

Straight Abe: Back Like a Bad Penny

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IN 1982, Charles B. Strozier published an influential psychoanalytic study of Abraham Lincoln's personal life, *Lincoln's Quest for Union: Public and Private Meanings*. One chapter focused on Joshua Speed, by authoritative accounts Lincoln's most intimate friend. Strozier created a stir among scholars with conclusions about Speed's role in a much-debated episode, Lincoln's nervous breakdown in 1841. Most historians had attributed it to his failed courtship of Mary Todd. Strozier came up with a startling new explanation. He argued that the breakdown resulted from Joshua Speed's decision to end his companionship with Lincoln, which had included sharing the same bed for nearly four years. In fact, it was the loss of Speed, Strozier concluded, that undid Lincoln's marriage plans with Mary Todd. "This separation apparently threw Lincoln into a panic that shook his fragile sexual identity. In this state his fear of intimacy with a woman was revived, and he broke his engagement with Mary."

Strozier didn't assert that Lincoln and Speed were sexual partners, but he reinvigorated controversy about Lincoln's mysterious love life, long a subject of dispute among biographers. Gay historians had already speculated about a Lincoln-Speed love affair. Strozier's analysis expanded the bed-sharing angle, giving it the aura of evidence. Many scholars found the idea preposterous, pointing out that same-sex bed sharing was commonplace in the 19th century. People with no romantic or sexual affiliation routinely slept together at inns and private homes. It was a matter of necessity because mattresses were expensive and scarce.

But Strozier provided reasons to challenge that explanation. "Lincoln," he wrote in *Lincoln's Quest for Union*, "was sensitive to issues of male closeness in a way that distinguished him from his peers." To illustrate the point, Strozier quoted a poem Lincoln wrote at age nineteen about two teenage boys who marry, have sex, and to their surprise cannot produce a baby. It was a satirical poem, written to embarrass someone against whom Lincoln held a grudge. What did the homosexual theme signify? Strozier flagged Lincoln's "fragile sexual identity," emphasizing that his "conflicts and fears operated at an unconscious level. He was only dimly aware of his conflicts as he struggled to define his identity."

Unconscious or not, these conflicts suggested homosexual tendencies. However, Strozier was more interested in the implications for Lincoln's relations with women. Of the bed-sharing with Speed he wrote: "It is probable that such close male contact during the years of Lincoln's greatest heterosexual ten-

sion heightened the difficulty he found in securing intimacy with women. ... Their intimate maleness substituted for the tantalizing but frightening closeness of women." Strozier concluded that it all worked out for the best. Speed provided Lincoln with "a mirror of his own inner experience," and vice versa. The bed became a zone of trust. In it, Lincoln's psyche overlapped with Speed's. It could hardly be described as a routine sleeping arrangement, but Lincoln and Speed never consummated it sexually. They didn't go all the way.

Not so fast, said various writers. Way back in 1926, Carl Sandburg had used unmistakably coded language in his claim that both Lincoln and Speed possessed a "streak of lavender ... spots soft as May violets." In the 1970s, on the eve of Strozier's book, the insurgent gay press had been circulating the gay Lincoln idea. Indeed, Lincoln and Speed were shaping up as an iconic gay couple. How could Strozier be sure that they were not, in fact, sexual lovers?

Strozier didn't directly address the question in *Lincoln's Quest for Union*. Over time he issued some notable claims, most conspicuously in a book by the eminent Harvard historian and Lincoln biographer David Herbert Donald. In his final major work, 2003's "*We Are Lincoln Men*": *Abraham Lincoln and His Friends*, Donald quoted Strozier's reasons for doubting a sexual love affair between Lincoln and Speed. It couldn't have happened, according to Strozier, because it would have made Lincoln "a bisexual at best, torn between worlds, full of shame, confused, and hardly likely to end up in politics."

In 2005, the late C. A. Tripp's *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln* created a mild furor with the thesis that Speed was the romantic and sexual love of Lincoln's life. (I assisted Dr. Tripp with this project.) Strozier reviewed Tripp's book for *The Illinois Times*. In the course of noting his disagreements with Tripp's findings, he advised readers to "consider the telling psychological picture we have of Lincoln, who hardly presented as homosexual." This reasoning raised questions. What is the evidence for homosexual shame in 19th-century political life? How did you "present as a homosexual" in the 19th century? Strozier seemed to be projecting 20th-century concepts onto an era when such concepts hadn't yet evolved.

The debate over Lincoln's sexuality provoked sharp reactions among academics, a subject I discussed in these pages (see "Lincoln, Sex, and the Scholars," March-April 2006). As far as I know, most of the writers in question haven't revisited their assessments. Strozier now proves an exception with a new book from Columbia University Press: *Your Friend Forever, A. Lincoln: The Enduring Friendship of Abraham Lincoln and Joshua Speed*.

Strozier argues that Lincoln was heterosexual, as the prejudices of the day would have doomed a gay Lincoln to failure in public life.

Lewis Gannett, editor of C. A. Tripp's *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln* (2005), has published scholarly papers on Lincoln's sexuality.

