

Review

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James B. Conroy. *Lincoln's White House: The People's House in Wartime*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. Pp. 328.

In the Education Center across from Ford's Theatre, visitors may begin or end their tour by facing a 34-foot metal tower depicting books about Abraham Lincoln; this tower stands in for approximately 7,000 manuscripts. Impressive as it is, the sculpture now represents about one-third of the published titles focused on the sixteenth President of the United States. After scrutinizing such a visually powerful structure, an aspiring writer or historian might be justifiably intimidated. What new revelations can possibly be made about Abraham Lincoln?

James Conroy proves that the tower of Lincoln books should continue to grow. *Lincoln's White House* provides a fresh perspective on Lincoln's presidency and leadership by focusing on the setting of the White House as the nexus of decision-making, personal struggle, and leadership. Using recollections from visitors and trusted staff, Conroy chronicles the daily life of the Lincoln family inside their home. His visual descriptions also provide curious readers with a vibrant picture of the 1860s White House, both in its perpetual splendor and gradual deterioration.

These days, Washingtonians drive past 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue with a mixed reaction of awe and unknown skepticism. No one is invited inside the White House unless business requires it. Many residents of the city and surrounding areas work their entire lives for the executive branch of government, but never once set foot inside the White House. Conroy's book brings us back to an era when the President's home was open to office-seekers, curious visitors, and opinionated politicians. The White House was the crossroads for the federal government and the Union, and Conroy provides us with a front-row seat.

At 31 rooms, the White House was the largest home in the United States at the time. Every president had lived there since John Adams, and consequently, it exhibited a "timeworn dingy." With the exception of a few paintings of former occupants, the walls had an air of

“unfinished bareness.” The State Dining Room was “plain and simple” while the furniture generally was worn. While spending a night in the Lincoln bedroom is certainly a relished commodity nowadays, the President’s chamber and its adjoining rooms were not perceived as lavish in the 1860s. Nonetheless, the plumbing in the house was state of the art, consisting of hot and cold running water in every bedroom and two modern toilets.

In addition to the rich physical descriptions of the building itself, Conroy focuses his book on the visitors who walked through the doors of the White House to visit President Lincoln and his family. Before Lincoln, presidents held public receptions once or twice a week for those who had been previously introduced to the first family or had letters of introduction from someone who had. Lincoln abolished this practice, making his weekly levees “open from the start to any sober person with a smile and a clean shirt.” The practice, in fact, was more democratic than Andrew Jackson’s protocols. At Lincoln’s first levee, the line snaked down Pennsylvania Avenue, and eager visitors reportedly “climbed in through the windows” to catch a glimpse of the new president. Of course, the widened inclusivity had its limits in 1861. African Americans were not considered part of polite society and did not attend President Lincoln’s early White House levees.

The first-hand commentary on the White House and its occupants thrives when the personal is the focus rather than purely political insights. Lincoln’s private secretary John Nicolay wrote, “Lincoln never gave a fraction of thought or a moment of care to any question of dress.” He was “indifferent” to the effect his physical appearance had on his visitors, either formal or informal. According to Conroy, Lincoln took meetings sitting crosswise in his chair, with his legs swinging freely. Other times, he put one leg over the arm of the chair and rested the other on a table. It is difficult to imagine what sort of effect such uncharacteristic behavior and mannerism might have had on those who interacted with President Lincoln. But such detail certainly helps scholars of the Lincoln administration re-create such scenes in their minds.

Conroy does a good job explaining the division of work between Lincoln’s three young secretaries: Nicolay, John Hay, and William Stoddard. Nicolay possessed formal power and authority. Most importantly, he controlled Lincoln’s calendar. Anyone who has worked for a politician can appreciate the significance of such a role. Nicolay protected Lincoln’s time, no doubt a difficult task. Hay was more affable and worked better with Members of Congress and Cabinet members. Lincoln often brought him to important meetings at the

War Department and trusted him to transmit information he overheard at social functions. The personal tie between Lincoln and Hay was strong; Conroy remarks that Lincoln "thought of him as a son." Stoddard was third in line and had less direct contact with Lincoln. He managed correspondence and took over duties when Hay or Nicolay were away. Quite critically, Stoddard worked closely with Mrs. Lincoln and served as her adviser, a hefty responsibility the other two secretaries were quite eager to yield. Despite their solid reputations in the capital city, Lincoln's three secretaries were increasingly disliked by many White House employees and dignitaries. Others viewed the young men's protection of Lincoln as obstructionist and did not understand why the President gave such men of relatively low experience such deference. Even more could be written about how this dynamic affected the operations and politics in the Lincoln administration.

Lincoln's empathy is apparent throughout the book. At a council of war meeting in the White House, a young Union colonel named Oliver Otis Howard offered his opinion during debate. He was promptly informed by his superiors that officers of his rank should be "seen and not heard." Later in the meeting, Lincoln rose and walked over to Howard, putting his arm around him. Howard later commented, "I loved Lincoln from that hour."¹

Conroy's book reserves its harshest judgment for Mary Lincoln. The upper echelons of Washington society snubbed her, viewing her as a dowdy simpleton. According to Conroy, Mrs. Lincoln viewed improvements to the White House as a way to show her detractors that she was worthy of the position bestowed upon her. Congress routinely appropriated \$26,000 for executive mansion renovations for each four-year presidential term. Mrs. Lincoln reportedly spent that budget in a few short days, purchasing ornate furniture, wallpaper, a velvet rug, and a grand piano. All of these purchases plus her personal indulgences occurred during a time of war, making her conduct even more questionable. When the bills arrived, Mrs. Lincoln did not know how to pay them. Conroy shows that Mrs. Lincoln consulted with the White House gardener, John Watt, who encouraged her to inflate official government expenses for the grounds so that she could pay for her private purchases. The cover-up came to a head when a new commissioner of public buildings was appointed and discovered

1. Howard, later a hero at Gettysburg, rose to Major General in the U.S. Army and after the war was a commissioner of the Freedman's Bureau and founder of both Howard University and Lincoln Memorial University.

the improprieties. Mrs. Lincoln narrowly escaped serious allegations concerning conspiracy to commit fraud with public monies. The overall characterization in the book leads a reader to conclude that Mary Lincoln resembled a looming specter in the White House, her behavior filled with self-indulgence, harshness, and nuisance. Mrs. Lincoln's demeanor may have resulted in a high turnover rate of White House staff, although some servants concluded that her "bark was worse than her bite."

Conroy provides intimate details of Willie Lincoln's untimely death in 1862. The White House was draped in black, with visitation taking place in the Green Room and the funeral in the East Room. In addition to the family's mourning, servants wept and diplomats fought to maintain their composure during the service. Lincoln's office closed for weeks, but eventually he turned back to his work, keeping his youngest son Tad at his side for close watch and attention. Unfortunately, Mrs. Lincoln never fully recovered. She viewed the White House as a "tomb" after Willie's death. One congressman, upon visiting Lincoln in the weeks after the funeral, described the house as a "sorrowful mansion."

Concern for Lincoln's safety increased as the Civil War raged on. Nonetheless, Lincoln maintained his freedom of movement, relishing walks in the surrounding President's Park. He refused a military guard when he went to church or out in public. He often walked to a Cabinet member's home in the evening with an unarmed companion, dismissing the worries of his wife and secretaries for his safety. In the summer of 1862, the Lincoln family moved to a cottage on the ground of the Soldiers' Home to escape the worst of the Potomac's heat and smell. Lincoln sometimes took a carriage back and forth to the White House, but other times rode unescorted on horseback. On occasion, Tad accompanied Lincoln on his rides, as the poet Walt Whitman observed the President's daily commute.

Lincoln's death has been analyzed by a multitude of authors before Conroy, but the focus on the White House brings a new perspective. The day after the assassination was cold and damp. A crowd largely of African Americans stood on Pennsylvania Avenue, grieving publicly for the slain president. Gideon Welles commented that "their hopeless grief" affected him more than "anything else." The last mailbag arrived, and Lincoln's correspondence secretary opened the letters "amid an awful stillness." Almost every house in the city was "draped in black" as an "air of gloom" enveloped Washington.

The main protagonist of James Conroy's book isn't a person. It is the White House itself. Like a novelist who understands the potential

strength of a story's setting, Conroy gives life to the executive mansion. Most Americans will never enter 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, but Conroy's book is more than satisfactory remedy.

The other star of the book, is, of course, Lincoln himself. By focusing on his interactions with family members, staff, office-seekers, the inquiring public, and dignitaries, Conroy portrays a thoroughly human figure. His Lincoln is not a mythical, untouchable figure. Instead, his foibles and shortcomings are presented alongside his admirable qualities. Dealing with both significant and small moments, Conroy presents the perfection and imperfection of Lincoln's humanity. This unprejudiced juxtaposition is perhaps the most impressive intellectual contribution of *Lincoln's White House*.