Review Essay

From Latin America to the Battle of the Crater

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On August 27, 1858, U.S. Senate candidates Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas met at Freeport, Illinois, in the second of their seven debates. In his opening remarks Lincoln asked his opponent whether, in light of the previous year’s Dred Scott decision, residents of a federal territory could exclude slavery from within its borders. Douglas replied that regardless of the 1857 ruling, “slavery cannot exist a day or an hour anywhere, unless it is supported by local police regulations.” Douglas’s attempted reconciliation of the Dred Scott ruling with his theory of popular sovereignty became known as the “Freeport Doctrine”—a doctrine that for many students of history neatly encapsulates the clash between Lincoln and Douglas in 1858.¹

Yet Robert E. May contends in his Slavery, Race, and Conquest in the Tropics: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Future of Latin America that there was another largely forgotten context to the Freeport debate: U.S. expansion into Latin America and the extension of slavery. At Freeport, Douglas argued that American “growth and progress” necessitated the extension of the nation’s boundaries, including southward to the “islands of the ocean” (a reference to Cuba); inhabitants of these acquisitions would use the “Nebraska bill” to decide the slavery question for themselves. Lincoln implicitly rejected any expansion to the south by asserting that while “honest” acquisition of territory was acceptable, any gains that exacerbated “the slavery question among ourselves” was not. May contends that his book “is the first to explore the


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rivals’ dramatically different ideas about the future of Latin America and why their competing visions help explain not only their bitter feud over slavery in the U.S. West but also the breakdown of North-South comity that led to the Civil War” (2).

According to May, a professor emeritus at Purdue University, Douglas was the proud heir of the expansionist tendencies of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson. An advocate of the “re-annexation” of Texas during his first congressional term, he later supported the “All of Mexico” movement, which advocated annexing all of Mexico’s territory after the Mexican War. Following the war, Douglas’s expansionist gaze extended to Cuba and Central America; by 1852 supporters of the nationalistic and pro-territorial-growth “Young America” movement identified the Little Giant as their favored presidential candidate. Although there is no evidence Douglas directly supported filibustering expeditions such as those of Narciso López, John Quitman, or William Walker, at Freeport and elsewhere he stated his desire for the acquisition of Cuba and other Latin American lands, regardless of the ensuing implications for slavery.

Lincoln adopted a different course. A critic of the Mexican War during his sole term in the U.S. House of Representatives, he supported the Wilmot Proviso, which barred slavery from any territory acquired as a result of that conflict. While not against territorial expansion in principle, Lincoln opposed the extension of slavery that in all likelihood would result from the annexation of lands to the south. In one of the key points in the book, May argues that Lincoln’s opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act resulted not only from the possibility of slavery’s expansion westward but from its potential growth southward as well. Thus in his famed Peoria speech, Lincoln contended that the “authors of [Kansas-]Nebraska” intended that its principle of popular sovereignty would result in “the planting of slavery wherever in the wide world, local and unorganized opposition can not prevent it.” Other observers were more explicit, contending that Douglas’s act would incentivize the acquisitions of Cuba, Mexico, and Haiti and thus facilitate slavery’s growth.

May thus brings the reader to the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, when the two candidates confronted each other over slavery and territorial expansion southward. In addition to their exchange at Freeport,

2. Ibid.
the two candidates discussed this issue at Galesburg, during which Lincoln posted that:

If Judge Douglas’s [popular sovereignty] policy upon this question succeeds . . . the next thing will be a grab for the territory of poor Mexico, an invasion of the rich lands of South America, then the adjoining islands will follow, each one of which promises additional slave fields. . . . It is, therefore, as I think, a very important question for the consideration of the American people, whether the policy of bringing in additional territory, without considering at all how it will operate upon the safety of the Union in reference to this one great disturbing element in our national polities, shall be adopted as the policy of the country. You will bear in mind that it is to be acquired, according to the Judge’s view, as fast as it is needed, and the indefinite part of this proposition is that we have only Judge Douglas and his class of men to decide how fast it is needed. We have no clear and certain way of determining or demonstrating how fast territory is needed by the necessities of the country. Whoever wants to go out filibustering, then, thinks that more territory is needed. Whoever wants wider slave fields, feels sure that some additional territory is needed as slave territory.”

Although the Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858 are briefly covered in the middle of the book, in May’s narrative they represent the climax of the clash between Lincoln and Douglas over slavery, expansion, and Latin America (the cover illustration is a mural depicting the debate at Knox College in Galesburg). Subsequent chapters assign a “Caribbean” dimension (with varying degrees of effectiveness) to events such as John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, the presidential campaign and election of 1860, and the secession crisis. Naturally, Douglas’s death in June 1861 ended the debate between the two men, but the final chapter is an informative summary of Lincoln’s role in the abortive black colonization schemes such as those involving Île-à-Vache and Panama.

No one knows more than May about southern expansionism, race, and slavery, as depicted in The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, which more than forty years after its publication is still the standard in the field. And Slavery, Race, and Conquest in the Tropics is on the whole a well written and informative first book-length study of Lincoln,
Douglas, and the politics of expansion into Latin America. Yet May occasionally overreaches to justify his theme, particularly regarding Lincoln. Aside from giving “fleeting attention” (May’s words) to the Caribbean in an 1852 speech, Lincoln apparently paid little heed to Latin American affairs between the end of his congressional term and the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act approximately five years later (82). Citing Lincoln’s warning in his “House Divided” speech that slavery’s advocates would push until the institution became “lawful in all the States, old as well as new—North as well as South,” May wanly proposes that “perhaps some of the new states would be tropical, and Lincoln meant the term ‘South’ as much in a directional, compass-driven sense, as in a U.S. regional sense” (145). Yet nowhere in the speech did Lincoln utter the words “Cuba,” “filibuster,” “Latin America,” “Mexico,” or “South America.” May also overreaches by omission in failing to mention perhaps the most important speech of Lincoln’s political career—the Cooper Union address of February 1860—probably because Lincoln said nothing in that speech about slavery, expansion, and Latin America. And even when May effectively uses several of the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 to advance his thesis, a little research shows that the question of slavery, expansion, and Latin America was not broached at the debates in Charleston and Alton. Indeed, nowhere in the transcriptions of the debates at Freeport, Charleston, and Alton do the words “Cuba,” “filibuster,” “Latin America,” or “South America” appear. The word “Mexico” is in the transcription of the Freeport debate only in the form of Douglas’s mention of the acquisition of New Mexico, and in the Charleston transcription the same word is nowhere to be found. In sum, the reader gets the impression that for considerable stretches of his political career Lincoln simply did not pay much heed to slavery and expansion as they pertained to Latin America.5

Compared with May, John David Smith covers more well-trodden ground in his *Lincoln and the U.S. Colored Troops*—part of Southern Illinois University Press’s Concise Lincoln Library series. Smith himself

has previously covered the black soldier in his *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era* (2004). Dudley Taylor Cornish’s *The Sable Arm: Black Troops in the Union Army, 1861–1865* and William A. Dobak’s *Freedom by the Sword: The US Colored Troops, 1862–1867* are other notable contributions to this field. In his latest work, Smith aims to tell the story of the USCT and to explicate Abraham Lincoln’s role in its development.⁶

As noted in the opening of Smith’s first chapter, the Emancipation Proclamation not only freed slaves in Confederate territory but also announced “that such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States.” Yet as Smith effectively summarizes, the road to this authorization of black troops was not an entirely smooth one. Lincoln himself squelched such an idea when Secretary of War Simon Cameron proposed it in December 1861. Eight months later, the president told a delegation of westerners that he would continue to employ black men as laborers but not as soldiers. Among other concerns, Lincoln feared arming African American men would turn border state residents into supporters of the Confederacy.⁷

Yet Lincoln would come around, due largely to developments both in Congress and in the field. In July 1862, Congress passed the Militia Act, which in part authorized the president “to receive into the service of the United States, for the purpose of constructing intrenchments, or performing camp service, or any other labor, or any military or naval service for which they may be found competent, persons of African descent.” Later that summer Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton permitted General Rufus Saxton to recruit black men in South Carolina, leading to the formation in October of the First South Carolina Volunteers, the first regiment of ex-slaves recognized by the War Department. As shown by his late-July “Notes Regarding the Recruitment of Negroes,” Lincoln by this time objected only to recruiting and arming slaves belonging to loyal slaveholders. In an April 1864 letter to Kentucky newspaper editor Albert G. Hodges, Lincoln couched his change of heart largely in practical terms: accepting black men into the armed forces represented “a gain of quite a hundred and thirty

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thousand soldiers, seamen, and laborers. . . . We have the men; and we could not have had them without the measure.”

With the final Emancipation Proclamation, recruitment of black soldiers began in earnest. Stanton authorized several New England states to begin raising African American regiments, and the quick actions of Massachusetts governor John A. Andrew led to the formation of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Volunteers. Stanton also sent General Lorenzo Thomas to the Mississippi River valley to recruit therein; by the end of the war the tireless Thomas would organize seventy African American regiments, or more than 40 percent of the USCT. Recruitment was less intense in the border areas (particularly Kentucky), once again reflecting Lincoln’s hesitancy to risk alienating residents of these states. This relatively haphazard system led to the standardization of recruitment via the War Department’s General Orders No. 143. Among other measures, this order established the Bureau of Colored Troops (part of the Adjutant General’s Office) to coordinate the recruitment of black soldiers. Regiments were to be “numbered seriatim, in the order in which they [were] raised,” and with the exception of a few units formed in Louisiana and New England, all black regiments, including those previously raised on the state level, would enter federal service.

Nearly two hundred thousand African Americans served in the USCT over the course of the war, with fewer than a hundred functioning as commissioned officers. It is unsurprising that these men frequently encountered discrimination. Although Stanton had promised black recruits the same pay as white men’s compensation, the War Department solicitor authorized lower pay for African American soldiers. Lincoln was slow to remedy this discrepancy, reasoning for a time that it was a necessary concession to those northerners opposed to black military service (Congress equalized pay in June 1864). Moreover, many white officers believed their black charges

were suitable only for manual labor. The conditions of such labor were often unsanitary, with inferior medical care, leading to more than twenty-nine thousand USCT soldiers dying from disease. Approximately 13.5 percent of white soldiers died during the war, while the rate for USCT troops was five percentage points higher, even though the latter saw far less combat than the former.

Nevertheless, when the soldiers of the USCT engaged in battle, they generally performed admirably. Their courage and mettle were evinced in clashes such as those at Port Hudson, Milliken’s Bend, and New Market Heights. The USCT’s “darkest hour,” the disastrous Battle of the Crater, featured nine black regiments, one of which—the Twenty-Ninth USCT—began the day with 450 effectives but finished with only 128. In the aftermath of the battle, critics pounced on the African American troops as convenient scapegoats, but General Ambrose Burnside refused to hold them responsible for the loss. Smith agrees, and—echoing the consensus of previous Civil War historians—summarizes that “the black soldiers’ generally strong performance in combat convinced rank-and-file white troops that black men had earned the right to be treated as equals—at least on the battlefield” (74).

The men of the USCT impressed Lincoln as well. “So far as tested,” the president announced in his December 1863 message to Congress, “it is difficult to say they are not as good soldiers as any.” Although at first dilatory in fully utilizing the capabilities of the black soldier and ensuring his equal treatment, the president gradually evolved to a full appreciation of his service and a proper consideration for his welfare. This change is most poignantly illustrated by Smith via Lincoln’s meeting with Mary Elizabeth Wayt Booth, the widow of Lionel F. Booth, the commander at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, who was one of those slain at the massacre of April 12, 1864. Mrs. Booth petitioned Lincoln to work for the granting of benefits to widows and children of black soldiers who fell in battle (the marriages of recruits who had been slaves had no legal standing as per southern states’ slave codes). The president wrote Senator Charles Sumner in support of this idea, starting a process that resulted in Congress passing a law which provided pensions to said women and children. Lincoln also selected four companies of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts as part of his military escort during the second inauguration—the first time black troops participated in an Inaugural Day parade. In time “no one came to appreciate the contributions of the USCT more” than Lincoln, Smith concludes, and thus the president “treated black soldiers with consummate respect” (89). These soldiers returned this respect on
April 19, 1865, when men of the Twenty-Second USCT at one point led the funeral procession of the late president.9

Lincoln and the U.S. Colored Troops is an informative précis, and Smith persuasively argues that emancipation and black military service in the war “was a great success, one of the transformative events in American history” (108). Yet the book is not without flaws. For one, Smith occasionally quotes secondary sources to some length. General Godfrey Weitzel’s first name is misspelled, and there are a few too many typographical errors. Most perplexing, however, is his frequent reference to the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts, the unit famous for its gallant (if futile) assault on Battery Wagner in July 1863. Throughout his narrative Smith refers to this regiment while illustrating the USCT experience, yet, as acknowledged by the author, the Fifty-Fourth was never a USCT regiment. At times Smith seems to be conflating the USCT with African American soldiers as a whole, even as he acknowledges the fact that not all black soldiers served in USCT regiments.

Yet these are relatively minor quibbles. Lincoln and the U.S. Colored Troops effectively and succinctly tells the story of African American troops in the Civil War and Lincoln’s oversight of them. It also functions as companion piece to May’s narrative of race, expansion, and Latin America. Whereas May is concerned in part with the underappreciated story of Lincoln, slavery, and expansion to the south, Smith focuses on our sixteenth president and the liberated slaves who fought under him. Both studies are worthy additions to any Civil War enthusiast’s bookshelf.