Abraham Lincoln: An African American Perspective

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Abraham Lincoln: An African American Perspective

By J. Blaine Hudson

Introduction

For the past decade and more, my research has focused largely on the slave trade and slavery, with special emphasis on African American resistance to slavery and the first true human-rights movement in the United States, the abolitionist movement that brought together a minority of men and women of conscience, black and white, who opposed slavery. In more specific terms, I have studied and written most about fugitive slaves and the Underground Railroad.

Ironically, we seldom, if ever, think of Abraham Lincoln as belonging to any of these groups or categories. Obviously, he was not black. Neither was he an abolitionist, according to those who were. At one time or another, he was denounced from all points along the national political spectrum. To some, he was an abolitionist; to others, he protected slavery. To some, he was too committed to war; to others, he was not committed sufficiently. Too hot or too cold. Too hasty or too slow.

Yet, in the storm-tide of change that was the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the United States, was the chief executive who presided over the end of slavery—who liberated four million enslaved African Americans.

So, from the perspective of the African Americans of Lincoln's time and from the perspective of their descendants today, who was Abraham Lincoln—and what was and is his place in our history?

Abraham Lincoln: Biographical Overview

The bare facts of Lincoln's biography are simple and well-known. He was born February 12, 1809, at Hodgenville, Ken-

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tucky, named for his paternal grandfather who was killed by Native Americans near present-day Long Run Park in eastern Jefferson County on May 19, 1786. He and his family moved to Indiana when he was eight years old and to Illinois when he was a young man. There, he tried many occupations and eventually became an attorney. He married Mary Todd, of a prominent slaveholding Lexington, Kentucky, family. He was largely self-educated, possessed a keen mind, and demonstrated great skill with the written and spoken word. As contemporary descriptions and actual photographs attest, he was tall, awkward, somewhat homely, and given at times to melancholy.

Lincoln served briefly in the Black Hawk War and in the Illinois legislature in the 1830s. He was elected to one term in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1846. Lincoln slipped into virtual obscurity for several years but returned to political life when he denounced the "popular sovereignty" provision of the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854)—which, in effect, nullified the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and allowed for the extension of slavery into the western territories.

In 1856, Lincoln nearly captured the Republican Party's nomination for vice president of the United States. In 1858, he ran for the U.S. Senate and challenged Stephen Douglas—his longtime rival, incumbent senator from Illinois and, not coincidentally, author of the Kansas-Nebraska Act—to a series of debates. Douglas was already a national figure and an aspirant to the presidency, and these seven debates, between August 21 and October 15, 1858, seized the imagination of the nation. Each one, in its own way, focused on the issue of slavery

Lincoln lost the senatorial election but became a national figure himself—and was nominated for president by the Republican Party in 1860. On November 6, 1860, he was elected and, before his inauguration on March 4, 1861, seven slave states had seceded from the Union and had formed the Confederate States of America. Confederate forces began shelling Fort Sumter in the Charleston, South Carolina, harbor on April 12. Lincoln issued a "call to arms" on April 15 and the Civil War began—not to end slavery but for the purpose of suppressing rebellion and restoring the Union.

Still, by the time General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant on April 9, 1865, the Union had been re-

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stored and slavery was ending across the United States. Lincoln was shot by John Wilkes Booth on April 14 and died the next day—with a plan in place, as enunciated in his Second Inaugural address and made manifest in legislative enactments, to reconstruct the sundered nation on a basis that would give the rights and opportunities of citizenship and government protection to four million newly emancipated African Americans.

Still, as I have reminded my students for nearly thirty years, Abraham Lincoln did not become the person "we think he was" until the last year of his life. So, to assess Abraham Lincoln fairly, we must consider several related dimensions of the man over time:

- his racial attitudes
- his views on slavery
- and how both evolved, particularly in the crucible of the Civil War.

Because Lincoln was a public figure who spoke and wrote volumes over several decades of public life, he can easily be taken out of context. Thus, as we explore these dimensions of Lincoln's thoughts and beliefs, it is important that we consider the totality of the evidence—not merely a few facts that can be cited selectively to fit and support a particular viewpoint. It is even more important that we let Lincoln "speak for himself."

So, who was Abraham Lincoln from the perspective of African Americans, then and now, and from the perspective of over 150 years since his untimely death?

Abraham Lincoln and Race

First, was Abraham Lincoln a racist, as so many have alleged—including Lerone Bennett, most recently in *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* (2000)? The answer to this question is not simple, particularly if we view Lincoln in the context of his times, not ours.

Some of the most telling and widely publicized examples of Lincoln's racial views can be found in the Lincoln-Douglas debates. First, the September 18, 1858, debate in Charleston, Illinois, where Lincoln stated:

> I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social or political equality of

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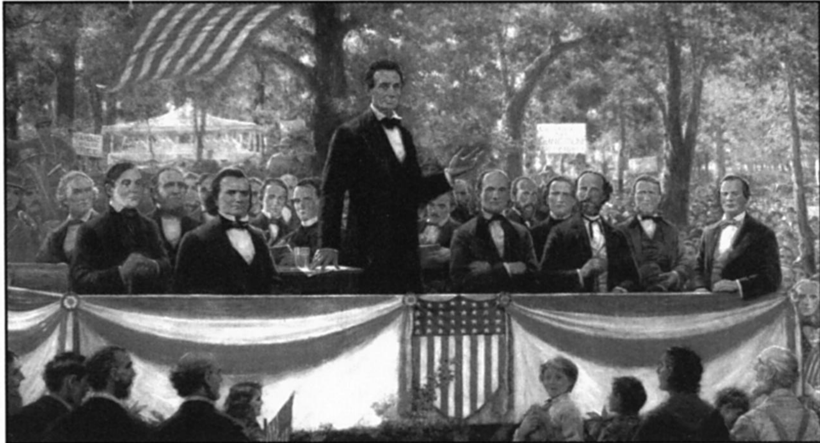

Courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library

Robert Root, *Lincoln-Douglas Debate*, 1918. In 1858, during his famous debates with Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln revealed his attitudes toward race on the eve of the Civil War. Although he saw racial differences rooted in color and conceded the possibility of the intellectual and moral inferiority of African Americans, Lincoln also believed that African Americans were human beings with rights that could and should be protected by the U.S. Constitution.

> the white and black races, that I am 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; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality.[1]

On October 13, 1858, in the sixth debate at Quincy, Illinois, Lincoln returned to this theme from a slightly different perspective:

> I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and black races. There is a physical difference between the two, which, in my judgment, will probably forever forbid their living together on the footing of perfect equality, and inasmuch as it becomes a necessity that there

[1] Michael P. Johnson, ed., *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery and the Civil War: Selected Writings and Speeches* (Boston, 2001), 73-74; Robert W. Johannsen, ed, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858* (New York, 2008), 162-63.

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> must be a difference, I, as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong having the superior position.[2]

Then, however, Lincoln continues in a somewhat different vein:

> I have never said anything to the contrary, but I hold that notwithstanding all this, there is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence—the right of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I hold that he is as much entitled to these as the white man. I agree with Judge Douglas that he is not my equal in many respects, certainly not in color—perhaps not in intellectual and moral endowments; but in the right to eat the bread without the leave of any body else which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every other man.[3]

These last statements, which are often overlooked, are especially illuminating and reflect a viewpoint articulated by Lincoln on many occasions in the 1850s. In essence, Lincoln saw racial differences rooted definitively in color, conceded the possibility of the intellectual and moral inferiority of African Americans, and supported white supremacy. However, Lincoln also believed that African Americans were human beings with rights that could and should be protected by the U.S. Constitution.

Having had little or no direct contact with African Americans, Lincoln also seemed to share the popular prejudice against and fear of interracial relationships, as he stressed on June 26, 1857, in a speech opposing the Dred Scott decision:

> There is a natural disgust in the minds of nearly all white people, to the idea of an indiscriminate amalgamation of the white and black races . . . . Now I protest against that counterfeit logic which concludes that, because I do not want a black woman for a slave, I must necessarily want her for a wife. I need not have her for either. I can just leave her alone.[4]

Privately, it seems that Lincoln recognized the inherent illogic of his own racial attitudes and those prevailing in ante-

[2] Johnson, *Abraham Lincoln*, 76-78.
[3] Ibid.; Johannsen, 247-49.
[4] Ibid., 57.

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bellum America and mused in 1854:

> If A. can prove, however conclusively, that he may, of right, enslave B—why may not B snatch the same argument, and prove equally, that he may enslave A?
>
> You say A is white and B is black. It is *color*, then; the lighter, having the right to enslave the darker? Take care. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with a fairer skin than your own.
>
> You do not mean color exactly?—You mean the whites are *intellectually* the superiors of the blacks, and, therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with an intellect superior to your own.
>
> But, say you, it is a question of *interest*; and if you can make it your interest, you have the right to enslave another. Very well. And if he can make it his interest, he has the right to enslave you.[5]

These views reveal an interesting set of seeming inconsistencies. On one hand, Lincoln's attitudes have significant racist overtones and undertones. However, on the other, given the intensity of racial antipathy in antebellum America, the fact that Lincoln considered African Americans "human beings" actually places him in the category of a "racial moderate" in the context of his times. In other words, Lincoln believed that African Americans, while different, were neither outside the bounds of the law nor the applications of the "Golden Rule." Perhaps George Frederickson understood this paradox best thirty years ago when he observed that Lincoln viewed African Americans "as men, but not as brothers."[6]

Abraham Lincoln and Slavery

While Lincoln's racial attitudes through most, if not all, of his life were problematic, his antipathy toward slavery was far more intense and far more consistent. This viewpoint was influenced, to some degree, by his early years in the border states, in areas known for the movement of fugitive slaves and the presence of the Underground Railroad, and by his long and

[5] Ibid., 49-50.

[6] George M. Fredrickson, "A Man but Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality," *Journal of Southern History* 41 (1975): 39-58 and *Big Enough to be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race* (Cambridge, 2008), 1-42.

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fast friendship with Joshua Speed of Louisville—and his visit to Farmington, the Speed plantation, in 1841. A few examples are instructive, the first from a letter (September 27, 1841) to Mary Speed, Joshua Speed's mother, recounting a steamboat trip on the Ohio River:

> A gentleman had purchased twelve negroes in different parts of Kentucky and was taking them to a farm in the South. They were chained six and six together. A small iron clevis was around the wrist of each, and this fastened to the main chain by a shorter one at a convenient distance from the others; so that the negroes were strung together precisely like so many fish on a trot-line. In this condition they were being separated forever from the scenes of their childhood, their friends, their fathers and mothers, and bothers and sisters, and many of them, from their wives and children, and going into perpetual slavery where the lash of the master is proverbially more ruthless and unrelenting than any other where.[7]

Lincoln continues that despite "these distressing circumstances," the enslaved African Americans "were the most cheerful and apparently happy creatures on board."[8]

However, this incident affected Lincoln on a far deeper level than he expressed at the time. In his *Reminiscences* (1884), Joshua Speed believed that, "The scene he describes bears so intimate a relation to his after-life, I think it probable that it may be considered as concentrating his opposition to slavery."[9]

In other words, this direct exposure to slavery and the domestic slave trade was a defining moment, the source of images that would haunt him over the years. As one indication of the lasting power of this encounter, Lincoln himself recalled it fourteen years later in a letter (August 24, 1855) to Speed regarding the deepening differences between them on the "slavery question":

> In 1841, you and I had together a tedious low-water trip, on a Steam Boat from Louisville to St. Louis. You may remember, as I well do, that from Louisville to the mouth of the Ohio River there were, on board, ten or a dozen slaves, shackled

[7] Johnson, *Abraham Lincoln*, 49-50.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Joshua Speed, *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln* (Louisville, 1884), 40.

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Courtesy of Ed Hamilton

Photographic print of clay model by Ed Hamilton, *Slavery*, bas-relief, 2007. In a letter to Mary Speed, dated September 27, 1841, Lincoln described seeing slaves chained together while he was on a steamboat trip down the Ohio River. The experience was a defining moment, the source of images that would haunt him through the years.

together with irons. That sight was a continual torment to me; and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio, or any other slave-border. It is hardly fair for you to assume, that I have no interest in a thing which has, and continually exercises, the power of making me miserable. You ought rather to appreciate how much the great body of Northern people do crucify their feelings, in order to maintain their loyalty to the constitution and the Union.

The slave-breeders and slave-traders, are a small, odious and detested class, among you; and yet in politics, they dictate the course of all of you, and are as completely your masters,

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as you are the masters of your own negroes.[10]

In far more memorable and public terms, Lincoln would state on June 16, 1858, when he accepted the Republican nomination for the U.S. Senate:

> We are now far into the fifth year since a policy was initiated with the avowed object and confident promise of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only not ceased, but has constantly augmented. In my opinion, it will not cease until a crisis shall have been reached and passed. "A house divided against itself cannot stand." I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward till it shall become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new, North as well as South.[11]

Much later, in a letter to A. G. Hodges of Kentucky (April 4, 1864), Lincoln would reiterate that: "I am naturally anti-slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I can not remember when I did not so think, and feel."[12]

Clearly, Lincoln believed that slavery, as an institution, was wrong—if not evil, regardless of how he viewed its victims. Still, although he opposed the extension of slavery into new U.S. territories, he believed that the Constitution protected the institution where it already existed. Clearly, Lincoln was no abolitionist who advocated the immediate end of slavery. However, unlike many of his contemporaries who shared his opposition to the "extension of slavery," Lincoln could accept the desirability of ending slavery altogether.

[10] Johnson, *Abraham Lincoln*, 49-50.
[11] Ronald C. White Jr., *A. Lincoln: A Biography* (New York, 2009), 251-55.
[12] Johnson, *Abraham Lincoln*, 285.

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Office of the COLONIZATION SOCIETY

Washington, May 16th, 1848.

This certifies that Mrs Catherine Laird is a MEMBER for life, of the AMERICAN COLONIZATION SOCIETY.

LEX IN TENEBRIS

AM. COL. SOC. A.D. 1816

Sec.

H Clay President

Henry Clay Memorial Foundation Papers, 96M3, Special Collections and Digital Programs, University of Kentucky Libraries

Henry Clay signed this American Colonization Society membership certificate, as president of the organization. In 1816, Clay founded this society, which called for the repatriation of freed blacks to Africa. Clay and Lincoln favored gradual, compensated emancipation of slaves coupled with colonization outside the United States. As late as 1862, Lincoln expressed support for this policy.

Abraham Lincoln, Emancipation, and Colonization

For much of his adult life, Lincoln reconciled this seeming paradox—opposition to slavery, on one hand, and the rejection of the equality of blacks and whites, on the other—by supporting colonization—the organized effort to remove free African Americans from the United States and resettle them in some other part of the world. In this belief, Lincoln was influenced strongly by his two political idols, Thomas Jefferson and Henry Clay, both of whom were strong advocates of colonization.

The abiding attraction of colonization as a concept, however impractical it was as a political strategy, was its promise to eliminate both the problem of slavery *and* the "problem," once slavery ended, of having a large free-black population on American soil. Colonization promised to solve the race problem,

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as if by "magic"—and was broadly influential. For example, the American Colonization Society (ACS) was formed in late 1816, with leadership drawn from the highest echelons of American government and, eventually, a network of state colonization societies also emerged, among which Kentucky's was one of the most active. The ACS lobbied for the Slave Trade Act in 1819, which led to the establishment of Liberia in the 1820s.

Still, the "magic" of colonization produced very limited results since African Americans recognized that colonization was not intended to benefit them but to protect slavery by removing the destabilizing presence of free people of color. Further, as the African American connection to Africa grew more tenuous by the year—by the 1830s, very few African Americans even had parents who had been born in Africa—the idea of entrusting their fate to an unknown land seemed reasonable only as a last resort, as was the case with Martin Delany and his followers in the troubled years of the 1850s. Consequently, since the government never appropriated any funds to support this scheme, only around fourteen thousand African Americans left the country in over forty years using private funds from whites.

Still, Lincoln referred to colonization—and its problems—on many occasions, for example, on June 26, 1857, he stated:

> I have said that the separation of the races is the only perfect preventive of amalgamation . . . Such separation, if ever effected at all, must be effected by colonization; and no political party, as such, is now doing anything directly for colonization . . . Let us be brought to believe that it is morally right, and, at the same time, favorable to, or at least, not against our interest, to transfer the African to his native clime, and we shall find a way to do it, however great the task may be.[13]

The failure of colonization before the Civil War did not lessen its appeal or weaken Lincoln's support. One of the most instructive examples can be found in the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, issued on September 22, 1862, which stipulates:

[13] "Speech on the Dred Scott Decision," in ibid., 58.

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> That it is my purpose, upon the next meeting of Congress to again recommend the adoption of a practical measure . . . 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, will be continued.[14]

At this juncture, it is important to note that Lincoln proposed voluntary colonization, at U.S. government expense—not forced deportation. Needless to add, a voluntary colonization plan required the acceptance and cooperation of black Americans and, although Lincoln was well aware of black attitudes toward colonization, he believed that he could convince black leaders of the wisdom of this course of action. After ending slavery in the District of Columbia in April 1862, Lincoln tested his assumptions, so to speak, by sending a relatively small group of African Americans on an unsuccessful attempt to found a black American settlement in Haiti. Consequently, even before issuing the preliminary proclamation, he attempted to "sell" the "benefits" of large-scale colonization to a delegation of free people of color in a meeting on August 14, 1862. Lincoln stated:

> 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 suffer 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 . . . even when you cease to be slaves, you are yet far removed from being placed on an equality with the white race. You are cut off from many of the advantages which the other race enjoy. The aspiration of men is to enjoy equality with the best when free, but on this broad continent, not a single man of your race is made the equal of a single man of ours. Go where you are treated the best, and the ban is still upon you.[15]

[14] Ibid., 206-8.
[15] "Address on Colonization," in ibid., 200-204.

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Not surprisingly, these remarks outraged African Americans and only intensified black opposition to colonization, led by the stinging spoken and written criticism of Frederick Douglass, perhaps the greatest of all African American leaders, before or since—who, not coincidentally, was not invited to this particular meeting. Apart from black opposition, the nations and colonies in the Caribbean and central and South America were disinclined to receive millions of displaced African Americans. Thus, as the fall of 1862 unfolded, it became increasingly clear to Lincoln that linking emancipation to colonization was untenable politically and, by the time he delivered his second annual message to Congress on December 1, 1862, he enjoined his audience to prepare for the continuing presence of African Americans on American soil. And when the final version of the Emancipation Proclamation was signed on January 1, 1863, all references to colonization had been removed.[16]

Still, there is a larger and more complex context. Lincoln could have made the Emancipation Proclamation effective in September 1862. Instead, he announced, in September 1862, his intention to end slavery in Confederate territory (which he did not control) in January 1863. Why the delay? And what was Lincoln hoping to accomplish in the interim? Clearly, "selling" colonization to African Americans was one of Lincoln's objectives—but he was also pursuing another and, perhaps, more fundamental, strategic goal.

For Lincoln, preserving the Union and ending slavery were, in 1861 and 1862, separate goals—and preserving the Union took precedence. Consequently, along with working for military victory, Lincoln spent nearly the first two years of the Civil War attempting to broker a compromise between slaveholding Unionists in the loyal states—Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, and, eventually, West Virginia—and more moderate Confederates who wished to end the war. His strategy was to avoid any immediate attack on slavery but to encourage the Union slave states to adopt compensated, gradual emancipation plans. Colonization was linked, implicitly or explicitly, to such plans, and the terms under which Lincoln abolished slavery

[16] Ibid., 218-19.

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in the District of Columbia served as a model for other states. Lincoln also signaled that Confederates who would abandon rebellion would have the same options.

By announcing in September 1862 that emancipation (in Confederate territory) would take effect on January 1, 1863, Lincoln was, in essence, giving the Confederacy one last opportunity to compromise—to end the rebellion and retain slavery, at least for a time. When the Confederacy and even southern moderates, failed to indicate any willingness to compromise, their intransigence compelled Lincoln, finally, to recognize the futility of this strategy and to take successively stronger steps to end slavery directly.

The failure to achieve either of these goals in the fall of 1862 was a key turning point and crucial to understanding how and why Lincoln changed his strategy—and, perhaps, his attitudes, in the last years of the Civil War. As noted by James McPherson, once Lincoln reached this fateful crossroads, ending slavery and restoring the Union became the same goal in a new "national strategy." And this new "national strategy" was complemented by the "military strategy" of seeking the unconditional surrender of the Confederacy after the complete defeat of its armed forces.[17]

In pursuing this strategy, Lincoln was moderate but resolute, moving forward at a halting pace that frustrated his abolitionist critics, but moving forward inexorably nonetheless. True, one could argue that Lincoln acted only out of military necessity, that ending slavery stimulated a floodtide of fugitive slaves that deprived the South of labor and struck at the heart of the southern social and economic order and sustained the Union army. However, Lincoln's determination to end slavery cannot be explained entirely on pragmatic, military grounds.

For example, even if he lagged behind his most radical critics and friends, he usually overtook them. For example, referring to the seemingly rapid evolution of his own racial policies, Lincoln stated to his friend Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts: "The difference between you and me is a difference of a month

[17] James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York, 1990), 65-91.

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In reference to the rapid evolution of his own racial policies, Lincoln stated to his friend Charles Sumner, a leader of antislavery forces in the U.S. Senate: "The difference between you and me is a difference of a month or six months in time." Lincoln did not so much oppose the Radical Republican agenda, but rather he let his more radical associates, like Sumner, serve as an advanced guard. Lincoln followed along as the military and political situation allowed.

or six months in time."[18] Similarly, in June 1862, Lincoln was described by Owen Lovejoy, abolitionist congressman from Illinois and brother of the martyred abolitionist, Elijah Lovejoy: "If he does not drive as fast as I would, he is on the right road,

[18] Archibald H. Grimke, *Charles Sumner: The Scholar in Politics* (New York, 1892), 338.

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and it is only a question of time."[19]

Again and again, buried in the records of the time, this sentiment is expressed—that Lincoln was not so much opposing the Radical Republican agenda but rather allowing his more radical associates to serve as an advanced guard with him following along as the military and political situation allowed. Thus, one could argue rather convincingly that, in the tumult of the Civil War, Lincoln learned that the "old" solutions would not work, that he could not preserve the Union without winning the war, and that, since compromise with slavery was impossible in a nation so deeply divided, he could not win the war without ending slavery. He also learned that he could not end slavery without defining a place for emancipated African Americans as citizens in this country, not somewhere else, so that, as he stated in the Gettysburg Address (November 19, 1863), "this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."[20]

The African American Perspective: Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass

So, how, finally, did African Americans view Abraham Lincoln in his time—and how should we view him today, based on the totality of the evidence available to us?

In my view, only one of his contemporaries was both willing and able to see Lincoln and Lincoln's meaning as they were. By a fascinating coincidence, this contemporary was also the only man who could rival Lincoln as a visionary and as a leader. And he was an African American, once a fugitive slave—the great Frederick Douglass, who still towers over our history long after his death in 1895.

Time, not to mention objective historical research, has proved the appraisal of Douglass to an honest, accurate, insightful, and balanced one. So, as we consider Lincoln from an African American perspective, we must consider Lincoln, first and last, from the perspective of Frederick Douglass—and in Douglass's own words.

[19] William F. Moore and Jane A. Moore, eds., *His Brother's Blood: Speeches and Writings, 1863-64, of Owen Lovejoy* (Urbana, 2004), 346.

[20] Johnson, *Abraham Lincoln*, 263.

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By the Civil War, Douglass was as widely known and as controversial as Abraham Lincoln—although for rather different reasons. Lincoln personified the power of the state. Douglass was, quite literally, the tribune of his people, the leading black abolitionist since the mid-1840s, perhaps the greatest orator in American history, and known internationally for his work. Still, Douglass was also a "minister without portfolio" and his "power," such as it was, derived solely from his own talents, convictions, and courage.

In this respect, Lincoln and Douglass were both self-made public men and knew of one another. Douglass was not invited to accompany the delegation of free people of color with whom Lincoln met in August 1862; he was too well-known and too closely identified with radical abolitionism for Lincoln to have any hope of convincing him of the wisdom of colonization. In fact, Douglass criticized Lincoln's colonization scheme with eloquence and anger, noting in September 1862:

> If men may not live peaceably together . . . in the same land, they cannot do so on the same continent, and ultimately in the same world. If the black man cannot find peace from the aggressions of the white race on this continent, he will not be likely to find it permanently on any part of the habitable globe. The same base and selfish lust for dominion which would drive us from this country would hunt us from the world.[21]

On August 10, 1863, Douglass met with Lincoln in Washington. Douglass pressed for equal pay and equal treatment for black soldiers. Lincoln, for his part, urged the black leader to continue recruiting for the Union army—and assured Douglass that he would honor his commitments to emancipation and to protecting black soldiers from Confederate retaliation. Lincoln treated Douglass with cordiality and respect, and Douglass was duly impressed and commented after the meeting that: "Though I was not entirely satisfied with his views, I was so well satisfied with the man and with the educating tendency of the conflict that I determined to go on with the recruiting."[22]

[21] David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge, 1989), 142.

[22] John Stauffer, *Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 2008), 17-22.

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On August 18, 1864, Douglass met Lincoln again—this time at Lincoln's invitation. At this meeting, the two talked for hours and Lincoln made the fascinating and little-known proposal that Douglass organize a literal "underground railroad" operation in the South that would lure increasing numbers of African Americans into Union-controlled territory. As David W. Blight noted:

> It is remarkable that Lincoln suggested such a scheme to Douglass; it would have forged an unprecedented alliance between black leadership and federal power for the purpose of emancipation. On August 29, 1864, Douglass wrote to Lincoln, outlining a plan where twenty-five agents would work at the front, channeling slaves into Union lines.[23]

After General William Tecumseh Sherman took Atlanta on September 2, there was no necessity to implement this plan, which is reminiscent of the organization of the Anti-Slavery League along the Kentucky–Indiana Ohio River border in the 1850s or John Brown's "subterranean pass-way." Still, that Lincoln would have considered this strategy and the alliance it implied—and that Douglass, after consulting other black leaders, would have considered becoming a black "John Brown" at Lincoln's request—are equally stunning.

More than two centuries of slavery and racism divided them. The determination to end slavery and mutual respect united them—even to the point that Lincoln invited Douglass to his second inaugural, where they met for the last time on March 4, 1865. At the inaugural reception, Lincoln asked Douglass what he thought of the inaugural address, saying "there is no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours." And Douglass replied that it was "a sacred effort."[24] After Lincoln's assassination, Douglass shared the nation's sense of grief and loss, and observed in December 1865 that even if Lincoln "did not control events, he had the wisdom to be instructed by them. When he could no longer withstand the current, he swam with it."[25]

[23] Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War*, 183-84.
[24] Stauffer, *Giants*, 295.
[25] Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War*, 187.

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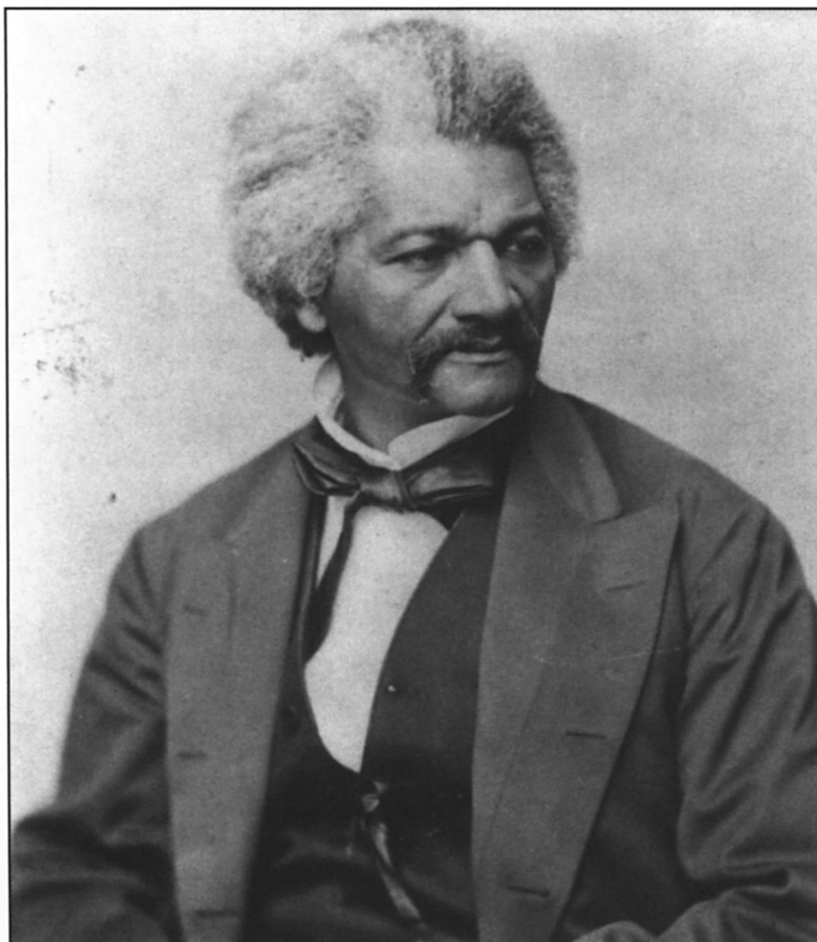

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On April 14, 1876, the anniversary of the day that John Wilkes Booth shot Lincoln in Ford's Theatre, Frederick Douglass gave a speech at the dedication of a monument in Washington, D.C., that described the sixteenth president in the role of "emancipator." "We saw him, measured him, and estimated him, not by stray utterance to injudicious and tedious delegations, who often tried his patience . . . .," Douglass said. "[W]e came to the conclusion that the hour and the man of our redemption had somehow met in the person of Abraham Lincoln."

Douglass would give his most complete and, perhaps, most thoroughly considered appraisal of Abraham Lincoln many years later when he spoke on April 14, 1876, at the dedication of a monument in Washington, D.C., about Lincoln in the role

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of "emancipator." By this time, Reconstruction was ending—and the vision of racial justice and equality, which he believed Lincoln's plan for reconstruction would have achieved, was fading from the minds of his countrymen. In this eloquent and courageous speech, Douglass sought both to tell the truth about Lincoln and to preserve that fading vision—more for posterity than for a nation that wanted mythology more than history, that wanted more to forget than to remember.

Standing before President Ulysses S. Grant, the leadership of both houses of Congress, and the U.S. Supreme Court, Douglass soon warmed to his task:

> It must be admitted, truth compels me to admit, even here in the presence of the monument we have erected to his memory, Abraham Lincoln was not, in the fullest sense of the word, either our man or our model. In his interests, in his associations, in his habits of thought, and in his prejudices, he was a white man.
>
> He was preeminently the white man's President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men. He was ready and willing at any time during the first years of his administration to deny, postpone, and sacrifice the rights of humanity in the colored people to promote the welfare of the white people of this country. . . . First, midst, and last, you and yours were the objects of his deepest affection and his most earnest solicitude. You are the children of Abraham Lincoln. We are at best only his step-children; children by adoption, children by the forces of circumstances and necessity.[26]

Then, Douglass continued:

> While Abraham Lincoln saved for you a country, he delivered us from a bondage, according to Jefferson, one hour of which was worse than ages of their oppression your fathers rose in rebellion to oppose.
>
> Our faith in him was often taxed and strained to the uttermost, but it never failed. . . . We saw him, measured him, and estimated him, not by stray utterances to injudicious and tedious delegations, who often tried his patience; not by isolated facts torn from their connections; not by any partial

[26] "Oration in the Memory of Abraham Lincoln," in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Life and Writings of Fredrick Douglass* (New York, 1955), 4:309-19.

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> and imperfect glimpses, caught at inopportune moments. . . . We came to the conclusion that the hour and the man of our redemption had somehow met in the person of Abraham Lincoln. It mattered little to us what language he might employ on special occasions; it mattered little to us when we fully knew him, whether he was swift or slow in his movements; it was enough for us that Abraham Lincoln was at the head of a great movement, and was in living and earnest sympathy with that movement, which, in the nature of things, must go on until slavery should be utterly and forever abolished in the United States.[27]

Nothing more need be said. Douglass saw Lincoln and Lincoln's meaning whole. Douglass also remembered well that, eleven years before, Lincoln, backed by a Republican majority in Congress, was taking the following actions before his death:

- land redistribution along the South Carolina coast (January 1865)
- the Thirteenth Amendment, passed by Congress in January 1865 and ratified on December 18, 1865
- the creation of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (the Freedmen's Bureau), established March 3, 1865
- voting rights for African American veterans and African Americans with education (as noted in Lincoln's last speech before his assassination)

Douglass understood that if these actions and policies had not been subverted by Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, African Americans would have embarked on their new journey as free men and women with an economic foundation, a role and place as citizens in the political process—and the commitment of the federal government to protect their rights. Instead, by 1876, serfdom was replacing slavery and African Americans were fast becoming powerless paupers, surrounded by their former owners, in an increasingly hostile and segregated society. And conditions would become much worse before Douglass died in 1895.

[27] Ibid.

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So, as Douglass stated with such power and clarity, the question of whether Abraham Lincoln was a "great white father" was irrelevant. The image of Lincoln as the benevolent and saintly white liberator had, as its counterpart, the image of the downtrodden and reverently grateful "slave" being freed from bondage. African Americans knew that neither image was accurate, that Lincoln was as Douglass described him and that African Americans themselves had paid for their freedom with their own blood and tears.

But African Americans knew as well—as African Americans knew under Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton—that the "enemy of my enemy is my friend," that it was far better to have a president whose policies helped more than hurt them, regardless of how questionable his other views and motivations might be. What mattered to Frederick Douglass and to African Americans, then and now, was that Abraham Lincoln was committed to ending slavery—and acted with the power of the federal government to translate that commitment into reality.

Conclusion

When he was being led to the gallows in December 1859, John Brown, the abolitionist martyr, handed a note to a guard that stated simply: "I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land can never be purged away but with blood."[28]

In many respects, Brown's apocalyptic vision anticipated the haunting passages from Lincoln's Second Inaugural address (March 1865), which juxtaposed the stark image of the Civil War as a divine judgment on both North and South for their complicity in the sin of slavery with the vision of forgiveness and a new nation purged of that sin. In prose that rises to the heights of both poetry and prophecy, Lincoln stated in this brief address:

> Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty

[28] J. Blaine Hudson, *Encyclopedia of the Underground Railroad* (Jefferson, N.C., 2006), 46.

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> scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."
>
> With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.[29]

Then, as now, there were those who believed that what was "good" for "some" Americans—a slavocracy or plutocracy or "ruling class"—was synonymous with what was "good" for the nation. Lincoln's vision and his plan for reconstructing the nation included everyone. Had this program been carried out, American history—for all Americans—might have been very different. How different, we shall never know.

Thus, to Abraham Lincoln, African Americans were "men, but not brothers." And, to African Americans, Abraham Lincoln was not a father or a brother, but an ally—and, in the end, perhaps even a friend.

[29] Johnson, *Abraham Lincoln*, 320-21.

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