Review Essay

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The late George M. Fredrickson’s 2006 lectures for the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University have been published by Harvard University Press under the title Big Enough to Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race. The title derives from a comment made by Du Bois in 1922 regarding Lincoln. He said that Lincoln as president was “big enough to be inconsistent—cruel, merciful; peace-loving, a fighter; despising Negroes and letting them fight and vote; protecting slavery and freeing slaves.”

This small volume is an attempt to focus on the issue of Lincoln’s personal views on race. Frederickson sees his own position on the matter as a middle way between two extremes of interpretation. On one side he places hagiographic works on Lincoln that downplay any racist views he may have had. Frederickson uses two recent works, Allen C. Guelzo’s Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and Richard Striner’s Father Abraham: Lincoln’s Relentless Struggle to End Slavery, as the best examples of this viewpoint. On the other side—those who see a deeply racist Lincoln—he places two other recent works, Lerone Bennett Jr.’s Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln’s White Dream and Michael Lind’s What Lincoln Believed: The Values and Convictions of America’s Greatest President. While Fredrickson throughout the book seems more sympathetic to the Bennett/Lind point of view, he lays out his own position in between the two schools of thought by explaining, “I would add there is also a third possibility: Lincoln’s attitude toward blacks and his belief about race may have changed significantly during the war years. He may have evolved from being a racial separationist into

1. Du Bois as quoted in Fredrickson, Big Enough to Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race, 2–3.
2. Fredrickson, Big Enough, 11–12.
someone who viewed African Americans as potentially equal citizens of a color-blind democracy.”

It is thus early on that Fredrickson stumbles. Fredrickson is not really offering a novel view of Lincoln, but rather one that is quite common among Lincoln students. In the standard reference work on Lincoln, Mark E. Neely Jr. made the same point more than a quarter of a century ago. Lincoln’s change and growth in the area of race has been a staple of Lincoln biography.

Fredrickson may also be setting up strawmen when discussing Guelzo’s work in particular. On Lincoln’s abandonment of the policy of colonization of freed blacks outside the United States, Fredrickson concludes, “Why did Lincoln change his mind about the desirability of a government-sponsored and subsidized emigration of black Americans? An obvious reason was . . . the dismal failure of the Chiriqui and Haiti projects. But the change may also have reflected a transformation of Lincoln’s basic attitude towards blacks and his conception of their future in American society.” Is this really any different though from what Guelzo writes about the failed colonies in the Caribbean and Lincoln’s changing view of colonization in *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation*? He makes essentially the same points. Guelzo and Fredrickson both stress the silence of Lincoln on the subject of colonization after the failed attempt at colonies. Both writers, too, emphasize the positive effect of the valor of black soldiers on Lincoln’s view of the racial future of America. So are they as far apart as Fredrickson maintains? Guelzo, while an admirer of Lincoln, doesn’t attempt to hide or explain away all of Lincoln’s statements on race.

Unfortunately, Fredrickson treats some of Lerone Bennett’s writings with more respect than they deserve. One example will suffice. Bennett makes the absurd statement, “We can say that the ‘great emancipator’ was one of the major supporters of slavery in the United States for at least fifty-four of his fifty-six years.” The reality is that had Lincoln wished to preserve the Union and perpetuate slavery, he could have done so very effectively as president-elect. All he had to do was abandon the platform he was elected on that called for the nonexpansion of slavery. Such a move by him would

3. Ibid., 28.
have placated the Upper South, isolated the cotton states of the Deep South, and guaranteed slavery’s future. Why Bennett thinks Lincoln did not do this obvious thing, which his main cabinet member William Seward was urging him to do, is unclear. Thus, by itself, Lincoln’s refusal to compromise on the extension of slavery in early 1861 refutes Bennett’s main point.

It would have been helpful, too, for the reader in evaluating what Bennett states on Lincoln and race if Fredrickson took Bennett to task for Bennett’s own inconsistencies on race. Bennett’s actions after his book was published can only be described as disgraceful. At a supposed attempt at dialogue with Lincoln scholars at the Schaumburg Library in Harlem, Bennett attacked Lincoln in the harshest terms and then sat quietly and did not contradict those in the audience who, in addition to skewering Lincoln, engaged in vile anti-Semitic tirades as Jewish Lincoln historians sat on the panel. Unfortunately, this performance was shown nationally on c-span. Bennett’s work appears less as a serious attempt to come to truth about racial issues in American history than as a cynical tirade against humanity.

A cause of most of the major interpretive pitfalls that Fredrickson succumbs to is the almost total lack of the consideration of the political environment in which Lincoln operated. Too often Fredrickson treats statements Lincoln made about race in isolation from their larger political context. Don E. Fehrenbacher, in an essay on Lincoln’s racial views, stressed the dangers of doing that when he stated, “Words uttered in a context of such pressure may be less than reliable as indications of a man’s lifetime attitude.”

This can be seen most clearly in Fredrickson’s use of something said by Lincoln in his debate with Stephen Douglas at Charleston. Lincoln told the crowd, “I do not understand there is any place where an alteration of the social and political relations of the negro and the white man can be made except in the State Legislature—not in the Congress of the United States.” Fredrickson uses this quote twice to show that Lincoln supported or would have supported black codes against free slaves in the states. In reality, by removing the quote from what goes before, the reader loses how politics affected what Lincoln said.

The quote is really a classic example of Lincoln using his political skills against Douglas. Douglas played the race card again and again in the debates. He even crudely played on sexual fears of many Illinois voters about marriage between the races. Lincoln, using the tool of

10. Fredrickson, Big Enough, 74, 199.
irony and reversal, was suggesting that if Douglas really feared intermarriage the place for him to be was not in the Senate but instead the Illinois state legislature. The relevant part left out by Fredrickson is what immediate follows the quote he uses. Lincoln continues, “... as I do not really apprehend the approach of any such thing myself, and as Judge Douglas seems to be in constant horror that some such danger is rapidly approaching, I propose as the best means to prevent it that the Judge be kept at home and placed in the State Legislature to fight the measure.”

To take this humorous attack on Douglas as evidence that Lincoln would have supported Andrew Johnson’s Reconstruction policies is too much of a stretch.

The ironic political nature of Lincoln’s comments on “miscegenation” in his Springfield Dred Scott speech are also not fully appreciated by Fredrickson. While Fredrickson admits that Lincoln was trying to “turn” the issue against Douglas, he gives undue importance to Lincoln’s stating that “If white and black people never get together in Kansas, they will never mix blood in Kansas.” Yet again a fuller reading would show that instead of Lincoln stating a deeply held belief, he was gleefully using Stephen Douglas’s own words and ideas against him. By showing that most biracial births were in slave states, Douglas’s own constant harping on the theme should have led him to an antislavery position. As Lincoln continues after the above quote: “It is worthy of note too, that among the free states those which make the colored man the nearest to equal the white, have, proportionally the fewest mulattoes the least of amalgamation. . . . These statistics show that slavery is the greatest source of amalgamation; and next to it, not the elevation, but the degeneration of the free blacks. Yet Judge Douglas dreads the slightest restraints on the spread of slavery, and the slightest human recognition of the negro, as tending horribly to amalgamation.”

Fredrickson also misjudges the political realities of Illinois when he dismisses Lincoln statement on race in his Chicago speech in the 1858 campaign. Lincoln closed his speech with “let us discard all this quibbling about this man and the other man—this race and that race being inferior, and therefore they must be placed in an inferior position—discarding our standard that we have left us. Let

us discard all these things, and unite as one people throughout this land, until we shall once more stand up declaring that all men are created equal.”\textsuperscript{14} Of this quote Fredrickson states, “it seems more likely that Lincoln was pandering to the quasi-abolitionists who would be part of an audience in Chicago than that he was pretending to be a white supremacist in the rest of the state.” Fredrickson thus thinks the statements Lincoln made in Charleston and elsewhere about not being in favor of black social equality probably better reflected his real thoughts.\textsuperscript{15} In fact Fredrickson has it completely backwards. Lincoln had no need to pander to his audience in northern Illinois. He knew he was going to carry the state legislative districts there by wide margins. The political realities dictated that he make his racially insensitive (and justifiably condemned) statement in Charleston, a heavily anti-black part of central Illinois. In short, if Lincoln did have a motive to prevaricate, it was in his more racially degrading statements rather than his more egalitarian ones that got him into trouble time and time again with his audience.\textsuperscript{16}

On the subject of Reconstruction, Fredrickson rightly claims that while it is possible that Lincoln would have followed Johnson’s hands-off Reconstruction policy, it is more likely that he wouldn’t have. Fredrickson states, “To see blacks who had served the Union brutally mistreated by Southern whites would presumably have evoked a strong emotional reaction in Lincoln and would possibly have led to forceful intervention.”\textsuperscript{17} As Eric Foner has reminded us in his magisterial work on Reconstruction, the former Confederacy practiced what can be justly described as state-sponsored terrorism against the former slaves.\textsuperscript{18} It is hard to picture Lincoln allowing former black federal soldiers to be killed with impunity.

However, by again ignoring the political, Fredrickson neglects the best argument that Lincoln would have been extremely unlikely to

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  \item \textsuperscript{14} Abraham Lincoln, “Speech at Chicago, Illinois,” July 10, 1858, Ibid., 2:501.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Fredrickson, Big Enough, 81–82.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} See Allen C. Guelzo, Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates that Defined America (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 192–93.; A fascinating corollary to Lincoln’s legal career has recently been put forward by a Lincoln student. Lincoln was often said to give away parts of his case to his opponents. In reality these were only the parts he could never keep. Lincoln, in giving away much of the racial equality issue, was giving away what he couldn’t keep anyway and focusing on what he could win—the non-extension of slavery. See Sarah Jane Ankeney, “Racism or Trial Method,” Lincoln Herald 110 (Spring 2008): 39–46.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Fredrickson, Big Enough, 125.
\end{itemize}
have followed Johnson’s policies. Since Johnson was an old Jacksonian Democrat, he had no real interest in the survival and long-term health of the Republican Party.\(^{19}\) Lincoln, who by all accounts knew how to count electoral votes,\(^{20}\) would have surely seen as others did that the best way to insure defeat of the Democratic Party was to break up the solid South by insuring black votes in states like South Carolina and Mississippi that had majority black populations. In order to do this Lincoln would have had to intervene with federal power in the South.

There are some very germane Lincoln documents that Fredrickson doesn’t look at which shed more light on the racial issue than his public comments. For instance, Lincoln wrote at one point to himself, “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.”\(^{21}\) Here, Lincoln is struggling with the logical absurdities and contradictions on the racial aspects of slavery, yet puzzlingly, Fredrickson omits this document.

It is fair to say that throughout the book Fredrickson sees Lincoln’s reverence for the Constitution as an impediment to any antislavery activism.\(^{22}\) In that sense Lincoln falls behind William Lloyd Garrison and others who saw the Constitution itself as the problem. But perhaps this misses a larger point. It can be argued that Lincoln’s reverence of the Union and Constitution and his legalism made him as effective as he was in ending slavery. As one Lincoln scholar has said, “Without Lincoln’s unmatched ability to integrate egalitarian ends and constitutional means he could not have enlisted the range of supporters and soldiers necessary for victory.”\(^{23}\) If history has shown anything, even the noblest egalitarian causes without firm foundations of law and tradition can turn into brutal nightmares. Lincoln

could, of course, have looked at the French Revolution, yet we have even greater examples than he had. The twentieth century has given us a range of egalitarian utopias gone bad, from the killing fields of Cambodia to the brutal purges of the Soviet Union. For all his strength of character and rage at the horrors of slavery, would John Brown’s plan for the overthrow of the government, if put fully into practice, have ended slavery more permanently and with less black casualties than Lincoln’s? The ultimate tragedy for generations of slaves who were born into a life of misery was that there was no quick and easy solution as long as the South itself, the only entity that had the power to end slavery immediately without bloodshed, thought it had an absolute right to slavery.

The subject of Lincoln and race is fraught with danger, and Fre- drickson himself recognizes this when he writes of how “the historian becomes dependent on institution and a sense of how a particular utterance or action fits into a larger pattern.” The brevity of this book also works against Fredrickson. In a longer setting he could have brought his considerable experience in examining all the nuances of race into play. The lecture format of the book hurts him here.

It is not as if there is no food for thought in this book. Fredrickson makes a strong case that colonization was not a ploy to get the general population to accept emancipation more readily by assuming that freed slaves would have to leave the country. Other Lincoln scholars have made that point. Instead, Fredrickson sees colonization and emancipation going hand in hand. Fredrickson is also on solid ground by arguing that Lincoln’s emphasis on colonization had the unfortunate negative effect of increasing emphasis on the idea that blacks and whites could not live together.

But in the larger sense, isn’t there an unwarranted triumphalism in books of this type that attempt to put Lincoln in the dock on race? Is it really Lincoln who is required to be so “big” to be inconsistent on the subject of race? Or is it that underneath all of our hubris, modern-day America and the rest of the world still are struggling with the issue of race despite many positive steps forward. A quick survey of our supposedly enlightened early twenty-first century will show mass inconsistencies on race. For example, some of the states in northern New England such as Vermont and Maine would consider themselves the most “progressive” on race, yet census figures show they are the

27. Ibid., 111.
least racially diverse areas in the country. Likewise, would a racially enlightened system of education feel the need to engage in the “ethnic cheerleading” that passes for multicultural education in so many schools? Would supposedly racially tolerant countries in Scandinavia have such large anti-immigrant political parties? Or would the tribal and sectarian killings in places like Rwanda and Iraq be so common? Judged from this viewpoint, Abraham Lincoln’s views on race seem all the more impressively enlightened compared to not only his contemporaries but to many in our flawed world today. In that sense Fredrickson’s *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race*, while interesting and at times thought-provoking, is ultimately misguided.