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The family Lincoln

by [Alexander Nazaryan](#)

On *The Lincolns: Portrait of a Marriage*, by Daniel Mark Epstein.

Daniel Mark Epstein

The Lincolns: Portrait of a Marriage.

Ballantine, 576 pages, \$28

While Abraham Lincoln was many things to many people, one rarely thinks of him as a model of domesticity. One would rather like to believe that the man responsible for the Gettysburg Address had no trouble rising above marital squabbles, and that childrearing, even in the national limelight, was nothing compared to the rift between North and South. While European politics, with its empires and dynasties, has always been a family affair, it is hard to imagine the Lincolns engaged in the kind of high drama that was at the heart of Hapsburg or Romanov rule.

In fact, Lincoln's ascendancy to the White House in 1860 provided the divided nation with a marriage as fraught and contentious as that between its feuding states. Abraham had been a taciturn lawyer from Illinois, rising to national prominence on an abolitionist platform; Mary, daughter of a prominent Kentucky family, was not immune to rumors that she favored the Confederate cause. For the first time there were young children in the White House, pulling fire alarms while the fields of Gettysburg burned. Not until Monica Lewinsky set foot inside the Beltway would tabloid broadsheets have so much to write about.

In *The Lincolns: Portrait of a Marriage*, Daniel Mark Epstein depicts the Lincoln presidency as largely a product of his marriage to Mary, teasing out of that fraught union the microcosm for the entire presidency. A prolific poet, Epstein has already written a book on Lincoln and Whitman, marrying the fortunes of the brooding abolitionist and the exuberant aesthete. The material in *The Lincolns* feels more forced, with Epstein constantly shifting between home decorations and the drumbeats of war. His expostulations ("Marriage is a state of mysterious paradoxes") can also smack too strongly of Dr. Phil, but such instances are overshadowed by acute insights on how the Lincoln marriage ebbed and flowed in rhythm with the nation.

A mercurial young man of restless temperament and boundless ambition, Lincoln first caught the eye of Mary Todd, "one of the most attractive, nubile ladies of Springfield," at a dance in 1839 for which he was one of sixteen managers. They quickly commenced a relationship that had the town gossiping and her wealthy Southern family displeased, despite Mary's private convictions that the young lawyer was bound to go far in life.

He did not make it easy, however, to love or be loved. Overcome by "Byronic moods of melancholy" and suffering from bouts of hypochondria, he would confide to a friend that "I can never be satisfied

with any one who would be block-head enough to have me.” In 1841 he suddenly broke off their engagement in a fit of passion (possibly brought on by a case of syphilis) only to come back to her a year later; then, shortly after challenging another suitor to a duel that never transpired, he showed up on Mary’s doorstep, announcing, “I want to get hitched tonight.”

Her agreement to marriage was not absent of self-interest. As Epstein argues, her investment in her husband’s future was very much the product of a privileged upbringing: “She dreamed that the two of them might occupy a place in society that would transcend everything that she and her more snobbish sisters had ever known. The key to this was politics.” Much of what follows explores the Lincolns’ shared ambitions in the context of Civil War politics, and Epstein is most successful when dissecting the peculiarities of Mary’s personality and their effects on her husband career.

It is well-known that Abraham suffered from a depressive temperament, but Mary was closer to outright psychosis. Earlier works like *The Madness of Mary Lincoln* have treated her supposed insanity at length, but Epstein avoids the lure of history-as-psychology. This is not to suggest that he shies away from accurate portrayals of Mary as enraged, self-pitying, irrational, insecure, coarse, vain, and uninteresting, among other colorful adjectives used both by Epstein and contemporaneous observers. He recounts episodes in which she threw coffee in her husband’s face, chased him out of the house with a broomstick, hurled water at him from a window, and struck him in the face because she did not like the cut of meat he bought. He, for the most part, bore these outbursts with the patience of Job.

Less riveting are the passages describing Lincoln’s well-known climb to the presidency. Epstein seems to know as much, spending considerably more ink on how Mary might have furnished their Washington home than on the composition of the Gettysburg Address.

The drama reached its height in 1860, when Lincoln won the White House. With the nation plunging into war, Mary took on the questionable task of transforming the staid White House into “a center of calm civilization in the midst of pandemonium.” While soldiers fell at Bull Run and Antietam, she shopped in New York and exceeded the White House decorating budget by thousands of dollars, earning the title of “Illinois Queen” and fostering rumors of her “secessionist sympathies.” Understandably, it took a toll on Lincoln to defend his wife’s honor; with her away at the summer retreat of Soldiers’ Home, he would spend protracted periods of time with Captain David Derickson, going so far as to share a bed with him. Epstein does not imply that the two men shared physical intimacy, but it is clear that Abe was badly in need of a stable companion.

But what truly unraveled the Lincolns was a tragedy closer to home than even the Confederate Army approaching Washington. Perhaps because there had been so little time to raise their children properly, their deaths—only one of four would live into adulthood—were an especially bitter tragedy. Eddie, not yet five, had died in 1850 from tuberculosis, which, in 1871, would also claim eighteen-year-old Tad. But particularly devastating was the 1862 death of beloved Willie, twelve, from typhoid fever at the height of the Civil War. Abraham sank further into himself and, busy with a war that was going poorly, left most of the guilt to his wife, who “begun to experience the delusions and hallucinations of what would now be diagnosed as clinical psychosis.”

In other words, whatever remained of their marital bliss dissipated long before Lincoln was assassinated on April 15, 1865. Epstein ends his tale with the bloodshed at Ford’s Theatre, allowing Mary to live out her years until “death of apoplexy” two decades later. *The Lincolns* thus largely succeeds in its aim, providing a well-researched view into those brief moments of domestic bliss and longer periods of discord that largely mirror a nation at war with itself.

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