
by Kevin Peraino
A captivating look at how Abraham Lincoln evolved into one of our seminal foreign-policy presidents—and helped point the way to America’s rise to world power.

Abraham Lincoln is not often remembered as a great foreign-policy president. He had never traveled overseas and spoke no foreign languages. And yet, during the Civil War, Lincoln and his team skillfully managed to stare down the Continent’s great powers—deftly avoiding European intervention on the side of the Confederacy. In the process, the United States emerged as a world power in its own right.

Engaging, insightful, and highly original, *Lincoln in the World* is a tale set at the intersection of personal character and national power. Focusing on five distinct, intensely human conflicts that helped define Lincoln’s approach to foreign affairs—from his debate, as a young congressman, with his law partner over the conduct of the Mexican War, to his deadlock with Napoleon III over the French occupation of Mexico—and bursting with colorful characters like Lincoln’s bowie-knife-wielding minister to Russia, Cassius Marcellus Clay; the cunning French empress, Eugénie; and the hapless Mexican monarch Maximilian, *Lincoln in the World* draws a finely wrought portrait of a president and his team at the dawn of American power.

Anchored by meticulous research into overlooked archives, *Lincoln in the World* reveals the sixteenth president to be one of America’s indispensable diplomats—and a key architect of America’s emergence as a global superpower. Much has been written about how Lincoln saved the Union, but *Lincoln in the World* highlights the lesser-known—yet equally vital—role he played on the world stage during those tumultuous years of war and division.
A Conversation with Kevin Peraino, author of *Lincoln in the World*

**Q)** What sets *Lincoln in the World* apart from other books on the Great Emancipator?

**A)** There are thousands of books about Lincoln—but virtually none about his foreign policy. There hasn’t been a holistic, human account of Lincoln’s role in foreign affairs in nearly 70 years. Part of the problem is that Lincoln had a powerful and competent secretary of state in William Henry Seward. So books that put Lincoln at the center of his own foreign policy tend to end up as hagiographies. To solve that problem, I included only those episodes in which Lincoln was deeply involved—tightly focusing the narrative around five distinct conflicts that helped define the character of a Lincolnian foreign policy.

**Q)** Jon Meacham, James McPherson, Amanda Foreman, and Michael Burlingame are among the handful of heavy hitters who have praised *Lincoln in the World* calling it “engaging,” “penetrating,” “riveting,” and “elegantly written.” With such a welcome early reception, did you have any concerns adding to the existing Lincoln literature?

**A)** Yes! My friends teased me about it: What could I possibly add to the record about one of the world’s most written-about figures? But what astonished me as I was researching this was just how much fascinating new material about Lincoln has recently come to light. Scholars like Burlingame have dug deeply into the archival material in recent years—combing through not just the traditional letters and diaries, but also the archived papers of past historians and biographers, looking for information that has ended up on the cutting room floor. I took a similar approach—traveling from Springfield to London to Lexington in search of fresh material.

**Q)** Did you come across any interesting facts or details about Lincoln in your research that you think readers would be surprised to learn?

**A)** I was struck by Mary Lincoln’s attempts to influence diplomatic appointments. She was far more cosmopolitan than her husband. As a girl she had attended a school where students spoke French, run by Parisian aristocrats. Her parents were friends with some of the country’s great diplomats, and her childhood home was filled with Belgian rugs and French mahogany furniture. She certainly felt—with some justification—that she was more knowledgeable about the world than her husband. And she let him know it. On several occasions she urged him to appoint her candidates as foreign envoys, and she repeatedly tangled with Lincoln’s chief diplomat, Seward.

**Q)** There are many fascinating individuals who were involved in Lincoln’s foreign policy legacy and who you...
highlight in *Lincoln in the World* Who did you find most interesting to research?

A) The French emperor, Napoleon III, was a particularly intriguing character. He was a poor strategist and a serial womanizer—deeply insecure and usually inscrutable. Otto von Bismarck described him as “a great unfathomed capacity.” Even his youthful girlfriends found him difficult to read. One marriage prospect later said that Napoleon was so opaque that she worried she would have “broken his head open just to see what was in it.” Lincoln, too, found himself wondering what Napoleon was thinking when the French emperor invaded Mexico during the height of the Civil War.

Q) The Lincoln whom you portray in your book is in many ways a different man than we think we know. Which aspect of his character most surprised you?

A) I was genuinely surprised by the scope of his worldview. We learn in grade school that European politics played some role in his decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. But Lincoln was constantly thinking about America’s place in the world. His first political handbill, nearly thirty years before the outbreak of the Civil War, argued that local schools should teach students more about foreign cultures. His economic vision as a Whig coming up in Illinois politics was all about building roads and canals—important links to the outside world. By the time he took office, he was making the case that the “central idea” of the looming war was to prove “that popular government is not an absurdity.” We’ve all heard Lincoln’s famous lines about America as the world’s “last, best hope.” But there’s a lot more to the story.

Product Description

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