

“Sustained by Mr. Jefferson”: Colonizationism as Jeffersonian Heritage in Abraham Lincoln’s Thinking¹

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2009 has been a very special year for scholars in the field of American Studies. The Lincoln Bicentennial offered a series of programs, exhibitions and conferences worldwide, and the celebration of the ‘Great Emancipator’ gained unique significance by the fact that exactly two hundred years after his birth, the first African-American president was inaugurated in the United States. It is no wonder, therefore, that these two events intertwined: comparisons have been frequently drawn between Lincoln and Obama, and the latter himself made extensive use of the invocation of Lincoln’s historical figure and posed as the successor of the true Lincolnian heritage, whatever that is, one might add.

For the press and the public, it was obvious that Obama was a “Lincolnian” president, but it is apparent that rarely has he been compared to any of the former residents of the Executive Mansion, including the two “giants”: George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. This realization struck me when I was doing research on the influence of Jefferson’s political thinking on Abraham Lincoln and I formulated the question: “If Obama is a Lincolnian and not a Jeffersonian president, does this necessarily mean that Lincoln himself was not a Jeffersonian politician?” This twisted logic might sound like entering a house from the basement

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backdoor, but actually it proved to be a starter for an intriguing line of thought as well as for rather fruitful research, based on which I could arrive at the conclusion that the links between Jefferson and Lincoln are far more numerous than one would anticipate. Of course, giving a thorough analysis of all these would go well beyond the scope of this paper, therefore, I decided to limit my inquiries and focus on a single issue only: ‘colonization’. In the context of 19th-century U.S. history this term refers to the movement that supported returning emancipated slaves to their “mother continent”, Africa. For many of its advocates, this seemed as a benevolent solution to the race problem, whereas for others, particularly retrospectively, it appeared to be a racist attempt to create a “lily-white” America.²

The Colonization movement gained momentum in late 1810’s as an antislavery response to the dilemma of what to do with the liberated slaves. In 1815, Paul Cuffe, a wealthy free black from Massachusetts, took thirty-eight Negroes to Africa on his own vessel at an expense to himself of several thousand dollars. In 1816, the American Colonization Society was formed in Washington, D.C. with Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, Reverend Robert Finley among its members, and Thomas Jefferson, President James Madison, Francis Scott Key as its supporters. The colonization effort resulted from a wide range of motives including fighting against racial discrimination and the perception of emancipated blacks as a burden on American society.

Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence who penned its probably most frequently-quoted line: “We hold these truths self-evident, that all men are created equal”—and was himself a slave-owner. This made him an easy target of hypocrisy charges, not to mention his sex-scandal with his female slave, Sally Hemings. Instead of sticking to his own ideal of universal freedom, Jefferson believed that the end of slavery must be accompanied by the removal of the black population. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia* he gave an elaborate plan for gradual emancipation and colonization: under this scheme slave children born after a certain date were to be educated at public expense, supplied with everything they needed, and transported to Africa. Simultaneously, from other parts of the world an “equal number of white inhabitants” would be

² Hungarian-born historian Gabor S. Boritt coined the phrase in his article “Did He Dream of a Lily-White America,” in Gabor S. Boritt (ed.) *The Lincoln Enigma*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 1–20.

transported to the US as labor force. This, even he admitted, seemed pointless, but he warned that without colonization slavery would be succeeded by racial warfare, or, what he deemed even worse, racial mixture.

In his *Autobiography* Jefferson pointed out: “Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate, than that these people are free; nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government. Nature, habit, opinion, have drawn indelible lines of distinction between them.”³ He rejected all other schemes outlining a different future for the two races: the very possibility of moving the liberated African Americans to the Western Frontier was out of question for him, as, he pointed out in his letter written to James Monroe in 1801: “[white Americans will] cover the whole northern, if not the southern continent, with a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms, and by similar laws; nor can we contemplate with satisfaction either blot or mixture on that surface.”⁴ In contrast, he found the West Indies, where “black sovereignty existed”, the most suitable home for expatriated blacks and wished that “these islands became the receptacle of the blacks transplanted into this hemisphere.”⁵

The colonization movement gaining a new momentum in the 1820’s was undoubtedly guided by these Jeffersonian arguments. An important element of their inventory of pro-colonization arguments was that blacks transported “back” to Africa were presented as missionaries carrying with them “the credentials in the holy cause of civilization, religion, and free institutions,” as Henry Clay summarized it at the ACS’s first meeting.⁶ Jefferson himself wrote in 1824: “The establishment of a colony on the coast of Africa[...] may introduce among the aborigines the arts of cultivated life, and the blessings of civilization and science.”⁷

³ The Thomas Jefferson Papers are accessible online in a searchable full-text format: http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/jefferson_papers/mtjquery.html.

This particular quote is from his *Autobiography* draft fragment dated July 27, 1821.

⁴ Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe. November 24, 1801. Accessible online: http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/P?mtj:1:/temp/~ammem_e0kQ

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Quoted in: <http://www.liberianforum.com/Notes-on-Liberia/American-Colonization-Society.html>. (Accessed on December 10, 2009.)

⁷ *Thomas Jefferson to Jared Sparks. 1824.* In *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson. Memorial Edition* (Eds. Lipscomb and Bergh) 20 Vols., Washington, D.C., 1903–04, Vol. XVI, p. 8.

Another prominent member of the slaveowner elite, Henry Clay condemned slavery all his life, as an evil. However, he also insisted that emancipation would create an uncontrollable population of free blacks (whom he called a debased and degraded set).

In 1799 Clay had an unsuccessful attempt to push a plan for gradual emancipation through the Kentucky constitutional convention, based on which he put forward a detailed proposal some 50 year later. According to this, beginning in 1855 or 1860, children born to slaves would become free at the age of 25. Colonization was absolutely indispensable to the plan, otherwise amalgamation was sure to follow—unacceptable to everyone. Gradual emancipation coupled with colonization formed a major part of Clay’s plan for regional and national economic development ha called the “American System”.⁸

Clay also believed that American blacks in Africa would be transformed into the carriers of modern civilization and Christianity, although, unlike Thomas Jefferson, he did “believe in the mutability of the human character,” as historian Eric Foner pointed out, and argued that their status as slaves and unequal free persons was due to slavery and not their innate incapacity to rise, thus they had the capacity for improvement.⁹

He urged emancipation while he believed that slavery was the “deepest stain upon the character of the country,” opposition to which could not be repressed except by “blowing out the moral lights around us” and “eradicating from the human soul the light of reason and the law of liberty.”¹⁰

Henry Clay played a major role in establishing the American Colonization Society, and advocated the transportation of emancipated blacks to Monrovia, Liberia on the grounds that “ [they are so much] of a different caste, of a different physical, if not moral, constitution [...] [that they] never can amalgamate with the great body of [...] population.”¹¹

⁸ For a detailed study, see Maurice G. Baxter, *Henry Clay and the American System*. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1995.)

⁹ *In Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World*. (Ed. Eric Foner) (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2009) (Hereafter cited as, Foner, *Our Lincoln*), p. 140.

¹⁰ Cited in: <http://www.nndb.com/people/813/000049666/> (Accessed on September 20, 2009)

¹¹ Henry Clay’s speech in front of the American Colonization Society. 1827. Quoted in: Robert Morgan, “The Great Emancipator and the Issue of Race,” http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v13/v13n5p-4_Morgan.html (Accessed on September 17, 2009.)

Unlike Thomas Jefferson and Henry Clay, Abraham Lincoln had little contact with slavery until the 1840's: in his Illinois hometown, Springfield, in 1851 there were only 171 blacks out of a total population of 10,000 inhabitants. He was, however, directly influenced by the anti-slavery movement—and he proved as much incapable of identifying with abolitionism as he rejected the moral injustice of the peculiar institution. He sat in the audience in 1847, when Clay delivered a lecture in Lexington, Ky summarizing his views about the future of slavery, which he called a “great evil”. He opposed the acquisition of new territories, as he feared that this would mean the territorial expansion of slavery, however, he rejected the idea that emancipated African Americans could stay in the country equal with the whites. Lincoln was impressed, and it is apparent that in the next one and a half decades his outlook on slavery closely paralleled that of Clay, whom he called his “beau ideal of statesman.”

It is not by chance that Lincoln was asked to deliver the eulogy of Clay. He hailed Clay for occupying a position between the extremes, quoted his procolonization speeches and embraced his idea of gradual emancipation followed by colonization.

Where Lincoln stood in this period of his political career is probably best summarized by Eric Foner: “Lincoln’s thought seemed suspended between a ‘civic’ conception of American nationality, based on the universal principle of equality, and racial nationalism that saw blacks as in some ways not truly American. He found it impossible to imagine the United States as a biracial society.”¹² Incompatible as this way of thinking may seem with the traditional “Great Emancipator” image of Lincoln, colonization for him, just like for many proponents of the abolition of slavery, offered a middle ground between the radicalism of the abolitionists and the prospect of the United States existing permanently half slave and half free. He agreed with Clay in the multi-level advantages of colonization for Americans, ex-slaves, and Africans alike, and presented colonization as part of God’s Grand Design. Knowing that Lincoln rarely used other than superficial references to God in his speeches, and that his antislavery views had virtually no religious overtones, one cannot escape the impression that this was just a marketing decision on his part simply to make the colonization idea “sell better” and he did not really take an interest in the Christianization of Africa:

¹² Foner, *Our Lincoln*, p. 147.

There is a moral fitness in the idea of returning to Africa her children, whose ancestors have been torn from her by the ruthless hand of fraud and violence. Transplanted in a foreign land, they will carry back to their native soil the rich fruits of religion, civilization, law and liberty. May it not be one of the great designs of the Ruler of the universe, (whose ways are often inscrutable by short-sighted mortals,) thus to transform an original crime, into a signal blessing to that most unfortunate portion of the globe?¹³

Lincoln referred to Africa as the slaves' "native soil" in spite of the obvious fact that the overwhelming majority of the African Americans were born in the United States. Moreover, Lincoln's words well demonstrate the difference between his ideas and those of the abolitionists. Although the Democrats did their best to identify him with abolitionism, Lincoln was clear about his intentions: avoid bringing about a biracial society by removing the inferior race and deporting it to Africa.

Following the death of Henry Clay, Lincoln became the major spokesman of colonization parallel to being among the founders of the new Republican Party. When dealing with the more and more apparent sectional conflict between North and South over the issue of the expansion of slavery, Lincoln was ready to admit that, similarly to most thinkers of the founders' and his own generation, he had no idea what to do with the "peculiar institution," therefore, showed sympathy towards Southern people, by all means including slaveholders: "I surely will not blame them for not doing what I should not know how to do myself." In this very same and famous speech of his delivered at Peoria, IL in 1854, he said the following about how he saw the future of the post-abolition American society, which clearly excluded the emancipated slaves themselves:

If all earthly power were given me, I should not know what to do, as to the existing institution. My first impulse would be to free all the slaves, and send them to Liberia,—to their own native land. But a moment's reflection would convince me, that whatever of high hope, (as I think there is) there may be in this, in the long run, its sudden execution is impossible. What then? Free them all, and keep them among us as underlings? Is it quite certain that this betters their condition? I think I would not hold one in slavery, at any rate; yet the point is not clear enough for me to denounce people upon. What next? Free them, and make them politically and socially, our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great

¹³ *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. (New Brunswick, N. J. : Rutgers University Press, 1953–1955), (Hereafter cited as, CWAL), Volume II, p. 132.

mass of white people will not. Whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgment, is not the sole question, if indeed, it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill-founded, can not be safely disregarded. We can not, then, make them equals.¹⁴

Lincoln occupied a middle position in his colonization scheme. Unlike Thomas Jefferson, he did not fear a racial war, and his plan did not include compulsory deportation either. By 1860 he and many other moderate supporters of colonization had been so successful in convincing a large number of people that several African-American leaders did not entirely rule it out either. Frederick Douglass himself was flirting with the idea of leaving the United States for Haiti, but the coming of the Civil War changed his plans: [the Civil War] “is a tremendous revolution [...] in the future of the colored race of the United States,” he said and concluded, “This is no time for us to leave the country.”¹⁵

Lincoln kept to his colonization scheme as a president, as well. He had no fewer than three advocates of the deportation of blacks to Africa on his cabinet: Attorney General Edward Bates, Secretary of Interior Caleb Smith, and Postmaster General Montgomery Blair. His attempts to find the suitable destination for the colonized ex-slaves came to nothing: his envoys were rejected both in Honduras and Guatemala with the suggestion that Lincoln should look for territories in the American West. Subsequently, Lincoln’s agents had talks about the establishment of a colony of blacks in the Yucatán.

In his first annual message to Congress on December 3, 1861 Lincoln requested further funds for the colonization of the blacks emancipated under the first confiscation act. In recognition of the role Lincoln played in colonization, a Washington newspaper even suggested that the proposed black colony be called ‘Lincolnia’.

In Congress Lincoln could count on the support of border unionists and moderate republicans, but abolitionists and radical republicans heavily criticized him for standing behind the idea of colonization. It was partly due to their efforts that the subsequent attempts of the Lincoln administration to establish a colony for emancipated slaves at the Amazon River, Costa Rica, or the Danish colony of St. Croix failed.

¹⁴ Lincoln’s speech at Peoria, IL on October 16, 1854. CWAL, II, p. 255.

¹⁵ Quoted in: <http://www.frederickdouglass.org/speeches/> (Accessed on November 14, 2009.)

Besides the radical republicans and abolitionists, colonizationists naturally had to face the resistance of the overwhelming majority of blacks themselves. That is the reason why Lincoln attempted to take the idea of colonization directly to the African Americans. On August 14, 1862 he invited a group of black delegates to the White House—for the first time in history. What he told them, however, made this event probably the most controversial moment of his career:

You and we are different races. We have between us a broader difference than exists between almost any other two races. Whether it is right or wrong I need not discuss, but this physical difference is a great disadvantage to us both, as I think your race suffers very greatly, many of them by living among us, while ours suffer from your presence. In a word we suffer on each side. If this is admitted, it affords a reason at least why we should be separated.¹⁶

He managed to convince some of the members of the delegation, but most people of the anti-slavery movement were bitterly disappointed with Lincoln. Especially indignant was Frederick Douglass who said that “this showed all his inconsistencies [...] his contempt for Negroes, and his canting hypocrisy.”¹⁷

Making use of the military successes of the Union Army, Lincoln could bring forward his Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 23, 1862 in which he referred to colonization and recommended to “adopt, immediate, or gradual abolishment of slavery [so that] the effort to colonize persons of African descent, with their consent, upon this continent, or elsewhere, with the previously obtained consent of the Governments existing there, [can] be continued.”¹⁸

In December 1862 he made his final offer to the border and Confederate states asking for gradual, compensated (the total value of slaves was approximately 3 billion dollars) emancipation coupled with colonization. However, this already showed a considerable change in his approach to the colored race, its future in America, and colonization, since the president refuted the the strongest argument against freed blacks’ remaining in the country: blacks overflowing the North, thus creating worse job opportunities for the whites, among many others.

¹⁶ Address on Colonization to a Deputation of Negroes. August 14, 1862. CWAL, V, p. 371.

¹⁷ Quoted in: <http://www.frederickdouglass.org/speeches/> (Accessed on November 14, 2009.)

¹⁸ Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. September 22, 1862. CWAL, V, p. 434.

Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863 was definitely a turning point in the history of colonization, and was markedly different from his previous statements: this time he called for immediate emancipation without compensation given to slaveholders, and did not say a single word about colonization—just like he never made any public mentioning of colonization afterwards. This was the period when Lincoln seriously started re-evaluating his former standpoint considering the role African Americans' would play in the postslavery American society, just as Frederick Douglass predicted that “the progress of war would educate Mr. Lincoln out of his idea of the deportation of the Negro.”¹⁹

The end of slavery clearly meant the end of colonization, and the Emancipation Proclamation created the depiction of Lincoln as the ‘Great Emancipator’, although his greatest achievement in bringing about the abolition of slavery was rather his efforts taken to push the 13th Amendment through Congress.

Lincoln's support of colonization is hardly compatible with his Great Emancipator image, and even less is the fact that he reached back to slaveholders like Thomas Jefferson and Henry Clay in order to cope with the more and more acute problem of slavery soon pushing the United States into the bloodiest sectional and fraternal war in her history. However, this probably points into the right direction in the evaluation of Lincoln as well as Jefferson and Clay: colonization offered a way for multiple generations of Americans to escape thinking seriously about the aftermath of slavery and offering a solution to the apparently unavoidable racial tensions arising in the post-emancipation American society: according to Frederick Douglass, it was an “opiate for a troubled conscience.” In the historical context of anti-slavery fight in the antebellum era, the support of colonization was less of a racist attempt to get rid of blacks than rather a way of offering a less painful solution to the long-standing problems of the biracial society. This way, instead of accepting the racist stigma on the sixteenth president of the anti-Lincoln tradition in historiography, one is more tempted to go along with historian Gore Vidal who wrote that Lincoln was “the symbol of man's ability to outgrow his prejudices”.²⁰

¹⁹ Quoted in: <http://www.mrlincolnanefreedom.org/inside.asp?ID=69&subjectID=4>
(Accessed on December 7, 2009.)

²⁰ Quoted in Richard N. Current and Harold Holzer, “Vidal's Lincoln: An Exchange” *The New York Review of Books*, Volume 35, No. 13, August 18, 1988. Online: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/4341>. (Accessed on January 5, 2010)