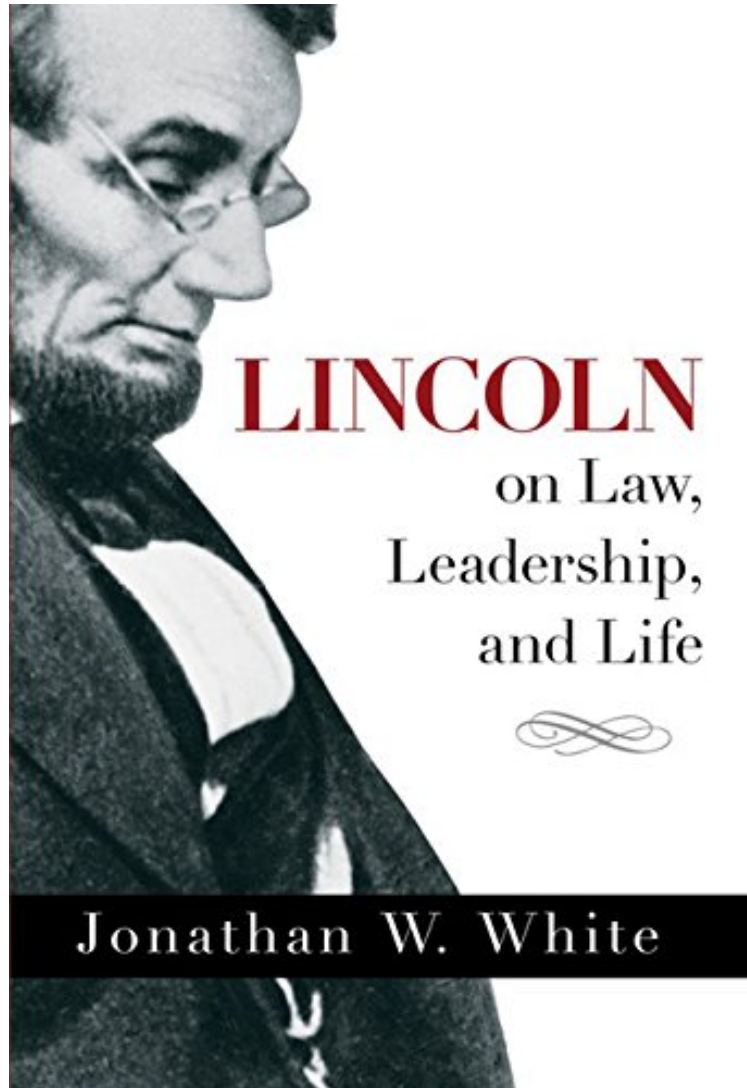


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## Lincoln on Law, Leadership, and Life

*Jonathan White*

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Wisdom and stories from one of America's most unique legal minds Abraham Lincoln's success as a politician was rooted in experience in the courtroom. Despite a presidency plagued with moral and legal crises, this self-taught prairie lawyer deftly led the nation by relying on the core principles he honed in his early career: honesty, self-discipline, and a powerful sense of social responsibility. Aspiring and practicing lawyers alike often looked to Lincoln for guidance and his hard-won wisdom is as relevant today as ever. Drawn from his correspondence with aspiring attorneys as well as observations from friends and colleagues, *Lincoln on Law, Leadership, and Life* is an insightful collection of Lincoln's timeless quotes, quips, and stories. "This should be required reading in every law school in America." Frank J. Williams, retired Chief Justice, Rhode Island Supreme Court, and founding chair of The Lincoln Forum.

"Using Abraham Lincoln's words and those of his fellow lawyers, Jonathan W. White presents a tightly woven story of Lincoln's rise in the law and politics during his 24 year practice. What comes through is Lincoln's discipline and work ethic, empathy for his clients, the succinctness of his pleadings foreshadowing his great writing skills, and his great speaking ability. This short primer should be required reading in every law school in America." - Frank J. Williams, retired Chief Justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court and founding Chair of the Lincoln Forum "Professor Jonathan White combines specific, yet applicable advice from Abraham Lincoln's experience as an attorney. *Lincoln on Law, Leadership and Life* is a quick read...throughout the book, anyone unfamiliar with Lincoln before his presidency will now understand his important influence to the law profession." - The Reporter "This little book can be read in a couple of hours and enjoyed by anyone - particularly lawyers, law students, and those contemplating attending law school." - The Federal Lawyer Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. INTRODUCTION In October 1857, Abraham Lincoln defended a seventy-year-old woman named Melissa Goings, who was on trial for the murder of her husband. Melissa and her seventy-seven-year-old husband, Roswell, had apparently been living "rather disagreeably" for some time. On April 14, 1857, the two got into a fight over whether or not to open a window. Roswell allegedly tried to choke Melissa; she therefore claimed to be acting in self-defense when she whacked him over the head with a stick of firewood. "I expect she has killed me," Roswell told a neighbor after the scuffle, adding, "If I get over it I will have revenge." He died four days later. As the trial got under way on October 10 at a small county courthouse near Peoria, Illinois, Mrs. Goings was nowhere to be found. A court officer accused Lincoln of encouraging his client to escape, but Lincoln denied the charge. "I didn't run her off," he told the court. "She wanted to know where she could get a drink of water, and I told her there was mighty good water in Tennessee." Abraham Lincoln was a talented, practical lawyer. In fact, Lincoln's success as a politician and statesman was rooted in his experience as an attorney. His presidency was plagued by constitutional problems and legal crises. Yet he deftly led the nation through a great civil war-our nation's most divisive constitutional conflict-in large measure as a sensible prairie lawyer in the White House. As a young man, Lincoln taught himself the law. He quickly became one of the most prominent attorneys in Illinois, handling every type of case imaginable-murder trials and other criminal proceedings, bankruptcy filings, divorces, larceny, trespasses, ejectments, railroads and big business, libel and slander, civil disputes, and debt collection. Lots of debt collection. But Lincoln did not deal only with trials in the lower courts. He also argued nearly 350 cases before the Illinois Supreme Court and one case before the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, DC. Young men in Illinois often looked to Lincoln for insight into how to become an attorney (only men could practice law in those days). Through letters, speeches, and informal conversations, Lincoln gave them advice based on his experiences. Lincoln's wit and wisdom are still relevant today for both aspiring lawyers and practicing attorneys. Indeed, while the legal profession in the United States has changed in many ways over the past century and a half, many of Lincoln's principles are timeless. In a larger sense, Lincoln's advice for lawyers is also relevant for people who work outside the legal profession. As we will see, Lincoln believed the highest duty of a lawyer was to be a peacemaker in his community. Therefore, any reader who deals with interpersonal conflict can learn from Lincoln's insights. Indeed, Lincoln's lessons for attorneys can apply to almost any walk of life. The words in the chapters that follow come directly from Lincoln and his friends. Many come from Lincoln's own correspondence. Others are recollections of those who knew him. Some of his friends' stories may be exaggerated or embellished-some may even have been fabricated or misremembered when they were recalled so many years after Lincoln's death. But perhaps we can learn as much about what it means to be a good lawyer from the myths and legends about Lincoln as we can from the reality. This daguerreotype, taken in about 1846 when Lincoln was elected to Congress, depicts the young lawyer in Springfield, Illinois. It is the earliest known photograph of the future president. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.