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ERIC FONER

THE FIERY TRIAL: ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND AMERICAN SLAVERY

In April 1876, Frederick Douglass delivered a celebrated oration at the unveiling of the Freedmen's Monument in Washington, D.C., a statue that depicted Abraham Lincoln conferring freedom on a kneeling slave. "No man," the great black abolitionist remarked, "can say anything that is new of Abraham Lincoln." This has not in the ensuing 130 years deterred innumerable historians, biographers, journalists, lawyers, literary critics and psychologists from trying to say something new about Lincoln.

Lincoln has always provided a lens through which Americans examine themselves. He exerts a unique hold on Americans' historical imagination, as an icon embodying core American ideals and myths—the self-made man, the frontier hero, the liberator of the slaves. Lincoln has been portrayed as a shrewd political operator driven by ambition, as a moralist for whom emancipation was the logical conclusion of a lifetime hatred of slavery and as a racist who actually defended and tried to protect slavery. Politicians, from conservatives to communists, civil rights activists to segregationists, have claimed him as their own.

Lincoln is important to us not because of his melancholia or how he chose his cabinet, but because of his role in the vast human drama of emancipation and what his life tells us about slavery's enduring legacy. I recently published a book tracing the evolution of Lincoln's relationship with slavery and the development of his ideas and policies about slavery and race in America. I admire Lincoln very much. Unlike a lot of recent work, however, which takes Lincoln as the model of "pragmatic politics," and relegates other critics of slavery, especially the abolitionists, to the fringe as fanatics with no sense of practical politics, I wish to situate Lincoln within the broad spectrum of antislavery opinion ranging from immediate emancipation and the granting of full citizenship rights to blacks, to plans for gradual, compensated emancipation, often coupled with the idea of "colonizing" the free slaves outside the United States, a position

to which Lincoln adhered for most of his career.

In approaching the subject of Lincoln's views and policies regarding slavery and race, the first thing to bear in mind is that the hallmark of Lincoln's greatness was his capacity for growth. It is fruitless to identify a single quotation, speech or letter as the real or quintessential Lincoln. At the time of his death, Lincoln occupied a very different place with regard to these issues than earlier in his life. Lincoln was a product of his time, yet able to transcend it, which is as good a definition of greatness as any.

Throughout his career, Lincoln's relationship with abolitionists and with Radical Republicans, who in effect represented the abolitionist point of view in party politics, was contentious. They often criticized him, and he made some unflattering remarks about them. Lincoln was not an advocate of immediate abolition. Yet he saw himself as part of a broad antislavery movement that included both abolitionists and more moderate politicians like himself. He was well aware of the abolitionists' significance in creating a public sentiment hostile to slavery. And on issue after issue—abolition in the nation's capital, wartime emancipation, enlisting black soldiers, amending the Constitution to abolish slavery, allowing some African-Americans to vote—Lincoln came to occupy positions the abolitionists had first staked out. The destruction of slavery during the Civil War offers an example, as relevant today as in Lincoln's time, of how the combination of an engaged social movement and an enlightened political leader can produce progressive social change.

Unlike the abolitionists, most of whom sought to influence the political system from the outside, for nearly his entire adult life Lincoln was a politician. In the 1830s and early 1840s, he was a prominent Illinois Whig, a member of the legislature and presidential elector. In this first part of his career, Lincoln said little about slavery. Most of his speeches dealt with the economic issues of the day, such as banking, the protective tariff and government aid to internal improvements, a program to which Lincoln was passionately devoted, so much so that he helped push through the Illinois legislature a far-reaching, extremely expensive plan of building roads, canals, and railroads that bankrupted the state.

Lincoln did not elaborate his views on slavery until the 1850s, when he emerged as a major spokesman for the newly-created Republican party, committed to halting the westward expansion of slavery. In speeches of eloquence and power, Lincoln condemned slavery as a fundamental violation of the founding principles of the United States, as these are enunciated in the Declaration of Independence: the affirmation of human equality and of the natural right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. To Lincoln, equality meant above all the equal right to the fruits of one's labor, in a society that offered opportunity for advancement to what he and many others called the "free laborer."

There are many grounds for condemning the institution of slavery—moral, religious, political, economic. Lincoln referred to all of them at one time or another. But ultimately, he saw slavery as a form of theft—stealing the labor of one person and appropriating it for another. Lincoln was frequently charged by Democrats with supporting "Negro equality." He firmly denied the charge, as we will see. But he explained the kind of equality in which he did believe, using a black woman as an illustration: "In some respects she certainly is not my equal; but in her natural right to eat the bread she earns with her own hand without asking the leave of anyone else, she is my equal, and the equal of all others." The natural right to the fruits of one's labor was not bounded by either race or gender.

Lincoln could declare, "I have always hated slavery, I think as much as any Abolitionist." He spoke of slavery as a "monstrous injustice," a cancer that threatened the lifeblood of the nation. Why then was he not an abolitionist? He never claimed to be one. The shadow of Lincoln should not obscure the contribution to the end of slavery of men and women like Wendell Phillips, Frederick Douglass and Abby Kelley, who fought against overwhelming odds to bring the moral issue of slavery to the forefront of national life. Before the Civil War, abolitionists were a small, despised group. Outside a few districts, no one with political ambitions could be an abolitionist. If you were from central Illinois, like Lincoln, abolitionism was hardly a viable political position.

I am not saying, however, that Lincoln was a secret abolitionist restrained by

political pragmatism. Abolitionists believed that the moral issue of slavery was the paramount issue confronting the nation, overriding all others. This was not Lincoln's view. In a famous letter to his Kentucky friend Joshua Speed, in 1855, Lincoln recalled their visit in 1841 to St. Louis, where they encountered slavery: "That sight was a continual torment to me; and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio [River, the boundary between free and slave states]... You ought... to appreciate how much the great body of the northern people do crucify their feelings, in order to maintain their loyalty to the constitution and the Union."

William Lloyd Garrison burned the Constitution because of its clauses protecting slavery. Lincoln revered the Constitution. He believed the United States had a mission to exemplify the institutions of democracy and self-government for the entire world. This, of course, was the theme of the Gettysburg Address. He was not, to be sure, a believer in "manifest destiny," the idea that Americans had a God-given right to invade other countries in the name of liberty. Lincoln saw American democracy as an example to the world, not something to be imposed on others by unilateral force.

In his great Peoria speech of 1854, Lincoln explained his opposition to the expansion of slavery. "I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites—causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity." Slavery, in other words, was an obstacle to the fulfillment of the historic mission of the United States. Yet because of this democratic mission, the nation's unity must be maintained, even if it meant compromising with slavery.

Another key difference between Lincoln and abolitionists lay in their views regarding race. Abolitionists insisted that once freed, slaves should be recognized as equal members of the American republic. They viewed the struggles against slavery and racism as intimately connected. Lincoln saw slavery and racism as distinct questions. Unlike his Democratic opponents in the North and pro-slavery advocates in the South, Lincoln claimed for blacks the natural rights to which all persons were entitled. "I think

the negro,” he wrote in 1858, “is included in the word ‘men’ used in the Declaration of Independence,” and that slavery was therefore wrong. But inalienable natural rights—life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness—he insisted, did not necessarily carry with them civil, political, or social equality. Persistently charged with belief in “Negro equality” during his campaign for the Senate against Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln responded that he was not “nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people.” Abolitionists worked tirelessly to repeal northern laws that relegated blacks to second-class citizenship. Lincoln refused to condemn the notorious Black Laws of Illinois, which made it a crime for black persons to enter the state.

Throughout the 1850s and for the first half of the Civil War, Lincoln believed that “colonization”—that is encouraging black people to emigrate to a new homeland in Africa, the Caribbean or Central America—ought to accompany the end of slavery. We sometimes forget how widespread the belief in colonization was in the pre-Civil War era. Henry Clay and Thomas Jefferson, the statesmen most revered by Lincoln, outlined plans to accomplish it. Rather than a fringe movement, it was part of a widely-shared mainstream solution to the issues of slavery and race.

Colonization allowed its proponents to think about the end of slavery without confronting the question of the place of blacks in a post-emancipation society. Some colonizationists spoke of the “degradation” of free blacks and insisted that multiplying their numbers would pose a danger to American society. Others, like Lincoln, emphasized the strength of white racism. Because of it, he said several times, blacks could never achieve equality in the United States. They should remove themselves to a homeland where they could fully enjoy freedom and self-government. It is important to remember that for Jefferson, Clay, Lincoln and many others, colonization was part of a plan for eventually ending slavery. Before the war, abolition required the consent of slaveholders. And it seemed impossible that slaveholders would ever agree to emancipation unless it were coupled with removal of the black population.

Lincoln did talk about a future without slavery. The aim of the Republican party,

he insisted, was not simply to stop its westward expansion, the immediate political issue of the 1850s, but also to put the institution on the road to ‘ultimate extinction,’ a phrase he borrowed from Henry Clay. Ultimate extinction could take a long time: Lincoln once said that slavery might survive for another hundred years. But to the South, Lincoln seemed as dangerous as an abolitionist, because he was committed to the eventual end of slavery. This was why his election in 1860 led inexorably to secession and civil war, for the reason, clearly stated by the southern secession conventions, that his administration might be a threat to the future of slavery.

During the Civil War, of course, Lincoln had to do more than talk about slavery. He had to act. How did he become the Great Emancipator?

The war did not begin as a crusade to abolish slavery. Almost from the beginning, however, abolitionists and Radical Republicans pressed for action against slavery as a war measure. Faced with this pressure, Lincoln slowly began to put forward his own ideas. I do not wish to rehearse in detail the complicated chronology of events in 1861 and 1862. In summary, Lincoln first proposed gradual, voluntary emancipation coupled with colonization—the traditional approach of politicians like his early idol Henry Clay, who were critical of slavery but unwilling to challenge the property right of slaveholders. Lincoln’s plan would make slave owners partners in abolition. He suggested this plan to the four border slave states (Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky and Missouri) that remained in the Union. He found no takers. Indeed, two of these states, Delaware and Kentucky, were the very last states to see slavery end—only the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery there, without compensation, of course.

In 1862, Lincoln held a famous meeting with black leaders. This was the second time in American history that black persons entered the White House in a capacity other than slaves or servants. (The first came half a century earlier, when James Madison met with the black sea captain, Paul Cuffe, who wanted to promote emigration to Africa.) Lincoln issued a powerful indictment of slavery—blacks, he said, were suffering “the greatest wrong ever inflicted on any people.” He refused to issue a similar condemnation of racism; nor did he associate himself with it: “whether it is right or wrong I need not

discuss.” But racism, he went on, was intractable. “Even when you cease to be slaves, you are yet far removed from being placed on an equality with the white race... It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated.” But the large majority of black Americans refused to contemplate emigration from the land of their birth.

In mid-1862, Congress moved ahead of Lincoln on emancipation, although he signed all their measures: the abolition of slavery in the territories; abolition in the District of Columbia (with around \$300 compensation for each slave owner); and the Second Confiscation Act of July 1862, which freed all slaves of pro-Confederate owners who came within Union lines. Meanwhile, Lincoln was moving toward his own plan of emancipation. A powerful combination of events propelled him:

1) The failure of efforts to fight the Civil War as a conventional war without targeting the bedrock of southern society. Military failure generated support in North for making slavery a military target.

2) Many northerners feared that Britain and France might recognize the Confederacy or even intervene on its behalf. Adding emancipation to preserving the Union as a war aim would deter them.

3) Slavery itself was beginning to disintegrate. From the beginning, the slaves saw the Civil War as heralding the long-awaited dawn of freedom. Based on this perception, they took actions that propelled a reluctant white America down the road to emancipation. Hundreds, then thousands ran away to Union lines. Far from the battlefields, reports multiplied of insubordinate behavior, of slaves refusing to obey orders. Slaves realized that the war had changed the balance of power in the South. In 1862, Union forces entered the heart of a major plantation area, the sugar region of southern Louisiana. Slaves drove off the overseers and claimed their freedom. The actions of slaves forced the administration to begin to devise policies with regard to slavery.

4) Enthusiasm for enlistment was waning rapidly in the North. By 1863, a draft would be authorized. At the beginning of war, the army had refused to accept black volunteers. But the reservoir of black manpower could no longer be ignored.

All these pressures moved Lincoln in the direction of emancipation. In September 1862, he issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation—essentially a warning to the South to lay down its arms or face a final proclamation in ninety days. On January 1, 1863 came the Proclamation itself.

The Emancipation Proclamation is perhaps the most misunderstood important document in American history. Certainly, it is untrue that Lincoln freed four million slaves with a stroke of his pen. The Proclamation had no bearing on the slaves in the four border states. Since they remained in the Union, Lincoln had no constitutional authority to act regarding slavery in these states. The Proclamation exempted certain areas of the Confederacy that had fallen under Union military control, including the entire state of Tennessee and parts of Virginia and Louisiana. All told, perhaps 750,000 of the four million slaves were not covered by the Proclamation. But that meant that 3.1 million slaves were declared forever free.

A military measure, whose constitutional legitimacy rested on the ‘war power’ of the president, the Emancipation Proclamation often proves disappointing to those who read it. Unlike the Declaration of Independence, it contains no soaring language, no immortal preamble enunciating the rights of man. Nonetheless, the Proclamation was the turning point of the Civil War, and in Lincoln’s understanding of his own role in history. Lincoln was not the Great Emancipator if by that we mean someone who was waiting all his life to abolish slavery. He was not the Great Emancipator if this means that he freed four million slaves in an instant. But what I want to argue is that Lincoln *became* the Great Emancipator—that is to say, he assumed the role thrust on him by history, and thenceforth tried to live up to it. The Proclamation did not end slavery when it was issued, but it sounded the death knell of slavery in the United States. Everybody recognized that if slavery perished in South Carolina, Alabama and Mississippi, it could hardly survive in Tennessee, Kentucky and a few parishes of Louisiana.

The Emancipation Proclamation was markedly different from Lincoln’s previous statements and policies regarding slavery. It was immediate, not gradual, contained no mention of compensation for slave owners and made no reference to colonization,

although this had been included in both the Second Confiscation Act and the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Instead, it enjoined emancipated slaves to “labor faithfully for reasonable wages” in the United States. For the first time, it authorized the enrollment of black soldiers into the Union Army. The Proclamation set in motion the process by which 200,000 black men in the last two years of the war served in the Union army and navy, playing a critical role in achieving Union victory. Putting black men into the army implied a very different vision of their future place in American society. You do not ask men to fight and die for the Union and then deport them and their families from the country.

Overall, the Proclamation changed the character of the Civil War, from a conflict of army versus army to one in which the transformation of southern society became a war aim. In his first annual message to Congress in December 1861, Lincoln had said he did not want the Civil War to become “a violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle.” The Emancipation Proclamation announced that this was precisely what the war must become.

Lincoln knew full well that the Proclamation depended for its effectiveness on Union victory, that it did not apply to all slaves and that its constitutionality was certain to be challenged in the future. In the last two years of the war he worked to secure complete abolition, pressing the border states to take action against slavery on their own (which Maryland and Missouri did), requiring that southerners who wished to have their other property restored pledge to support emancipation and working to secure congressional passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. This was another measure originally proposed by the abolitionists that Lincoln came to support. When ratified in 1865, it marked the irrevocable destruction of slavery throughout the nation.

Moreover, by decoupling emancipation from colonization, Lincoln in effect launched the historical process known as Reconstruction—the remaking of southern society, politics, and race relations. In the last two years of the war, Lincoln for the first time began to think seriously of the role blacks would play in post slavery America. Two of Lincoln’s last pronouncements show how his thinking was evolving. One was his “last

speech,” delivered at the White House in April 1865, a few days before his assassination. Of course, Lincoln did not know this was his last speech—it should not be viewed as a final summation of policy. In it he addressed Reconstruction, already underway in Louisiana. A new constitution had been drafted, which abolished slavery yet limited voting rights to whites. The state’s free black community complained bitterly about their exclusion from the ballot, with support from Radical Republicans in the North. Most northern states at this point, however, did not allow blacks to vote and most Republicans felt that it would be politically suicidal to endorse black suffrage. In this speech, Lincoln announced that he would ‘prefer’ that limited black suffrage be implemented. He singled out not only the “very intelligent”—the free blacks—but also “those who serve our cause as soldiers” as most worthy. Hardly an unambiguous embrace of equality, this was the first time that an American president had publically endorsed any kind of political rights for blacks. Lincoln was telling the country that the service of black soldiers, inaugurated by the Emancipation Proclamation, entitled them a political voice in the reunited nation.

Then there is one of the greatest speeches in American history, Lincoln’s second inaugural address, of March 1865. Today, it is remembered for its closing words: “with malice toward none, with charity for all... let us strive to bind up the nation’s wounds.” But before that noble ending, Lincoln tried to instruct his fellow countrymen on the historical significance of the war and the unfinished task that still remained.

It must have been very tempting, with Union victory imminent, for Lincoln to view the outcome as the will of God and to blame the war on the sins of the Confederacy. Everybody knew, he noted, that slavery was “somehow” the cause of the war. Yet Lincoln called it “American slavery,” not southern slavery, underscoring the entire nation’s complicity. No man, he continued, truly knows God’s will. Men wanted the war to end, but God might see it as a punishment to the nation for the sin of slavery. In that case, it would continue “until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s 250 years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn by the sword.” Here was a final reaffirmation of his definition of slavery as a theft of labor, and also one of the very few times that Lincoln spoke

publically of the physical brutality inherent in slavery. (Lincoln generally preferred to appeal to the reason of his listeners rather than their emotions.)

In essence, Lincoln was asking the entire nation unblinkingly to confront the legacy of the long history of bondage. What are the requirements of justice in the face of this reality? What is the nation's obligation for those 250 years of unpaid labor? What is necessary to enable the former slaves, their children, and their descendants to enjoy the "pursuit of happiness" which he had always insisted was their natural right, but which had so long denied to them? Lincoln did not provide an answer. And these questions have continued to bedevil American society until the present day.