REVIEW: 'Six Encounters With Lincoln,' by Elizabeth Brown Pryor

NONFICTION: "Six Encounters With Lincoln" argues that he had as many failings as he did moments of greatness.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER Special to the Star Tribune | FEBRUARY 3, 2017 — 11:27AM

Most Americans regard Abraham Lincoln as one of our greatest presidents. They celebrate "Honest Abe" as a self-made man, a shrewd and pragmatic politician (and master of the English language) who won the Civil War and ended slavery in the United States.

Professional historians, however, also recognize that Lincoln was very much a man of his own times. And in her meticulously researched "Six Encounters With Lincoln," Elizabeth Brown Pryor, a senior diplomat in the American Foreign Service and the author of biographies of Clara Barton and Robert E. Lee, draws on the assessments of his contemporaries to argue that the fallibility of the 16th president "punctuates his moments of greatness."

Pryor tends to accentuate the negative. "Blind to Southern resolve," her Abraham Lincoln gives mixed and misleading signals to secessionists and loyalists in the South; is an inept military commander; made bad appointments to reward political allies; lacked dignity and did not inspire confidence; exhibited prejudice toward African-Americans, Indians and women, and grossly underestimated the difficulties of bringing the South back into the Union at the end of the Civil War.

On occasion, Pryor's critique is unfair. She suggests that in the early days of his presidency a "conciliatory gesture, showing at least a willingness to forestall disaster, might profitably have been made." However, Pryor does not outline a concession that would have been acceptable to Lincoln, the Republicans who elected him, and Southern slaveholders. Brushing aside the view that the provisioning of Fort Sumter was a clever ploy to make the Confederates fire the first shot, Pryor characterizes the action as "a badly bungled job."

Surprisingly, moreover, Pryor claims that there were "genuine questions of political philosophy over the right of secession," including the liberty of slaveholders "to choose their own brand of democracy, not have it dictated by the North."

She seems, then, to want to have it both ways. Southerners were in "deadly earnest," Pryor writes, proclaiming that "the issue had moved beyond discussion and no kind of peace could unite them." And although Lincoln "often tried to deny taking responsibility for the war, describing events in the past tense, or blaming southern demagogues, the long suffering slaves or even God for the misfortune ... he must have known that the war had been very much about him personally: about his provocative words ... and his uncertain performance in the crisis of 1861."

Like all human beings, Lincoln had feet of clay. Nor is it surprising that his contemporaries fixated on his shortcomings. And yet, even as Pryor reveals the man partly hidden behind the legend, that man still deserves acclaim as a pre-eminent political leader.

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Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

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