"Public Sentiment Is Everything": Abraham Lincoln and the Power of Public Opinion

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Abstract
Book Summary: Since Abraham Lincoln's death, generations of Americans have studied his life, presidency, and leadership, often remaking him into a figure suited to the needs and interests of their own time. This illuminating volume takes a different approach to his political thought and practice. Here, a distinguished group of contributors argue that Lincoln's relevance today is best expressed by rendering an accurate portrait of him in his own era. They seek to understand Lincoln as he understood himself and as he attempted to make his ideas clear to his contemporaries. What emerges is a portrait of a prudent leader who is driven to return the country to its original principles in order to conserve it.

Chapter Summary: "Our government rests in public opinion," Abraham Lincoln said in 1856. And how could it be otherwise (he explained in 1859), since "in a Government of the people, where the voice of all the men of the country, enter substantially into the execution, - or administration, rather - of the Government - in such a Government, what lies at the bottom of it all, is public opinion." "Public sentiment is everything," he replied to Stephen A. Douglas in 1858. "Whoever can change public opinion can change the government." [excerpt]

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