



# The National Joker: Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Satire

*Todd Nathan Thompson*

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Abraham Lincoln's sense of humor proved legendary during his own time and remains a celebrated facet of his personality to this day. Indeed, his love of jokes—hearing them, telling them, drawing morals from them—prompted critics to dub Lincoln “the National Joker.” The political cartoons and print satires that mocked Lincoln often trafficked in precisely the same images and terms Lincoln humorously used to characterize himself. In this intriguing study, Todd Nathan Thompson considers the politically productive tension between Lincoln's use of satire and the satiric treatments of him in political cartoons, humor periodicals, joke books, and campaign literature. By fashioning a folksy, fallible persona, Thompson shows, Lincoln was able to use satire as a weapon without being severely wounded by it.

In his speeches, writings, and public persona, Lincoln combined modesty and attack, engaging in strategic self-deprecation while denouncing his opponents, their policies, and their arguments, thus refiguring satiric discourse as political discourse and vice versa. At the same time, he astutely deflected his opponents' criticisms of him by embracing and sometimes preemptively initiating those criticisms. Thompson traces Lincoln's comic sources and explains how, in reapplying others' jokes and stories to political circumstances, he transformed humor into satire. Time and time again, Thompson shows, Lincoln engaged in self-mockery, turning negative assumptions or depictions of him—as ugly, cowardly, jocular, inexperienced—into positive traits that identified him as an everyman while attacking his opponents' claims to greatness, heroism, and experience as aristocratic or demagogic. Thompson also considers how Lincoln took advantage of political cartoons and other media to help proliferate the particular Lincoln image of the “self-made man”; underscores exceptions to Lincoln's ability to mitigate negative, satiric depictions of him; and closely examines political cartoons from both the 1860 and 1864 elections. Throughout, Thompson's deft analysis brings to life Lincoln's popular humor.

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