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On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation changed the nature of the Civil War. With a signature, Lincoln coupled freedom with the cause of national integrity. This document would, during his lifetime, elicit both praise and condemnation. By putting emancipation on the table, Lincoln engendered a revolutionary new direction in a war for union. He well understood that he would be remembered for this act. And he was correct. For decades following his death, his image as Great Emancipator vied for the top position among the several Lincoln traditions.

Harold Holzer observes in *Emancipating Lincoln: The Proclamation in Text, Context, and Memory* that the sixteenth president, once deified for his proclamation, has fallen from such elevated graces. Historians, as they are wont to do, have taken to task the president’s actions resulting in the proclamation, and a broad historiography now challenges an old image, one that is exemplified in the Freedman’s Memorial at Lincoln Park in Washington, D.C. The statue, erected in 1876 and designed by famed sculptor Thomas Ball, reflects the common perception of Lincoln in the latter quarter of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. Lincoln in bronze lifts his outstretched hand to a former slave—kneeling, shackles broken, and rising before his emancipator in a subservient fashion. But despite the sentiment of the era, dedication keynote speaker Frederick Douglass, who referred to Lincoln as the “white man’s president,” made mention of the two figures’ peculiar juxtaposition. The statue showed the “Negro on his knees when a more manly attitude would have been indicative of freedom.” This attitude, although not recorded by the local press in 1876, was not lost on future historians such as Kirk Savage, who in 1997 quite famously noted the supplicant posture of the memorial’s black figure and derided the sculpture as perpetuating racist ideology.

Such memorials reflecting a particular commemorative pattern can tell us a great deal about what people think of Lincoln and his
emancipator title, but what can we say of Lincoln himself? Scholars have gone to great lengths to demystify the man—to strip away legend and myth—and to understand Lincoln as a nineteenth-century white politician contending with national crisis and ultimately civil war; as a pragmatist; and as a president intent on suppressing rebellion and overseeing reunion. Many of those efforts have yielded an understanding of the Emancipation Proclamation not as a great progressive document but as a bland executive order leaving no room for the plight of those enslaved. In that light, some have come to understand Lincoln as plotting and calculating—as a man in tune with the racist proclivities of the nineteenth century who did not care for slavery but cared less for black people. In troubling ways, Lincoln appears in recent assertions as less of a liberator and more of an obstructionist.

To be sure his document was indeed a war measure, framed with the intention of depriving rebels of their means to wage war and hastening the end of the civil strife, begging modern scholars in some circles to question the “greatness” of Lincoln’s proclamation. Although scholars’ assessments of emancipation are apparently never ending, one must carefully consider where to situate the avalanche of what Holzer deems “oversimplified visions of Lincoln’s most important act.” But, as Holzer charges, Lincoln is largely responsible for the mess. Those among us, he claims, who “ill-advisedly apply twenty-first century mores to a nineteenth-century man are not the only culprits who have made it difficult to see the proclamation within the context of its own time. Lincoln himself is to blame.”

Holzer first examines Lincoln’s strategies shortly before and during what he calls the “interregnum period” between the reading of a first draft of the proclamation to his cabinet on July 22, 1862, and the issuing of a public statement on September 22 the same year. What did Lincoln have to contend with in order to render plausible such a revolutionary proclamation? Plenty of those close to the president knew that Lincoln was planning something in terms of emancipation. He had confided in a number of people, including Hannibal Hamlin, Winfield Scott, George McClellan, and William Seward, during the months leading up to the interregnum period and was met with mixed response. Members of his cabinet concluded that he would face a storm of discontent, including the question of the document’s constitutional legality and public recalcitrance. The crux of Holzer’s analysis illustrates Lincoln’s political cunning, intentional obfuscation, and deliberate planting of information in order to finesse the notion of emancipation for an uneasy citizenry. His conclusions ultimately suggest that we need not doubt Lincoln’s sincerity as a liberator.
Next Holzer explores the wording of the proclamation. A document bereft of Lincoln’s vaulted writing style—what many have come to expect from an author known for eloquence—the Emancipation Proclamation caused a stir in its own time and has since undergone something of a remarkable trajectory. Do his letters and speeches explaining the document qualify as the poetic accompaniment to the prose with which he first announced the proclamation? What about the speeches and writings that followed? Lincoln himself was certainly aware of the document’s significance noting, “If my name ever goes into history is will be for this act, and my whole soul is in it.” Lovers of freedom throughout the North, Holzer explains, rang in 1863 with expressions of religious fervor: gathering in churches, waiting and praying for the midnight hour to usher in liberty to all the inhabitants of a divided America.” But while the proclamation may have had a way of inspiring conflicted responses, it was the import of the document rather than the words that moved Lincoln’s followers. In this case a war measure—written with the intention to disarm radicals on the right and left and simultaneously placate border state rumblings—needed no soaring rhetorical flourishes. In time the antislavery movement dismissed the tepid prose and celebrated the momentous occasion, elevating the document to the status of American scripture. The poetry made possible by the proclamation—the Gettysburg Address, the Second Inaugural—those came later.

Finally, Holzer tackles a theme that has become something of a cottage industry in Civil War scholarship: memory studies and the national image of Lincoln the emancipator. Here he offers some surprising conclusions, suggesting that Lincoln’s image as emancipator was longer coming than we might have previously imagined. Artists at first may have had trouble visually interpreting Lincoln’s flat, uninspiring words, particularly in the immediate months and years after January 1, 1863, when the effect of emancipation remained uncertain. Artists’ renderings of Lincoln the emancipator flourished after his death and firmly established the tradition by 1900. But the great emancipator image had competition in the early decades of the twentieth century, when artists’ depictions of Lincoln the orator or Lincoln the savior of the Union received equal attention, sometimes trumping emancipationist imagery. By the end of the century, visions of Lincoln the emancipator were under attack by artists who were offering social critique by portraying the unfulfilled promises of freedom.

Harold Holzer’s contributions to Lincoln scholarship, consisting of dozens of authored, coauthored, and edited collections as well
as hundreds of articles, are welcome additions to the thousands of studies on the sixteenth president. Lincoln’s speeches, public life, and administration are but a few of the many themes in Holzer’s collected works. His words and analyses are at once compelling and engaging, and *Emancipating Lincoln* is no exception. In this work the reader comes away with an assessment of the document, rather than emancipation itself.

Discussion of emancipation often turns to addressing the question, Who freed the slaves? This is a well-worn practice in public forums, on conference panels, and in scholarly discourse. Recently, prominent historians such as Barbara J. Fields, relying on the oft-quoted words of Lincoln himself, reminded her readers that the president would have saved the Union without “freeing any slave.” Fields agrees that the proclamation was significant but asserts that slaves provided the impetus for such a policy through self-emancipation. Proclamation or not, no one could have stopped this sweeping tide of freedom. In response, James M. McPherson noted that Lincoln made it abundantly clear that a man governing another man was despotism, that the relation of master and slave was a violation of the principle of equality embedded in the founding documents, and that the slave system undermined the principles of progress. The proclamation was a step in slavery’s extinction. Concerning the sweeping tide, McPherson notes that without a war, and thus a war measure, emancipation on such a scale was unlikely. Strangely, neither historian gives much credit to the Union army, a mobile, armed body that in many cases provided the means for slaves’ escape to freedom.

*Emancipating Lincoln* does not become embroiled in that debate, which has grown somewhat stale. Rather, engaging the words of the document alongside the contexts within which they were written, Holzer has added a new strand of analysis to the study of emancipation broadly defined. As the author of this new strand, he deftly handles both public opinion and positions within Lincoln’s inner circle in ways that refrain from falling into analytical traps set by overly simplistic assessments of the document or even of emancipation itself. Within this realm of historical inquiry, Holzer’s skills as a Lincoln scholar shine through. It is his engagement with the visual imagery and the exchange between history and memory that falls a bit short.

Within the context of historical memory, Holzer follows some familiar patterns. He examines a wide array of images spanning nearly 150 years and connects the emancipation moment(s) with a number of historical events and people of historical significance. Holzer suggests, following the paths of historical memory scholars before him,
that vestiges of the past are shaped by today’s predilections. And thus, through Lincoln and his proclamation, for better or worse, individuals can draw on a useful history. These ideas regarding individuals’ selectivity in crafting traditions (especially in public) remain extremely influential and are prone to vary depending on political, social, and cultural currents.

Without question, historical memories can be a reflection of the times in which they occur. But such examinations may have run their course. Coupling a recognizable image (or person, or monument, or anything else) from the past with any later period or time, event, or social movement will yield conclusions that are generally the same: memories become abstract generalizations pertaining to any particular moment. As Pierre Nora wrote in 1984, “Memory always belongs to our time and forms a lived bond with the eternal present.” But what was true in 1984 begs revision. The weakness of memory studies, as historians Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche note, is the “tendency to conceive of memory as an entity of symbols without actions, of culture without society.” If memories indeed shape the cultures around them, as they very well must, then historians have an open door to reexamine memories as movements, as contestations creating cultural shifts—not necessarily the other way around. Historical memories are so much more than reflections of the present.

This divergent outlook on the state of memory studies notwithstanding, Holzer’s book is a very valuable contribution to Lincoln scholarship. It is a much-needed new tack toward understanding the difficulties of announcing a revolution to an uneasy public. With care and the finesse of a skilled politician, Lincoln pulled it off. Harold Holzer convincingly shows us how he managed to do so.