

An interview with Ed Achorn, author of *Every Drop of Blood: The Momentous Second Inauguration of Abraham Lincoln*

By Shannon Jones
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World Socialist Web Site writer Shannon Jones recently spoke with Ed Achorn, author of *Every Drop of Blood: The Momentous Second Inauguration of Abraham Lincoln* reviewed last month on the WSWWS. Achorn is a former journalist with 41 years in the profession, most recently as editorial pages editor and vice president of the *Providence Journal*.

Shannon Jones: What interested you in writing a book about Lincoln? What drew you to his Second Inaugural?

Ed Achorn: I have loved and admired Lincoln my whole life. From a young age, I have read hundreds of books about him. I've always been intrigued by his Second Inaugural address; a remarkable piece of work that would be almost unimaginable coming from any other politician.

I started focusing on that speech and thinking how I could approach it in a book. I started thinking about 24 hours in Lincoln's life, from the night before he delivered that speech until the following evening when he gave a grand reception in the White House where thousands lined up to shake his hand. I found that period contained very interesting people interacting with him.

Salmon Chase, who tried to replace him as the Republican presidential nominee, was the Supreme Court justice, appointed by Lincoln, who swore him in. Walt Whitman covered the inauguration for *The New York Times*. He had worked in hospitals tending to soldiers during the war. John Wilkes Booth was there at the inaugural, stalking Lincoln. I think he planned to kill him that day.

Frederick Douglass was there. In my view he is almost Lincoln's equal in his ability to powerfully express moral truth through language. He listened to the speech, standing in the mud below Lincoln, then made his way with some difficulty that night to the line of the reception. Several times, guards tried to block him because he was black, but he got in and spoke to Lincoln about that speech.

I found it fascinating that these compelling historic figures were there that day. I found I could tell the story of this tragic war through the voices and perspectives of these people intersecting with Lincoln. I thought it would make a different book from any out there.

I think there has been an immense amount of writing about the speech, but nothing I think that sets it so thoroughly into the context of that day. I wanted to show, through these people interacting that day, what a terrible tragedy that war was, how bitter people felt, and what Lincoln was risking in making the speech.

SJ: Were there any surprises from your research for the book?

EA: What surprised me most was the virulence of the hatred for Lincoln at the time. When you go back and read newspaper accounts,

you're struck by how hated he was and how widely. Of course, in the South they detested him and viewed him as a tyrant who was invading their homes and killing their young men just because he wouldn't accept their desire to live under a different government.

The kind of vile things said about him in newspapers: including suggestions that if he got re-elected someone should take a knife and plunge it into his chest. This level of animosity is very striking. A lot of that got erased from history because when he was shot, he instantly became a martyr to the war. People moved on very quickly from hating him and much of that seemed to be forgotten.

SJ: I was impressed by the enormous amount of detail in your book. What sort of man was Lincoln?

EA: The essential thing about Lincoln was his extraordinary sense of honesty and fairness. But he was a pretty strange man. People who knew him the best said he was the most secretive and remote man they ever knew. He loved to make people laugh by telling his stories, some of which were very dirty, but he didn't reveal his heart to people. He had a certain coldness about him. He was lost in his own world of his thoughts.

When he was a lawyer on the circuit people said he didn't even notice how bad these taverns were. They were filthy, the food was terrible, they had bedbugs and mosquitoes and fleas, and others complained, but they didn't seem to have any effect on him. He was lost in thought. His law partner William Herndon said, "He thought more than any man I have ever known."

He also seemed to be wrapped in a really deep melancholy. People said he had the saddest face they ever saw, but when he saw a friend or an acquaintance, and had an opportunity to tell a story, his face just lit up. People said the photos of him don't capture the brightness and emotion, the energy of his bright face when he lit up.

Also, he would not want to reveal his political positions at the drop of a hat. He would think long and hard about these...but once he had it etched in his mind, that was it. He had very firm beliefs that he would not be moved from.

I write in *Every Drop of Blood* about Frederick Douglass visiting Lincoln at the White House in 1863. When Lincoln asked how he assessed the situation, Douglass said he was most disappointed by "tardy, hesitating, vacillating policy of the President of the United States." Lincoln allowed that he might seem slow, but he did not vacillate. He said, "I think it cannot be shown that when I have once taken a position, I have ever retreated from it."

That was an interesting exchange. And that was very true, I think. Lincoln was stubborn. He stuck to his beliefs because he thought very

deeply before he committed himself to anything.

He hated extemporaneous speaking. He liked to have his speeches written out very carefully. I think he spent years working on the 2nd inaugural. There are elements of it in his thought and letters from two or three years before. He had a habit of writing down thoughts he might use and putting them aside in little cubbyholes, or even his hat, and pull them out and use them. This is how his mind worked — he cogitated for an awfully long time.

SJ: Lincoln seemed to have an amazing ability to clearly communicate his thoughts and to connect with the common people.

EA: His stepmother touched on that. Even in his boyhood, it really bothered Lincoln if he could not understand something. He tried to break everything down to its simplest terms and express it as clearly as he could. When he was writing, he read it out loud to himself and others so that he could hear the sound of his words and assure himself he was as clear as possible.

He grew up in abject poverty. He lifted himself through his own effort and self-education to become a very successful lawyer. To me that is an extraordinary achievement. That was one reason he so profoundly cared about America and wanted to defend it.

SJ: That may have contributed to his abiding dislike of slavery.

EA: He strengthened his views against slavery as he went along. He more and more felt it was absolutely essential to oppose slavery. As the years went along and the country became more divided, he realized you could not compromise on that point. You had to do what you could short of involving the country in a terrible civil war to prevent the spread of slavery and create conditions under which it would die. He was hoping to avoid this terrible civil war, but we did have it. In one of his most famous speeches he said, “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” The Union could not ultimately be half-slave and half free. “It will become all one thing or all the other.” He was right.

SJ: Who were the people whose judgment he relied on?

EA: He listened to a lot of people, but he didn’t do what they told him to do. David Davis, a close friend, said he would advise Lincoln, and Lincoln would listen, but he wouldn’t ask for advice and often he wouldn’t heed advice. What Lincoln would do is listen to the American people. He would allow ordinary people to line up at the White House and come in every day and come into his office and talk to them. He called these meetings public opinion baths.

People wondered, “Why are you doing this in the middle of this terrible war where you have to pay attention to a million details?” He thought it was essential to keep that link with the public, to understand how people thought. He also listened to very shrewd and experienced political strategists. He listened to William Seward, who was his Secretary of State, and Thurlow Weed, who was a brilliant strategist behind Seward. But, again, he often went his own way.

Lincoln had all sorts of connections around the country. He would reach out to them for political intelligence. He was very keen on how the country stood politically and how quickly he could move to win this war without destroying public support.

I think he very carefully timed the Emancipation Proclamation to the moment he had sufficient political support to sustain it. I thought he timed it brilliantly, as the card he needed to play to win the war. He realized he needed to have hundreds of thousands of slaves leave the South, weakening the South, and enlist in the Union army and turn their guns against the South. That really swayed the war.

SJ: Black troops were essential. It also helped sway public opinion, the heroic conduct of these African American units.

EA: Frederick Douglass recognized this. Douglass came to the White House to complain that the Union was paying black soldiers less than white soldiers for the same service. Lincoln argued that black men “had larger motives for being soldiers than white men.” Their freedom was on the line, and their ability to become full citizens. He assured Douglass that African Americans would eventually get equal pay, but blacks and Lincoln had to make this concession to prejudice for a short time. This is how Lincoln thought: he looked at the big picture.

Douglass agreed. He encouraged blacks to enlist. He wrote that “the iron-gate of our prison stands half-open. One gallant rush from the North will fling it wide open.” Douglass understand that once someone is fighting bravely for the United States in a US uniform it becomes very difficult to treat him as a second-class citizen. It says we are all the same, we are all in this together. It makes a very profound cultural statement. These things changed public perceptions.

SJ: There is the claim that Lincoln was a racist—in the 1619 Project there was a claim that black Americans fought alone and an attack on Lincoln from the standpoint that some of his statements sound racist. But the whole idea you can judge by past epoch by standards of today seems fallacious. There was an evolution of Lincoln’s thoughts.

EA: Lincoln was also a politician who was running for office in Illinois. Lincoln declared during his debates with Stephen Douglas in 1858 that he would not support making blacks full citizens, members of juries and that sort of thing. So Lincoln said things we would deem today to be white supremacy. But he also argued that blacks deserved the rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence.

Frederick Douglass also noted that Lincoln seemed to show absolutely no racial prejudice in their meetings. That was something remarkable at the time. I write in *Every Drop of Blood* about the reception at the White House. Lincoln calls out, “Here comes my friend Douglass,” when he sees him in line. Lincoln was not someone who disparaged other people of any race or background. He viewed people as fellow Americans and that’s how he treated them.

You can target anyone from the past and cherry pick comments. I try to look at the world in which he lived. Lincoln ended 250 years of brutal bondage. I don’t think anyone else could have had the political skill and the determination to do that. Lincoln had to win this terrible war, and in doing that, he rid this nation of slavery. To dismiss that is to dismiss one of the most powerful stories of American history.

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