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Book Review Final Project

Stephen B. Oates' With Malice Toward None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln

**With Malice Toward None: A reflection on Lincoln's decisiveness, stability and dedication to the Union**

"Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud? Like a swift-fleeting meteor, a fast-flying cloud, a flash of the lightning, a break of the wave, he passes from life to his rest in the grave" (u.s.geocities, 1). Although Lincoln did not know who Henry Knox was when he first read the poem "*Mortality*", he knew the words encapsulated his life. In his usual flare, Oates conjures up a vision of Lincoln in his, With Malice Toward None that is both well researched yet impassioned with a bold vision of Lincoln. In Oates' book written 32 years ago, he avoids the blundering attempts made by many current historians to sensationalize Lincoln's inner self, yet succeeds throughout the book by tastefully capturing Lincoln's fatalistic attitude. Oates leans on Lincoln's reflections on himself from an interview while running for the presidency to tell a story that is true to Abe's perspective. He also demonstrates the ability to write a biography that gives an honest appraisal of Lincoln's life. In rare cases we see that Oates is held back from a clearer picture because of missing facts that we now know today. An example of this being Oates' confusion over the motivations of Stephen Douglass and Popular Sovereignty (his motivations being his large land holding in Chicago/Illinois and his attempt to make it a key component of the railroad system) (Oates, 129). Yet, Oates' failings are few and sets

a high bar for other biographers. In With Malice Toward None we see a balanced approach by Oates. For every example of Lincoln and his fatalistic attitude and bouts with “the hypo”, we see equally compelling examples of him being the grounding force in his family and especially for Mary. Likewise, for every early example of being indecisive, we see Lincoln grow into a man that is firmly decisive. Lastly and most importantly, for every liberal and anti-slavery stance Lincoln takes, we see balancing examples of his ability to keep the preservation of the Union at the forefront and keeping faithful to the vision of the founding fathers.

### **Decisive and Experienced vs. Indecisive and Inexperienced**

Oates weaves into his book contrasting views of Lincoln's ability to be both decisive and indecisive, as well as demonstrations of his experience and lack there of. In Chapter 4, he highlights Lincoln's early indecisive and passive nature by noting how Abe seldom created legislation in his four terms in the Illinois state legislature (Oates, 38). Yet, Oates adds how Lincoln from this early age quickly gains his reputations of being decisive and unbending with his ethics and honesty. Likewise, as a lawyer on the circuit traveling with Judge Davis, Davis commented on Lincoln as the most ethical and unmovable man he had ever met, who with his experience could make the most complex seem simple to jurors (Oates, 110). Many would point to 1848 as a prime example of Lincoln's inexperience with the Spot Resolution debacle, but this sets the stage for Lincoln's political stance on the slave issue.

By 1850 Lincoln was decisive and steadfast by working to introduce bills towards gradual emancipation. In 1854 we see Lincoln's horror over the Kansas-Nebraska Act and immediate rejection of Stephen Douglass' Popular Sovereignty. He displays his swift action with his October 16 speech in Peoria against Douglass' stance (Oates, 129). Lincoln keenly understood that slavery must stay out of new territories and that was despotism to rule more than one's own person. Moreover, he knew that the Missouri Compromise must be restored to fight greed and embrace justice. Lincoln proves this by sacrificing his own candidacy and giving Lyman Tremble his support in a move against the Kansas Nebraska Act (Oates, 130).

During the mid 1850's Lincoln could be viewed as indecisive over joining the Republican Party. In reality, Lincoln was using his experience and watching a power struggle play out between the Democrats, the newly powerful "Know Nothings", and early Republican Party. By June 1857 Lincoln begins to set Republican ideals with his firm response on the slavery question with his, "house divided" speech in reaction to the Dred Scott decision (Oates, 155). After losing his bid for the Senate in 1858, Lincoln, as a Republican Party man, began to use his experience to rally the Republicans to stay unified on the fugitive slave question (Oates, 158).

A contrast to Lincoln's consistent anti-slavery message is Stephen Douglass' position in 1860. Throughout 1860 we see the Little Giant begin twisting his words and playing both sides of the fence by leaving his Freeport Doctrine and going further towards Southern property rights on the slave issue. This looks far more indecisive than Lincoln

who came into New York in 1860 as a perceived inexperienced liberal, yet left looking as a decisive Republican leader who could clearly explain the moral ideals of the party in his Cooper Institute speech (Oates, 187). While Abe came off as an experienced politician in New York, Oates still points out that Lincoln's greatest strength was being an unknown in his bid for the presidency. Lincoln had not hurt himself with nationally known liberal speeches like his main Republican competitor Seward. Oates makes a good case for this noting that Seward was a politician who had no moral stance but was only seen as a radical because of his partisan speeches. With the electorate's lack of information, one of Lincoln's key strengths to become the presidential candidate was his Kentucky background and ability to carry the lower North. Lincoln in fact won the Ohio candidacy not so much because of being experienced or inexperienced but more because he was so unknown that there was no clear confirmation of him being a radical or conservative (Oates, 189).

Early in the war, during Lincoln's first term, he was constantly seen as indecisive, yet displayed his strength many times. An example of this was his ability to play off the opinions of Seward and Sumner and find a stable middle ground when it came to decisions about emancipation. Likewise, Lincoln displayed his experience fighting off the liberal Republicans call for emancipation by keeping at the forefront the importance of retaining the border North and saving the Union. However, his dealings with Cameron in the War Department, Fremont in the West and McClellan on the Potomac, exemplified his inexperience with firing his appointees (Oates, 256).

After Lincoln emancipated the slaves he did not back down to the outcry to reverse the proclamation by Northern Democrats and fearful Northerners who were terrified of the thought of freed slaves flooding into the North (Oates, 368). Similarly in 1863, Lincoln showed his decisive nature by having 14 black regiments within 8 months of the proclamation (Oates, 370). During the same time Lincoln asserted himself by keeping military law and arresting anyone who attempted to stop the draft and in addition he stayed firm on Clement Vallandigham (Oates, 372). Lastly, as the war came to a close, Lincoln prepared the South for Reconstruction and acting as the Commander and Chief helped created the death blows at Vicksburg and Gettysburg. The experienced Lincoln made sure that his strategy for dealing with the end of the war and accepting the South back into the Union was one that was fluid and changed depending on the situation in each part of the South. He knew that successful Reconstruction not only depended on his actions towards the South but also by pacifying the Congress with the details of his ten percent plan (Oates, 410).

### **Mental Instability Vs. Stability**

Lincoln's bouts with depression and his fatalistic attitude have been ballyhooed in the recent past, yet Oates paints a picture of a person living with the extremes of the human experience. He goes even further to temper any of Lincoln's bouts with "the hypo" with stories of Lincoln's ability to lighten up difficult and complex matters. Oates opens with Lincoln's early life where he finds his fatalistic attitude dealing with his mother's early death (Oates, 7). Yet, we also learn of Abe's aptitude to tell humorous stories that he

inherited from his father who could carry a room (Oates, 9). Lincoln adapted this ability to tell stories into an uncanny capacity to tell jokes with deeper meanings (which immensely helped him in the court room as a lawyer). Early on from his mother, he adopted the doctrine of necessity, where by he believed God needed Lincoln but did not know for what purpose (Oates, 12).

After becoming a state rep at the age of 25, Lincoln felt his fatalistic attitude after the untimely passing of his sister, Sarah and Anne Rutledge at the age of 22. Here Oates introduces for the first time Lincoln's bouts with "the hypo". This deep depression where Lincoln could stay melancholy for weeks or even months was a state of deep contemplation and morbid thoughts. A good example of this is in Chapter 4 where Lincoln gets the hypo after Mary Todd's family forced the break up of their engagement (Oates, 64). Yet, within his own melancholy he displays a grounding and stable force for his friend Joshua Speed dealing with his own case of depression over heartbreak. In 1846, we see Lincoln dealing with somber feelings after visiting his hometown. In a healthy and grounded way he deals with this by penning a therapeutic poem (Oates, 68).

Oates gives a keen insight into Lincoln's stability through his law partner Bill Herndon, who wrote of Lincoln's ability to create ingenious jokes and light-hearted stories and metaphors. Lincoln showed his grounded attitude to Herndon by rejecting Herndon's love of heady literature and superstitions. Yet, for every time he brushed off Herndon's lofty ideas, he often also displayed his melancholy in Herndon's company. Herndon

found Lincoln to be the most shut-mouthed person who ever lived. A man who could be found often staring off deep in depression and grim contemplation, yet his anguish would disappear suddenly and would go back to making everyone laugh (Oates, 81).

In 1850 Lincoln exhibited his steadiness dealing with his young son Eddie's death. This is the first example of Lincoln's ability to become Mary's rock even during a time of his own pain (Oates, 200). Although he was a stabilizing force in Mary's life, his fatalistic visions never left him. In 1860, these visualizations reemerged during his candidacy for the presidency because of Southern death threats. He experienced apparitions of death through a double-visioned mirror in his room (Oates, 192). Similarly during this time period Lincoln presented his tendency toward "the hypo" during the war. This is seen early on in the war with the deaths of Ellsworth and Baker. But again in 1862, Lincoln proved his ability to become his families' rock when both Willy and Tad became ill and on February 20 Willy died. During the next 3 months Mary had a nervous breakdown and was bedridden, yet Lincoln remained strong throughout the time period and stayed with Mary as much as he could (Oates, 200).

During the last year of Lincoln's life he continued to battle visions and his fatalistic attitude, yet solidified his realistic vision during extraordinary times in his 2nd inaugural address. During his campaign for a second term he was praised by many as the man who was so sound in judgment that he alone could see America through the war. Harriet Beecher Stowe explained that Lincoln was the safest choice and was the only man stable enough in his loyalty to the Union to keep it together (Oates, 423). Once Lincoln was

reelected he displayed his disdain for vengeance towards the South and clarity in purpose in his second inaugural address. He now knew that the Civil War was God's will and that he must see it through with "malice toward none" and "create a just and lasting peace" (Oates, 447). Even though Lincoln displayed his more than stable mental state he was still ominously visited by visions. From discussion with Stanton and Lamon, Lincoln (like most presidents) had come to peace with the possibility of assassination attempts (Oates, 453). Nevertheless, Lincoln could not shake fatalism and his down right uncanny ability to peer into his dark future. One night in the second week of April, Lincoln told Mary a detailed story of walking through the White House into the East Room where he saw himself in his own casket (Oates 463).

### **Anti-slavery vs. Preservation of the Union**

Stephen Oates succeeds in providing a vision of Lincoln's personal liberal tendencies and hatred towards slavery, while still solidifying the point that the public Lincoln would do anything to keep true to the Founding Fathers wishes and preserve the Union. Early in With Malice Toward None, Oates details Lincoln's faithfulness to the Founding Fathers adding that he saw them as the apostles of liberty from which he derived all of his political thoughts. From Lincoln's disconnect with his own father, he saw the founding fathers as his true father figures that he should spend his life attempting to emulate (Oates, 12, 32, 51).

Oates introduces Lincoln's hatred of slavery with his reaction to the proslavery laws of 1837 (Oates, 39). Lincoln's distain for slavery which could have equaled that of an abolitionist had to be tempered with the acknowledgement of the anti-black sentiment of Illinois politics. Immediately we see Lincoln's political insight in rejecting the extreme abolitionist standpoint and adopting a policy similar to the Founding Fathers, of gradual extinction of the peculiar institution. Instead of damning the South, he knew he had to show them that slavery did not help the view of America being an enlightened country, that and could not have such a moral blight (Oates, 42).

In Lincoln's opinion, all of America needed to prove the Founding Fathers experiment in liberty to the rest of the world. In this sense he idolized Henry Clay because both of their visions of America stood for a place where everyone should be free and through hard work could achieve prosperity. He agreed with Clay's view that the destruction of the Union is a greater evil than even the slavery that both distained (Oates, 114).

Lincoln's adherence to the preservation of the Union is exhibited through his actions before his first inaugural address. Lincoln rejected the Crittenden Compromise as a bad idea and took the position of the Adams Compromise to create a 13th Amendment to protect slavery. Here Lincoln demonstrated his dedication to the preservation of the Union and faithfulness to the Founding Fathers vision by vowing to save the Union by protecting slavery (Oates, 236). On July 14, 1862 he once again presented his faithfulness to preserving the Union after the 2nd Confiscation Bill had passed. Lincoln

once again went to the loyal Border States with a compensated emancipation plan to try to build greater unity yet was rejected (Oates, 333).

By 1863, Lincoln knew it was time to abandon state led emancipation and accepted his role to create presidential emancipation and liberate all slaves in rebel states. Throughout 1862, Lincoln spent his time subtly preparing the North for emancipation by talking about colonization and sending African Americans to Central America or Liberia. He also spent time talking to black leaders about colonization which many black leaders accepted, yet many free blacks like Frederick Douglass were furious and fully unimpressed with Lincoln's plan. They petitioned the president to deport the slave owners instead. Lincoln went on preparing the North and hinting at an impending proclamation by making sure that Northern's knew that freed slaves would not flood into the North. He also made sure that it appeared that he had left his personal hatred of slavery aside and was willing to do anything in order to save the Union (Oates, 370). By September 22, Lincoln had his win at Antietam, a win that he saw as a sign from God that he could deliver the Emancipation Proclamation (Oates, 343).

By the end of With Malice Toward None, Oates has delineated multiple contrasting points on Lincoln's decisiveness, stability and dedication to the Union. While Oates does succeed in presenting Abe's fatalism, melancholy, indecisiveness, inexperience and personal anti-slavery positions, he uses these points to strengthen the idea of Lincoln's competence. In that, in order to paint a real picture of a human's competence and stability, all ranges of emotion must be explored. Surely Lincoln was a deeply

contemplative, intelligent, tight lipped man who dealt with a life that saw much more sorrow than many. Oates uses these facts to guide the reader to a realistic vision of a man who lived in extraordinary times and situations. A kind of life that would have seen many fall victim to mental instability or at the very least depression and a life of little productivity. Yet in the end, Oates has created a portrait of a man that accomplishes his ultimate goal of emulating the Founding Fathers and playing a central role in preserving the Union.

References:

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