Review Essay

Abraham Lincoln: The Better Angel of Our Nature
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As the nation approaches the bicentennial celebration of the birth of Abraham Lincoln in 2009, the idea of “getting right with Lincoln” looms large over the planned festivities. But folks cannot get right with Lincoln if they do not square their admiration for the Great Emancipator with the rumors that he shared the prejudices of most white Americans of his day against black people. Can Americans revere a former president who saved their Constitution but may have cared little for Americans of African descent? May we give only two cheers for Lincoln?

Heading into the bicentennial season, there will be more than the usual procession of Lincoln books for popular consumption, and among the more interesting topics still worth exploring is the question of Lincoln and race. Brian R. Dirck, associate professor of history and political science at Anderson University (Indiana), delves into this subject with a collection of original essays by scholars who have made significant contributions to the well-trodden field of Lincoln studies. Lincoln Emancipated: The President and the Politics of Race offers a variety of lenses through which to see and understand Lincoln’s actions towards slavery and black Americans.

Kenneth J. Winkle, professor of history at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and author of The Young Eagle: The Rise of Abraham Lincoln (2001), sets the table for this discussion by chronicling Lincoln’s engagement with the issue of slavery as he rose to political prominence and eventually the presidency. In addition to presenting a useful narrative of Lincoln’s interactions with blacks throughout his life (some periods more consistent than others), Winkle notes early that Lincoln saw something important enough to maintain at the price of leaving slavery alone where it already existed in the states: namely, union, and specifically the self-government that the American union established. He was willing
to support, or at least acquiesce in, second-class citizenship for blacks in Illinois, though he wrote privately to his former roommate Joshua Speed that “I bite my lip and keep quiet” about the oppression suffered by American slaves: “You ought rather to appreciate how much the great body of the Northern people do crucify their feelings” about the continuance of slavery in the American republic. All this was done “in order to maintain their loyalty to the constitution and the Union.” To lose what Lincoln called “the last best, hope of earth” in the attempt to free American slaves would make a mockery of the quest for abolition; after all, what good is freedom without laws to protect it? This is why Lincoln, as much as he hated slavery, never called himself an abolitionist. Even the one speech that could plausibly be interpreted as an endorsement of at least one strain of abolitionism is written with an irony that is lost on most scholars and lay readers even today.

Another useful observation Winkle provides for understanding Lincoln’s approach to the slavery controversy is his early and abiding reverence for the law. That concern for the means of self-government—how consent gets channeled through the institutions of deliberative government— informs what Lincoln did about slavery and how he went about it. He could agree with abolitionists in their praise of the equality principle of the Declaration of Independence, but he did not share their antipathy for a constitution that maintained a union with slaveholders. While abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison turned a blind eye to the consent principle of the Declaration, Lincoln insisted that justice required that any effort to reform existing political practices (like slavery) must find expression through the established channels of government. Lincoln’s prime directive was how to rid the nation of slavery without undermining the nation’s system of self-government.

Winkle rightly notes that the Republican Party gave a “new emphasis on the immorality of slavery,” but more explanation is needed for this development: Namely, what this reflected about the erosion of a national consensus—nay, even a Northern consensus—regarding the natural injustice of slavery. In the wake of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act and its promotion of local popular sovereignty as an attempt to lessen national agitation over slavery, Lincoln made an issue of the humanity

of the Negro and the evil of slavery (where he had mostly kept quiet about it before) precisely because Northern sentiment against slavery—as long as it was the enslavement of blacks—appeared to wane. Lincoln’s famous debates with Stephen Douglas in 1858 highlighted the difficulty facing any candidate for office even in the North, where white supremacy was not the exception but pretty much the rule, especially west of the New England states. Winkle shows that despite Lincoln’s reticence to promote “racial equality” (24), his statements on behalf of the humanity of the Negro and the necessity of putting slavery back on “the course of ultimate extinction” stand in bold and noble relief compared with Douglas’s “campaign of race-baiting” (27).

The late Phillip Paludan, the Naomi B. Lynn Distinguished Chair of Lincoln Studies at the University of Illinois, Springfield, and Lincoln Prize winner for *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln* (1994), devoted much of his recent work to the relationship between Lincoln and black Americans. His essay “Greeley, Colonization, and a ‘Deputation of Negroes’” examines the charge that Lincoln was a racist by looking at three key episodes in the development of Lincoln’s policies regarding blacks: his August 1862 letter to Horace Greeley; support for colonization of free blacks to Africa or Central America; and his publicized “audience to a Committee of colored men at the White House.” Why he chose those three—as opposed to, say, his Emancipation Proclamation, Gettysburg Address, and meetings with Frederick Douglass—isn’t explained. Nevertheless, the “three major documents” do provide fitting material for exploring Lincoln’s sentiments towards the black race in America.

Paludan points out that one must read Lincoln’s comments about policies affecting black Americans, slave or free, in light of his chief political constituency—white Americans. After all, “Lincoln knew that emancipating because slavery hurt black people inspired few followers unless they could also see that ending slavery helped white people” (34). In other words, the alleged racism of Lincoln has to be examined in light of the confirmed racism of most of white America.4

Another worthwhile reminder is that Lincoln’s devotion to the American Union reflected no blind endorsement of the status quo or some vain political nostalgia. Rather, it showed a principled understanding of the federal constitution as an instrument of freedom. Alexander Stephens once said of Lincoln, “The Union, with him, in sentiment rose to the sublimity of a religious mysticism, while his ideas of its structure and formation, in logic, rested upon nothing but the subtilities of a

But Paludan has it right when he argues that “the Union that Lincoln said was the foundation of his policies was a Union where slavery was imperiled. Even without a direct attack on the peculiar institution, Republicans would place slavery in the course of ultimate extinction” (34). Miss this about the meaning of Union for Lincoln, and you miss the significance of his opposition to Stephen Douglas’s popular sovereignty. Lincoln’s opposition sought to prevent American self-government from becoming a crude form of majoritarianism, ignoring the equal rights of humanity and “insisting there is no right principle of action but self-interest.” Moreover, as president, Lincoln strove to explain to the American people, through his ostensible letter to Greeley (and many other public statements), the limits of his authority with regards to slavery and how any action against it must be tied to the larger aim of winning what he considered a war of self-defense. Paludan concludes, “He could not do the right thing unless it was also the constitutional and lawful thing” (35).

As for colonization, whereas the Emancipation Proclamation applied to almost three-quarters of the nation’s slaves, the reach of Lincoln’s colonization proposal was fairly circumscribed. Paludan deftly juxtaposes Lincoln’s endorsement of colonization—as a corollary to emancipation—with his allowance of informal black recruitment and a developing “contraband” policy that for all practical purposes enlisted escaped slaves in the federal war effort. He spent little of what Congress appropriated for colonization, with Congress eventually dropping the program altogether by September 1864. Paludan surmises that despite consistent overtures towards colonization, Lincoln “was allowing blacks an alternative path to take away from slavery, and from colonization itself” (41).

Add to this Paludan’s evenhanded discussion of Lincoln’s meeting with the “Negro Deputies,” which shows Lincoln speaking bluntly but realistically about the pervasive social inequities facing blacks in America, even in the North, and the reader will be hard pressed to conclude differently than Paludan that as “a result of Abraham Lincoln’s efforts, slavery—the foundation of war and American racism—began its death march” (46) and resulted in landmark changes in the American polity, like the Thirteenth Amendment and President Lincoln’s recommendation that blacks be given the franchise in reconstructing states.

Kevin Gutzman, associate professor of history at Western Connecticut

State University, also scrutinizes Lincoln’s colonization proposal, but he interprets it through the lens of Thomas Jefferson’s more pessimistic appraisal of the prospects of a biracial American society. Where some might argue that Lincoln’s colonization scheme was geared towards making emancipation more palatable to nervous white Northerners, Gutzman believes that the plan, like Jefferson’s, reflects “a desire to see the population of European stock occupy the bulk of North America without African intermixture” (47). Gutzman thinks this connection between Jefferson and Lincoln can be demonstrated not by divining “confidential motives” but simply attending to “what they did, wrote, and said as political actors” (49).

He also asserts that Jefferson’s prediction of a race war if mass emancipation were to take place “was only the fruit of his imagination” and a projection of “his own likely resentment onto his chattels” (55), as if it bore no connection to the social and political reality of his day. The reality of white prejudice and black resentment due to American slavery led others, like James Madison and Alexis de Tocqueville, to the same conclusion. While Gutzman does cite the standard proof texts of Jefferson that relate to blacks and slavery, he seems intent on reading them with the most cynical eye, with scant consideration of alternative interpretations of the evidence he produces. If one honestly thought that former slaves could not overcome their desire for vengeance if set free en masse among their former masters, is it imprudent of Jefferson to promote colonization as a means of avoiding a race war and giving the newly established structures of American self-government a greater chance of survival?

Gutzman concludes his section on Jefferson by citing his proposal for a “diffusion” of America’s slave population to the western territories as “the next best thing” to colonization, but without explaining Jefferson’s rationale (62). That reinforces the notion of Jefferson’s crude antipathy to blacks, when Gutzman could have shown that slave diffusion was simply a way to promote emancipation over time in a manner least likely to provoke a race war. As Jefferson wrote to John Holmes, “their diffusion over a greater surface would make them individually happier, and proportionally facilitate the accomplishment of their emancipation, by dividing the burthen on a greater number of coadjutors.” It is hard not to conclude that Gutzman stacks the deck against Jefferson in order to make his case against Lincoln all the easier.

When Gutzman turns to Lincoln as one who held “similar hopes—and for similar reasons” (62), there’s no question where the argument is headed. To that end, he cites the three constitutional amendments Lincoln proposed to Congress in December 1862 as Lincoln’s “vision of the American future”: namely, encouragement of state emancipation (with compensation from the federal government), recognizing the emancipation of those freed “by the chances of the war,” and a federally funded colonization plan (63). Gutzman gives short shrift to the prudence that Lincoln displayed in arguing for the natural rights of blacks in a state where they possessed few civil rights and no political rights. “Lincoln’s public ruminations on slavery, and on the place of free blacks in American society, took him further than tactical necessity (so-called) would have required.” Forgetting the blatant appeals to white bigotry that Stephen Douglas made during their famed debates in 1858, Gutzman blithely asserts that it was Lincoln who “gave voice to most of the classic themes of nineteenth-century racial demagoguery” (67).

Instead of interpreting Lincoln’s many statements on blacks, slavery, and emancipation in light of the waning commitment of Northern whites to the principles of the Declaration of Independence, Gutzman simply claims that there is “no direct evidence” (67) of Lincoln applying prudence to the highly contentious and divisive issue of black slavery in America. He is incorrect to conclude that Lincoln had “no intention of ever conceding the equality of black citizens” and assumed “they must always be subordinated” (68). Lincoln was quite careful to say, “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” (emphasis mine). He did leave open the possibility of favoring equality in his last public address, on April 11, 1865. Gutzman studiously avoids any mention of what Lincoln’s rival Douglas declared right from the start of their debates: “I believe this government was made on the white basis. I believe it was made by white men, for the benefit of white men and their posterity for ever, and I am in favor of confining citizenship to white men, men of European birth and descent, instead of conferring it upon negroes, Indians and other inferior races.” If Gutzman thinks Lincoln played the race card in these debates, Douglas dealt an entire deck!

In the end Gutzman crudely explicates the writings of both Jefferson and Lincoln, and fails to establish a firm connection between their re-

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spective colonization proposals and rationales. While there is evidence to support Gutzman’s title, “Abraham Lincoln, Jeffersonian,” he would have done better to show that what impressed Lincoln about Jefferson was his grasp of “the definitions and axioms of free society.” For Lincoln, Jefferson “had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and despotism.”

In “The Difficulties of Understanding Abe: Lincoln’s Reconciliation of Racial Inequality and Natural Rights,” James Leiker attempts to show how Lincoln could accept the prevailing prejudices of his day and still argue for the protection of the natural rights of blacks. Like Gutzman, he interprets Lincoln as a white supremacist of sorts whose concerns for the black man derived almost entirely from his devotion to the political prosperity of his own race: “He was far-seeing enough to realize that the same justifications for slavery that subjugated blacks could in time be applied to certain whites” (87). That last point seems promising enough, insofar as it acknowledges that any serious political reform in the 1850s must find a way to enlist the political might of the majority-white population on behalf of principles of right that apply to all men.

Alas, the title of Leiker’s essay proves too true for his own examination of Lincoln’s political principles and practices. In an effort to answer modern-day critics of what he calls “the myth of the ‘Great Emancipator’” (97), Leiker gives in too readily to today’s Lincoln detractors in hopes of finding “a more human Lincoln,” suggesting that the real Abraham Lincoln could not possibly have transcended the prejudices of his day because we all know that everyone is “the product of” their own time. How he squares this with the diversity of opinion not only in Lincoln’s day but in our own, Leiker does not say. After all, as was pointed out by a once obscure political philosophy professor, “The mere fact that we can raise the question of the worth of the idea of our society shows that there is something in man that is not altogether in slavery to his society.” It was precisely that ability of Lincoln’s to step back from what his society was saying and doing about the future of slavery in America, and to consider the most prudent course to pursue, that enabled him to present alternatives

10. To Henry L. Pierce and Others, April 6, 1859, ibid., 3:375, 376.
to the nation in a way that restored freedom as a goal of the regime worthy of defending, if even from domestic enemies.

The essay also falters by presenting a number of readily contestable claims that raise sufficient questions to undermine Leiker’s argument: “Lincoln was a product of his time” (74); “Lincoln clearly believed in black inferiority” (77); “he occasionally used derogatory terms in speeches with no direct political motive” (81); “like the Constitution, the Declaration was a living document to be reinterpreted by each generation” (88); and “the establishment of the United States constituted a legal contract between slaveowning and nonslaveowning states” (88).

Perhaps the most objectionable of those points is the notion that in accepting “the slave’s humanity,” Lincoln took “the same leap of faith as any abolitionist in reaching a conclusion that was more spiritual and instinctual than empirical and philosophical” (93). Since when does Lincoln or any other person need to conclude that “all men are created equal” as the result of a philosophy? Belief in the natural rights of black slaves is no more a leap of faith than accepting the self-evident claims of the Declaration of Independence! One would think that conclusion would be the most logical point to make in an essay devoted to reconciling racial inequality and natural rights.

When Lincoln addressed “the humanity of the slave” in response to Stephen Douglas’s Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, he observed that when Southern whites freed their black slaves, “something” induced them to do so: “Is there any mistaking it? In all these cases it is your sense of justice, and human sympathy, continually telling you, that the poor negro has some natural right to himself—that those who deny it, and make mere merchandise of him, deserve kickings, contempt and death.” Lincoln highlighted freedom’s tug on the nation’s soul, trusting politically that “right makes might,” and appealing, as he would say later, to “the better angels of our nature.”

Brian Dirck, the editor of this volume and author of two previous books on Lincoln, explores Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation in light of the threat of a Supreme Court rejection. After airing criticisms of the proclamation, as well as a few justifications for its timing and wording (e.g., it contained “no ringing Lincolnian declarations of freedom and liberty” [101]), Dirck highlights the legal context of the war-time decree: “It would have been strange had this lifelong at-

torney failed to assess the legal ramifications of his actions and the perspective of the nation’s highest legal institution” (104). He reminds us that Chief Justice Roger B. Taney’s decision in the notorious Dred Scott case (1857) was still good law at the war’s outset, and while he remained on the Court, threatened to doom any policy of war-time emancipation. Given Taney’s “very expansive reading of the Fifth Amendment,” especially its guarantee of due process, property in slaves was held to be inviolable by the federal government. Add to this precedent Taney’s 1861 circuit court ruling in Ex parte Merryman, and Lincoln knew in no uncertain terms “that he faced a hostile Supreme Court” (107).

Tracing Lincoln’s appointment of three Supreme Court justices, two of whom were not guaranteed to side with Lincoln’s wartime use of the executive powers, Dirck compounds Lincoln’s difficulties in enforcing emancipation if the high court were to hear from a dispossessed slave-owner. Therefore he speculates that Lincoln may have proposed “compensated emancipation and the exclusion of border state and occupied Americans in the Emancipation Proclamation” as something of a “fallback position” if the proclamation were declared unconstitutional (113, 115). While not a foolproof plan to secure freedom for the escaped slaves of the South, Dirck offers this rationale to counter Lerone Bennett’s claims that Lincoln was disingenuous in proclaiming freedom to slaves at the same time he was requesting funding from Congress to colonize any willing freedmen. By wording the proclamation to exclude slave-owners from states still loyal to the Union, Lincoln “removed the only realistic plaintiffs” (116), thereby preventing in all likelihood any test case from making its way to the Taney Court.

Dirck’s exploration of the likely legal considerations tumbling through Lincoln’s mind in 1862 supplements the all-important political and constitutional considerations that informed the text and timing of the Proclamation. Lincoln consistently argued that any action he took with regards to slavery would derive from his constitutional obligations to preserve the union, which eventually produced a proclamation justified “as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion.”13 Rejecting military necessity, Lincoln explained, “Would I not thus give up all footing upon constitution or law? Would I not thus be in the boundless field of absolutism?”14

The Emancipation Proclamation followed a year filled with emanci-

patory milestones that set the stage for what Lincoln would call “the central act of my administration, and the great event of the nineteenth century.” On April 16, 1862, Lincoln signed a law abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia. On June 19, Congress banned slavery from all federal territories, and followed with a Second Confiscation Act on July 16, which provided freedom for slaves who had sought refuge behind Union lines. When Lincoln replied on August 22 (on the front page of the New York Times) to Horace Greeley’s “Prayer of Twenty Millions” editorial, explaining how he viewed the freeing of slaves in the context of saving the Union, the ink on his draft of the preliminary emancipation proclamation had been dry for over a month. In fact, he had been contemplating this move for several months, and had cultivated public opinion throughout the year to smooth its reception. Simply put, Abraham Lincoln earned his reputation as the Great Emancipator by reminding the public of the necessary connection between constitutional means and ends.

Michael Vorenberg, author of Final Freedom: The Civil War, the Abolition of Slavery, and the Thirteenth Amendment (2001), approaches his assessment of Lincoln’s emancipation bona fides by looking at his post-emancipation proposals for colonization, education, and restitution for former slaves. The key to what Vorenberg considers Lincoln’s “evolution as a thinker about race” (119) is the prospect for education following the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln saw reconstruction in Louisiana as a testing ground for the education of blacks, and discussed it privately and eventually publicly. Moreover, by reflecting on his own rise from poverty and ignorance, and getting to know notable black personages like Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Martin Delany, and even his wife’s seamstress Elizabeth Keckley, Lincoln spoke less and less of colonization in hopes that Americans black and white would experience “a new birth of freedom.”

Curiously, Vorenberg takes issue with Lincoln’s efforts on behalf of black education because it implied that whites of his day were not deficient in a fundamental respect: namely, their need “to be educated for black freedom.” While he credits Lincoln for a second inaugural address that counted the cost of “war and mass death as payment for slavery,” he faults Lincoln for not saying or doing more explicitly “to educate whites for a biracial society” (129). Apparently Vorenberg has

read many of Lincoln’s speeches and letters, delivered throughout an adult lifetime in the public eye, and missed his clear and consistent intention to educate his primarily white audience. Is it not safe to say that any education today, or any future day, that aims to prepare a people “to learn to live in harmony with one another” would include extensive readings in the Lincoln oeuvre? As Lincoln put it in his first debate with Stephen Douglas, “In this and like communities, public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. Consequently he who moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed.”

To ask that Lincoln make a biracial society the focus of his speeches during his presidency, let alone the highly contentious antebellum years of the 1840s and 50s, is to ignore the immense groundwork Lincoln had to lay even to discuss the mere restriction of slavery from federal territories. Recall that Lincoln, more than four score years after the Declaration of Independence, had to compare “hogs and negroes” in order to demonstrate what even Southerners in his day knew in their bones: namely, “their consciousness that, after all, there is humanity in the negro.” To be sure, Lincoln saw sufficient white prejudice North and South of the Mason-Dixon line that made a biracial society a tall order in the near future. However, the arguments he marshaled on behalf of the natural rights of all men remain the surest ground for any education, then or now, “about what it means to live in a pluralistic society” (129).

Speaking of diversity, Dennis Boman’s essay, “All Politics Are Local: Emancipation in Missouri,” illustrates how the Union war effort in a pivotal border state was hampered by a war within the war. To speak of conservatives, moderates, and radicals would give only an inkling of the different opinions expressed and actions taken by Missouri citizens as the war progressed. Boman shows that the closer one looks at the prosecution of the vast war effort by Lincoln, the more astounded one becomes at how the president managed it all. The fight was not just to preserve the Union from rebellious Southerners, but to engage the American citizenry—civilian and military—on disparate fronts personally, rhetorically, and politically. With an eye towards the progress of emancipation in Missouri, initiated by fits and starts by both the

federal and state government, Lincoln had to negotiate circumstances and personalities—in a word, contingencies—that forecast no certain future for the continued union of the American states. By chronicling Lincoln’s actions in Missouri alongside those of key politicians and constituencies, and resisting a judgment of those actions in light of how events turned out, Boman helps one to form a more judicious estimate of Lincoln’s statesmanship.

In trying to make sense of Lincoln as an emancipator, this volume cannot help but grapple with the fundamental tension that Harry V. Jaffa identified as the driving force of American politics: namely, the attempt to secure the equal rights of humanity through the consent of the governed.19 Perhaps the grandest of American political ironies is that the nation was never so free in its thinking as when she was surrounded by slaves. But by 1855, Lincoln would write, “On the question of liberty, as a principle, we are not what we have been.”20 Lincoln spent the rest of his public life trying to return his countrymen to the principle of human equality as the foundation of its self-governing way of life.

This collection of essays lives up to its title billing, rendering for most of its contributors an “emancipated” Lincoln who, as the foreword by Allen Guelzo puts it, not only possessed “superior moral insights” but also was “noticeably free from any form of racial malevolence” (vii–viii, xii). As the bicentennial of his birth approaches, we do well to see how we can “live the legacy” that Lincoln bequeathed us.21

19. Harry V. Jaffa, Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates (1973; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 374: “And we deny that the peculiarly American tension, arising from recognition of the demands of equality on the one hand and the practical denial of some of those demands on the other, is in any just sense a morbid condition. It is, on the contrary, the typical condition in which political justice must be sought.”

20. To George Robertson, August 15, 1855, Collected Works, 2:318.