

# Historic Southern Indiana

*Lincoln Institute, June 2005*

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## Lincoln and Race

By Richard Blackett

I am not sure how or why I got myself roped into coming to the Midwest to give a talk on this topic. Most people have pretty strong opinions on the Civil War president, opinions fashioned by over 16,000 publications on some aspect of the man's life, countless television programs, and a host of other popular art forms that have made Lincoln a man of mythic proportions. And as you all know it is never easy to bring dispassion and balance to mythology. A person for whom children have been named, whose statues stand in monuments in the nation's capital, in a cemetery in Edinburgh, in a green space before the House of Commons in London, and in a square renamed in his honor in the middle of Manchester, England, is, as the kids would say, awesome.

So I am going to apply a slight of hand taught me as an undergraduate obliged to answer interminable essay examinations. Put yourself in my shoes. What would you do if confronted by this compulsory question in a political science examination for freshmen: "Under the British Constitution the House of Lords is otiose. Discuss." My future flashed before my eyes. To have failed would have led, to employ the quaint expression of my English professors, to being rusticated. To avoid such an eventuality we were all taught that the trick to answering a confounding question was to first reinterpret it and then proceed to answer it based on your interpretation. The professor, we were reliably assured, was then obligated to evaluate your answer not on whether he agreed with your interpretation, but only on how well you have presented your argument. Or so we were led to believe. No one, of course, ever mentioned what the outcome would be if your interpretation was simply wrong! The fact that I am here says either I made a good guess about the meaning of the word "otiose" or I flawed the professor with my interpretive powers.

I am going to rely on the same approach to get around the pitfalls associated with this topic. But before I do, let me give a very broad and generalized survey of what historians have said about Lincoln and race by which I take it to mean, how the president viewed the contributions to, role in and future of African Americans in the United States. For some he is the great emancipator who freed the slaves and set them on a course of full participation in a revitalized country. For others he was a fundamentally conservative politician who inched part of the way to emancipation and had to be prodded the rest of the way. And still to others he was a person who longed for a country which made room for Fritz, Baptists, and Patrick, immigrants from Europe, as he once said, but who, to the end of his life, thought the country would be better served if black people made their

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future elsewhere. There is a fourth interpretation one that straddles all of the above and suggests that Lincoln was neither a saint nor an evil force, nor was he prophet or a consummate politician “whose every word and action are prompted by political expediency,” nor was he “an unregenerate racist.” (Tackack, XIV)

Let’s go to the source and see what Lincoln had to say about slavery, race, emancipation and colonization. As we do so keep in mind that Lincoln was a lawyer and a politician, not a particularly commendable combination. Because of this, historians have been quick to argue that, in trawling for votes, Lincoln simply did what all politicians do: he trimmed his sails. To be an effective politician in a state like Illinois which, among northern states, passed one of the most draconian anti-black laws in the antebellum period, Lincoln’s position had to take into consideration the sentiments of the voters. Similarly, a lawyer in order to be successful has to do the lawyerly thing: he has at times to hold his nose and take cases if he was to make a name for himself as well as make a living. This, they say, explains why he decided to work with the slave holder Mason in his effort to reclaim his slave who sought safety in Illinois. There may be something to this explanation for lawyering is, after all, the second oldest profession and not in the view of some as honorable as the oldest!!!

If Lincoln was antislavery to the core, as he was fond of saying, how do we explain his lack of action on that belief? David Donald has suggested that a good part of the explanation is to be found in Lincoln’s lack of personal knowledge and exposure to the workings of the institution. It was not until he went to Congress, Donald tells us, did Lincoln see the system in operation. (165-67) Lincoln did oppose a bill calling for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. He suggested a substitute, however, which did foresee the possibility of abolition but only if the white citizens of the district had an opportunity to vote on the issue. But all the evidence suggests that Lincoln had grave doubts about the ways agitating the issue would affect the nation and about what freedom would mean for the future of the country. Agitation, he feared, would threaten the social and political order. Lincoln had a particular reverence for the law. Bad laws there were, but until they were changed, all laws, he insisted, had to be obeyed. What then was a person who was antislavery to the core do confronted as Lincoln was by a system of laws which denied African Americans the “abstract principle” he admitted they were entitled to under the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution? His answer prior to his debates with Stephen Douglas was little, although when he was pushed to take a position he looked to his political mentor, Henry Clay, for a solution: slow, gradual, compensated emancipation followed by the colonization of African Americans in another country.

Emancipation without colonization presupposed social and political equality of the races. As Lincoln frequently said in response to Douglas’s taunting, he was opposed to

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freeing the slaves and making them the equal of whites. While in principle Negroes were entitled to the enjoyment of equal rights, Lincoln insisted that those rights could never be fully available in the United States. His words in the Charleston debate in September 1858 are well known: "I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races, that I am not and have never been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, not of qualifying them to hold office, not to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will for ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race...I say upon this occasion I do not perceive that because the white man is to have the superior position the negro should be denied everything. I do not understand that because I do not want a negro woman for a slave I must necessarily want her for a wife." (Basler, III, 179) The clincher for Lincoln and his audiences was the fear of amalgamation: if one kept the two races apart there would be little chance for mixing.

It is this fear that made Lincoln cling to colonization long after it had lost its appeal even among conservatives. There is little doubt that the fear was fuelled by passage of the Kansas-Nebraska act and the decision of the Supreme Court in the case of Dred Scott. It appeared to Lincoln and many others that slavery was increasingly violating the compact made by the Founding Fathers and was now inching its way into territories and states where it had not previously existed. That concern comes out most vividly in Lincoln's House Divided speech for he believed that the Founding Fathers had set a course that would result in the ultimate extinction of slavery, that it was their policy to "prohibit the spread of slavery into the new Territories of the United States where it did not exist," and the public had come to accept that eventuality. (Basler, III, 117) His analogy of the snake in the bed with children captures the essence of the dilemma he saw. The danger to the compact of the Founding Fathers would only ease if the snake of slavery was limited to existing states, and there killed. It must not be allowed to take its poison into the bed of the free states and territories. In order to achieve some form of gradual compensated emancipation had to be offered to slaveholders with the clear understanding that African Americans would have to leave the country.

On this Lincoln never wavered. Even when he assumed the presidency and the country came to blows, he continued to promote a policy of gradual freedom for the slaves, money for their owners, and the removal of blacks from the country. Most historians would admit if pressed that his heart was not in the Emancipation Proclamation. The pressures of war forced his hand and he ringed about it so many limitations that contemporaries rightly questioned its effectiveness. They were right; by the end of the

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war 95% of the slaves had not been freed and those that were took their freedom by abandoning their masters whenever the opportunity presented itself. Prior to issuing the preliminary Proclamation in September 1862, Lincoln held out the prospects of gradual emancipation over an extended period of time, compensation and the removal of blacks to Border State slaveholders convinced that his plan would bring a speedy end to the war by removing the causes of the war: slavery and the Negro. Even as the war drew to a close and it was clear that the Confederacy was running out of time, Lincoln dangled before opponents at the Hampton Roads conference a willingness to raise a tax of some \$400m to compensate slaveholders for the loss of their property.

While he was trying to persuade the Border States to accept his emancipation proposal he used the power of his office to persuade blacks to leave the country. The scheme to establish settlements of African Americans first in Central America and later in the Caribbean was ill conceived, impractical and, to put it mildly, callous. In his meeting with a group of hand-picked African Americans at the White House the president declared: "You and we are different races. We have between us a broader difference than exists between almost any other two races," a difference that has worked to the detriment of both races but especially so to blacks "who suffer very greatly." There seemed little chance that conditions or the relationship between the two races would change for the better in the near future. He dismissed as "extremely selfish" those African Americans who insisted that their future lay in the United States. Rather if "intelligent colored man" would act unselfishly and sacrifice something of their present comfort by settling elsewhere they would set a standard for all newly freed slaves who because of "very poor materials" would otherwise start their new life as free men in America at a distinct disadvantage. (Basler, V, 372-73) The plan met with almost universal condemnation from those it was supposed to benefit. In an open letter to the President, George B. Vashon, the black lawyer and school teacher, dismissed the colonization proposal as unjust to the descendants of those who fought for the establishment and survival of the country, impractical for it would involve the expatriation of one-sixth of the population at the cost of hundreds of millions of dollars in the midst of a war when the Union was strapped for money. (Ripley, V, 153-54)

Without providing much evidence to support his claim, Donald has argued that the colonization scheme was "a shrewd political move, a bit of careful preparation for an eventual emancipation proclamation." (Donald, 368) I am at a loss to understand how a plan to rid the country of all black people can be considered a shrewd prelude to emancipation. Up until mid-1862 Lincoln had never once strayed very far from the belief that colonization was to be the ultimate resolution of the race problem in America. Lerone Bennett in his blistering denunciation of Lincoln sees colonization as a form of ethnic cleansing, "symbolic murder," he labels it elsewhere, a policy that looked to a future when "there would be no blacks in America." (Bennett, 10, 66, 215) One would

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be hard-pressed to refute Bennett's assessment. But the question lingers: why did Lincoln continue to push colonization and why did he reject racial equality? Some have suggested that he was constrained by a set of belief: he did not believe that the country would accept abolition; he did not believe that the South would simply free the slaves; he did not believe that blacks would achieve social and political rights in America; and he did not believe that, if armed, blacks would fight. This strikes me as a rather porous set of explanations that is much too deferential to the man and his memory. Historians are usually very unsympathetic to people in power who claim to be constraint by their beliefs especially when contemporaries continue to suggest alternative approaches. Without suspending judgment, one could reasonably ask the question what if Lincoln had acted differently, what if he had pushed the Border States to accept full emancipation? There is no evidence that they would have resisted and gone over to the Confederacy. More importantly, there were many, black and white, who found his actions indefensible and who constantly suggested alternative approaches to ending the war.

I know this is rather late in the presentation, but let me at this juncture lay out what I think is a useful way of engaging the topic: Lincoln and race. We have explored in some detail what Lincoln said about the issues of slavery, race, emancipation and colonization. We have also had the benefit of the views of some of those who have studied his life and his policies as president. But this conventional approach does little to clarify the controversies that continue to swirl around Lincoln. For the rest of my talk this evening I want to look beyond the borders of the country believing as I do that what happened abroad particularly in Britain could have affected the outcome of the war. That it did not, had little to do with either the actions of the Union or Confederate governments. Put another way, while Lincoln was agonizing over ways to hold on to the Border States, over the reach of the Emancipation Proclamation and all the other issues involving African American in the war, he should have been paying closer attention to the ways his policies were affecting British views of the war. Would we have been having this discussion had the British recognized the Confederacy, as many in and out of government were suggesting, in the fall of 1862?

While Lincoln agonized over what to do, his policies were doing grave damage to the image of his country across the Atlantic. To be sure, there were those in Britain who simply could not stomach the idea that a man from such humble beginnings could rise to the office of president. How, one editor asked, could any country elect as leader "a man unlettered, undignified, unable, uneverything, but uncommon." Only the American system could throw up someone like Lincoln, one Conservative Member of Parliament agreed: no one in Britain "clever as he might be at rail-splitting, at navigating a badge, or at the attorney's desk, would, with no other qualifications, ever become Prime Minister of England, let alone County Court Judge." Even among of the Union's staunchest

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supporters there were some who thought that America selected its presidents, one editor said, “as Catholics do their Pope---for their imbecility.” To British observers, even among the Union’s staunchest supporters, Lincoln’s policies defied logic. Why the reticence to declare emancipation, and when he finally did, why was it so limited in its reach? To many, the Proclamation had little to do with freeing the slaves and everything to do with inciting them to rise up and cut their masters’ throats. When Lincoln told the New York Tribune editor Horace Greeley that his principal concern was to save the Union at all cost, many believed that the President’s had lost his bearings. After all, emancipation and union were irretrievably twined; the two things being right, one editor observed, “the one could not need to be put in abeyance to the other.” One Scottish radical compared the president to “the despots who have rendered hateful the houses of the Hapsburgs and Romanoffs.” Lincoln’s policies during the first year of the war caused friends of the Union considerable grief. His response to Greeley seemed all of a piece with his reversal of Fremont’s and Hunter’s proclamations freeing the slaves in their military districts. But if those approaches to emancipation were unacceptable to the president how did he propose to deal with the issue? His refusal to articulate a clear policy did the Union cause considerable harm and painted the president as a temporizer. Few accepted the proposition that his ability to act was constrained by the Constitution; war demanded boldness something that seemed to be in short supply in Washington.

But if Lincoln’s temporizing on emancipation surprised many observers, his active promotion of colonization defied logic. Even among friendly editors it was dismissed as impractical and chimerical, as infeasible as trying “to send off the Norman, or Saxons, or Celtic elements of English society.” The editor of the London Times, admittedly no friend of the Union, derided the proposal, in a phrase reeking of sarcasm as a “scheme of philanthropic expatriation.” The logic of the president was “the old logic of the inquisitor who stretched his captive upon the rack, and then told him that it was entirely his own fault that he was in pain, because if he would change his religion he would be immediately released.” At a period when much of the success in promoting the cause of the Union fell unofficially to the dozens of African Americans then living and working in Britain, calls for their deportation undermined their legitimacy in the eyes of the British public. Colonization was only the most recent manifestation of the country’s profound antipathy for its black population and a reflection of its unwillingness to confront the issue of slavery and racial discrimination openly. The Rev. J. W. C. Pennington spoke of the anguish: “If the black man had not a well-balanced mind, and a great amount of common sense, he ran the risk of being driven out of his mind by the persecutions to which he was subject.” James Watkins, a fugitive slave, came close to abandoning the cause over colonization. He issued a blistering condemnation of this attempt to deny black Americans “their rights as citizens of America---a right that was conceded to them when their valour and blood was needed, and shed in gaining the independence of that

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Union over which Mr. Lincoln now presides. It was galling, undignified, demeaning and totally impractical. "Men who were born free, and others who have gained their emancipation, toiled and elbowed their way into position, some of ease and comfort, some of affluence, and most of them to respectability, must break up their homes, sever the dearest ties, throw their business to the winds, and go and meet a dark and ominous future on some remote and desolate highway between the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean."

It was clear to Watkins that at the back of the colonization scheme lay a plan to make the country, especially the "unsettled" territories west of the Mississippi River, a white man's country. Lincoln's talk of sacrifice for the greater good of African Americans in a place away from America captured his inability to embrace a future in which blacks would enjoy full social and political equality. Making sense of the full meaning of his life and presidency is made more difficult by the fact that he was cut down at the moment when all eyes were turned to reunification and a new dawn full of hope and promise. In what direction would he have taken the country? There are ominous signs that his conservative instincts were beginning to limit his vision at the time of his assassination. Some see his efforts to reintegrate the defeated South back into the Union as magnanimous. But for black Americans there were some troubling signs. What did he mean by the suggestion that the right to vote would be limited to the most intelligent blacks and slaves who had fought in the armies? It seemed that Fritz, Baptiste and Patrick would continue to enjoy all the rights of citizenship regardless of which side they were on, but for African Americans things would continue to be different.