

BOOKSHELF | By Robert K. Landers

Surrogate Fathers

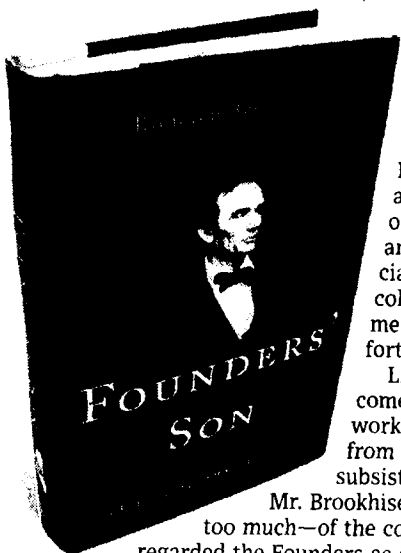
Founders' Son

By Richard Brookhiser

(Basic, 347 pages, \$27.99)

On Washington's birthday in 1842, Abraham Lincoln, who had just turned 34 and was hoping to run for Congress, addressed the Washington Temperance Society of Springfield, Ill. The real George Washington, Richard Brookhiser reminds us, "served wine at his table, treated voters to drinks, and ran a distillery at Mount Vernon." But Lincoln assured the temperance advocates that the revered Founder had fervently favored their cause and his support still counted: "Washington is the mightiest name of earth . . . in moral reformation." At this point in Lincoln's career, Mr. Brookhiser says, his invocations of Washington were "opportunistic or empty."

Lincoln eventually got better at summoning the Founding Fathers for his purposes, which included not only winning elections but also trying to solve the nation's problems. In "Founders' Son," his tenth book



about the Founders, Mr. Brookhiser provides a concise, smoothly written history of Lincoln's career and "the unfolding of the ideas that animated it," especially the ideas Lincoln drew from the men who brought forth the new nation.

Lincoln, who had come to loathe farm work, was alienated from his father, a subsistence farmer, and Mr. Brookhiser makes much—too much—of the conceit that Lincoln regarded the Founders as surrogate fathers.

Whether he did look upon them in that way is not really known and relatively unimportant next to the truth that, as Mr. Brookhiser shows, Lincoln used their ideas about liberty, equality and slavery to make the Founders his allies in opposing slavery.

Lincoln had been introduced to the Founders as a boy. He took from Parson Weems's pious "Life of Washington" an image of Washington less as a moral exemplar than as an active champion of liberty. Later, as a young man, Lincoln was affected by another revolutionary hero, Thomas Paine, the second of three Founders whom Mr. Brookhiser singles out. He calls Paine "an eccentric founding father" who "sits a little uneasily" among the others—and uneasy he should be, since it is doubtful that Paine qualifies as a "Founding Father" at all. Paine and his widely read "Common Sense" (1776) contributed to the destruction of the old order, but he played little role in the founding of the new one. In any case, his post-revolution "Age of Reason" influenced Lincoln in his 20s. "Paine taught him—for a while at least—to laugh at Christianity," writes Mr. Brookhiser, "and he showed him, to his lifelong benefit, how to use laughter in winning arguments."

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According to Mr. Brookhiser, it was Sen. Henry Clay, the "Great Compromiser," who toward the end of the 1840s "shaped [Lincoln's] understanding of the founding and showed him its relevance to the politics of slavery." In an 1852 eulogy, Lincoln said that Clay (though a slave owner) was always against slavery in principle and had opposed both abolitionists and slavery's proponents: The former wanted to tear up the Constitution because it protected slavery while the latter wanted to tear up the Declaration of Independence because it claimed that all men possess an inalienable right to liberty.

The Declaration's author is the third of the Founders who influenced Lincoln, in Mr. Brookhiser's view, and "the most problematic." Lincoln's law partner William Herndon said that, though esteeming Thomas Jefferson the Founder, Lincoln "hated" Jefferson the "politician." What he disliked, Mr. Brookhiser says, was Jefferson's "cowardice" in his later years in refusing to campaign publicly against slavery. Even so, Lincoln revered him for enunciating in the Declaration what Lincoln called "the definitions and axioms of free society."

Lincoln and Sen. Stephen Douglas, Mr. Brookhiser notes, "fought over the founders—each claiming them as guides and allies." They did so not only during their famous debates of 1858 but over a six-year period: Lincoln first tried to join Douglas in the Senate in 1854, then competed with him in 1858 for his Senate seat and in 1860 for the White House. Douglas insisted that the Founders left each state free to allow slavery or not and that the Declaration's concept of equality applied only to white men. Lincoln argued that the Founders had meant it when they said all men are created equal.

In those six years, "all the elements of Lincoln's mind and personality, which had lain about like engine parts in a workshop," Mr. Brookhiser says, "finally came together into something coherent and ultimately powerful." This started with a speech in Peoria, Ill., in 1854, in which Lincoln said that the "unmistakable spirit" of the Revolutionary age had been hostility to the principle of slavery and "toleration only by necessity." He concluded in 1860 with the famous speech at Cooper Union in New York, in which he showed that "a clear majority" of signers of the Constitution had voted to restrict slavery in territories. Three years later, in the Gettysburg Address, "he would crown and compact all he had been saying about the founding fathers since . . . his eulogy for Henry Clay in 1852."

But Lincoln had earlier spoken other words about the Founders and drawn different ideas from them. As a congressman in 1848, he contended that President James K. Polk had acted unconstitutionally in ordering troops into territory disputed with Mexico. The Founding Fathers, he said, had given the war-making power to Congress, not the president—a restrictive arrangement his enemies would charge he disregarded after the attack on Fort Sumter. He also argued that title to that disputed territory depended on whether its inhabitants, or "any portion" of them, had revolted against Mexico. "Any people anywhere . . . have the right to rise up, and shake off the existing government, and form a new one that suits them better," Lincoln said. As Lincoln biographer David Herbert Donald commented: "These were words he would have to eat in 1860-1861." They are also words that Mr. Brookhiser ignores. His book is a provocative introduction to the subject of Lincoln and the Founders, but not the final word.

Mr. Landers, a freelance writer, contributes to The Wall Street Journal and Commonweal.