Ball aims to extend and further explore the deeper meaning of a phrase he coined some years ago: "deadly hermeneutics" — roughly, the idea that textual interpretation can be, and often is, a deadly business, inasmuch as peoples’ lives, liberties and well-being hang in the balance. By way of introduction and illustration he first considers very briefly three modern examples of deadly hermeneutics. He then goes on to provide a brief account of the hermeneutical-political situation in which Abraham Lincoln found himself in the 1850s in the run-up to the Civil War and subsequently during the war itself.