemized throughout Lincoln’s surviving writings.<sup>62</sup>

Lincoln’s speculations on fatalism and necessity also throw a different light on one of Lincoln’s most-admired attributes, his “charity for all” and his “malice toward none,” from the defeated Confederate leadership down to the sentry caught asleep on duty. Lincoln interpreters have been tempted to ascribe this “charity” to a mysterious, godlike reservoir of virtue in Lincoln; but Herndon

62. Herndon, “Analysis of the Character,” *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* 1 (Sept. 1941) and (Dec. 1941): 364, 411; Herndon to Weik, Nov. 24, 1882, in *Hidden Lincoln*, ed. Hertz, 90–91; Rufus Rockwell Wilson, *What Lincoln Read* (Washington, D.C.: National Capital Press, 1932), 51–53.

knew better—and knew that it was closely linked to Lincoln's fatalism. "Lincoln's patience sprang from his philosophy," Herndon explained, "his charity for men and his want of malice for them everywhere, all grew out of his peculiar philosophy." Since Lincoln was a "thorough fatalist" and "believed that what was to be would be, and no prayers of ours could arrest or reverse the decree," then "men were but simple tools of fate, of conditions, and of laws," and no one "was responsible for what he was, thought, or did, because he was a child of conditions."<sup>63</sup>

This does not, at first blush, seem like a very congenial attitude for a case lawyer like Lincoln to adopt, but it is worth noting that this was a problem that Bentham and the utilitarians had addressed by redefining the connection between responsibility and punishment by abandoning all idea of legal punishment for crimes as retributive justice and reconceiving imprisonment as an opportunity for moral exhortation and rehabilitation.<sup>64</sup> Punishment, wrote the American Benthamite John Allyn, should not be "an expression of hatred, but a means of exciting in the mind of the delinquent a motive to do right, and thereby . . . remedying his deficient moral state."<sup>65</sup> Laws should therefore be "remedial" rather than retributive according to the utilitarians. Indeed, Bentham's most well-known proposals for legal reform addressed the reconstruction of the English penal system, including the architecture of prisons, to promote penitence rather than to inflict pain.<sup>66</sup> Not surprisingly, Lincoln often took the same line of argument in asking for the revision of sentences for wartime criminals. "Five years at hard labor in the Penitentiary is not at all necessary to prevent the repetition of the crime by himself and others," wrote Lincoln in remitting the sentence of William Yocum in 1864, and the pertinent thing to note in that judgment was Lincoln's conviction that the purpose of punishment was not to even scores but, in good utilitarian fashion, to present a sufficient motive to deter repetition or imitation.<sup>67</sup>

63. Herndon to Weik, Feb. 25, 1887, Herndon-Weik Papers, Group 4 [reel 9], #1893-96; Herndon to Fowler, Feb. 18, 1886, and to Weik, Feb. 26, 1891, in *Hidden Lincoln*, ed. Hertz, 141-42, 266-67.

64. Richard Double, *The Non-Reality of Free-Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 134-37; Christopher Lasch, "Guilt," *Intellectual History Newsletter* 16 (Dec. 1994): 15-17.

65. Allyn, *Philosophy of Mind*, 99.

66. Carleton, *Liberty and Necessity*, 161; William Holdsworth, *The History of English Law*, 2 vols. (London: Methuen, 1935), 11:137; Melvin I. Urofsky, *A March of Liberty: A Constitutional History of the United States* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 308, 313.

67. Lincoln, "To Edwin M. Stanton," Mar. 18, 1864, in *Collected Works*, 7:257.

Otherwise, Lincoln shrank from objective assessments of responsibility, because, to the extent that necessity was irresistible, human efforts to oppose it or flee from it were fruitless. In 1854, he had remarked that southern slaveholders "were neither better, nor worse than we of the North" because "if we were situated as they are, we should act and feel as they do; and if they were situated as we are, they should act and feel as we do; and we never ought to lose sight of this fact in discussing the subject."<sup>68</sup> Later, when reviewing the appeals of deserters, Lincoln liked to discover necessity in a case, rather than the sentimental application of pity, as the grounds for granting a pardon. "Well, after all, Judge, I think I must put this with my leg cases," Lincoln remarked on one occasion to Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt: "They are the cases that you call by that long title, 'cowardice in the face of the enemy,' but I call them for short, my 'leg cases.' But I put it to you, and I leave it for you to decide for yourself: if Almighty God gives a man a cowardly pair of legs how can he help their running away with him?"<sup>69</sup> "This philosophy as a whole will account for much of the facts and laws of his splendid life," promised Herndon, and that promise may also include Lincoln's most eloquent statement on the meaning of responsibility, in the third paragraph of the second inaugural.

Almost by custom, the attention commentators devote to the second inaugural is drawn largely to the final paragraph, with its benediction-like exhortation to end the Civil War "with malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right." What is frequently missed is how, in the preceding paragraph, Lincoln had expressed grave reservations about how much of the right God had actually given people to see. Even though the Confederate cause had been dedicated to a palpable injustice—that of "wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces"—even this injustice had been part of "the Almighty's purposes," and Lincoln was loath to pass too severe a judgment of his own on southerners when it was those purposes that were the ultimate cause of their misdoings. Much as he might pray "that this mighty scourge of war might pass away," Lincoln could not escape the sense of necessity in the four years of bloodshed, that the war was something that "God wills to continue." Faced with the inscrutability of that necessity, Lincoln warned, "let

68. Lincoln, "Speech at Bloomington, Illinois," Sept. 12, 1854, in *Collected Works*, 3:230.

69. Current, *Lincoln Nobody Knows*, 165–66.

us judge not that we be not judged" in dealing with each other; and let us not judge God, whose mysterious purposes are still, above any human willing or judgment, "true and righteous altogether." This is not so much a declaration of forgiveness as it is an acquiescence in the face of a "necessity" that forbids the imputation of too much praise or blame. Even at the end, Lincoln's fatalism had managed to have the last word.

Yet, Lincoln the "fatalist," who had no assurance that the will of any person was free, is also the great giver of liberty—the emancipator of millions—and the rebuilder of a sundered republic. There is no greater paradox in Lincoln's life than the one arising from the juxtaposition of these two images, for there seems no easy way to reconcile the man who believed that all human action was decided by powers beyond human control and the president who reiterated his faith in the capacity of individuals to improve themselves *via* a free-labor system that "gives hope to all, and energy, and progress, and improvement of condition to all."<sup>70</sup> Unhappily, paradoxes tempt the curious to resolve them into their separate parts; in Lincoln's case, the paradox of the Great Emancipator and the Fatalist has more significance for us if we leave it standing and ask what purpose the paradox might have served. In the most general sense, the paradox of Lincoln's fatalism falls into a pattern that has reappeared throughout modern Western history, and it arises from the peculiar tendency of determinists, from Oliver Cromwell to Karl Marx, to preach divine or material inevitability at one moment and then turn into the most avowed revolutionary activists at the next. The significance of Lincoln's paradox may be, in that light, that doctrines of necessity possess a strange psychological dynamic of their own, one that ironically promotes action rather than passivity, construction rather than indolence, persistence rather than hopelessness. And in Lincoln's American context, the need to preserve a sense of paradox about necessity and choice was, as Jon Pahl and Michael Kammen have suggested, a necessary part of the building of "a new and distinctive culture or ethos" in America.<sup>71</sup> Kammen notes that Americans, faced with the overwhelming challenge of subduing a new continent and establishing a new republic, could find the resolve to confront that challenge only by

70. Gabor S. Boritt, "The Right to Rise," in *The Public and Private Lincoln: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Cullom Davis et al. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), 57–70; Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3:478–79.

71. Pahl, *Paradox Lost*, 167–70; Michael Kammen, *People of Paradox: An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of American Civilization* (New York: Knopf, 1973), 32–47.

simultaneously asserting a divine Providence that would assure their triumph *and* a “hope in human striving” that would give them the incentive to strive in the first place. In that context, it was precisely Lincoln’s embrace of paradox—of both “necessity” and the “right to rise”—that granted him both the deterministic stability and the self-willed initiative to save the republic from the greatest challenge it would face.

But the paradox of Lincoln’s fatalism may also be linked, in a more paradoxical way, to a subtler change in Western consciousness in the nineteenth century. The Rice University historian Thomas Haskell, in a celebrated debate in 1985 and 1987 with David Brion Davis and John Ashworth, asked his readers to see a linkage between the rise of market capitalism in the Atlantic world in the nineteenth century and the simultaneous rise of humanitarianism, especially in the form of antislavery. Haskell reasoned that capitalism taught people, for the first time in Western history, to look beyond short-term gains and losses and to “attend to the remote consequences of their actions.” Capitalism, in other words, expanded the horizons of trade and with it forced the traders to widen their mental horizons, in terms of both geography (treating the world as the market rather than just the village down the lane) and time (calculating long-term gains and long-term patterns in marketing); this, in turn, created an extraordinary expansion of what people conceived themselves capable of doing and “inspired people’s confidence in their power to intervene in the course of events.”<sup>72</sup> In Haskell’s view, this expansion of possibilities had particular application to the antislavery movement, since it was precisely this new confidence of power, and the new awareness of a larger world of problems to use that power on, that explained for Haskell why no one before 1760 seemed to have felt that slavery was a problem they could or should address and why after 1760 so many people abruptly changed that opinion.

By that reckoning, no one ought to emerge as a better example of this consciousness than Lincoln, especially since his career as a Whig lawyer so often served the interests of an expanding American market system. But Lincoln’s fatalism points toward exactly the opposite form of consciousness, toward a sense of increased restraint and futility in the face of invisible powers over which one

72. Haskell, “Capitalism and Humanitarian Sensibility, 2,” in *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 141, 148.

has no meaningful control. To an observer like Lincoln, the dramatically expanding commercial economy, with its impersonal connections, with strangers bidding prices on distant markets, with railroads bringing goods and immigrants from heretofore unimaginable distances, was just as likely to be a reminder of how little could be ascribed to individual human willing and how much to the power of "interest." In Lincoln's case, the expansion of horizons described by Haskell could not dispel a contradictory sense of inability, of what could *not* be achieved; even the preoccupation of "promise-keeping," which Haskell selected as a prime characteristic of the new market consciousness (and which is incarnated in Lincoln's fabulous reputation for scrupulous honesty), has to sit uneasily beside Lincoln's effacement of moral responsibility in the face of "motives."

So once again, Lincoln presents us with paradox. For Lincoln, the expansion of America and the abolition of slavery would certainly give "hope to all." But as Americans rose to meet the moral challenge of slavery, they would have to learn the humbling lesson of "fatalism," that moralism does not come unmixed with motives and self-interest; and as America grew in commercial power and strength across the continent, that growth would sooner or later bring Americans to the kind of conceptual and economic boundaries on growth that no one can supersede. Not for Lincoln would there be the straightforward acceptance of a world of new horizons but rather a complex struggle to assimilate the expansion of what could be accomplished with the diminution of what one could be responsible for. His antislavery convictions may have less to do with embracing the new consciousness of the market than with an ambivalent effort to contain it. He did not live to see how futile that effort would have been in the Gilded Age, but perhaps that would not, in the end, have greatly shocked a "fatalist" like Lincoln. *Why should the spirit of mortal be proud*, Lincoln asked, in reciting his favorite poem, and why should it expect to accomplish more than the purposes of the Almighty had laid down for it? Perhaps that realization, more than any other single factor, left him no other explanation for human action but the "Doctrine of Necessity."