Lincoln’s Deadly Hermeneutics

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My aim in this chapter is to extend and further explore the deeper meaning of a phrase I coined some years ago: "deadly hermeneutics"\(^1\) – 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. I plan to proceed as follows. By way of introduction and illustration I first consider very briefly three modern examples of deadly hermeneutics. I then go 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. This requires that I sketch an overview of the Southern case for secession and, more particularly, their interpretation of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to legitimize that radical move. I then attempt to show how Lincoln invoked and used a counter-interpretation of the Declaration in his speeches on the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854), the Dred Scott decision (1857), and his debates with Senator Stephen A. Douglas (1858). I next look at President Lincoln's interpretation of the Constitution in the Emancipation Proclamation (1863), his suspension of Habeas Corpus and, finally, his finest, briefest -- and at the time highly controversial -- Gettysburg Address.