Holding Up a Flawed Mirror to the American Soul: Abraham Lincoln in the Writings of Lerone Bennett Jr.

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In April 2003, one hundred thirty-eight years after he first visited the capital of the Confederacy, Abraham Lincoln still haunted Richmond, Virginia. The occasion was the dedication of a sculpture depicting Lincoln and his son Tad seated on a bench outside Richmond’s Tredegar Iron Works, engraved with the words “To Bind Up the Nation’s Wounds.” The monument commemorated Lincoln’s visit in April 1865, shortly after Confederates evacuated the city. That spring, as Lincoln walked through the streets, he was joyfully greeted by the city’s African American population while Confederate residents remained in their homes, peering from behind their curtains. In 2003 it was evident that for some Americans, honoring Lincoln remained controversial indeed. The dedication ceremonies were picketed by several dozen protestors with signs comparing Lincoln to Adolf Hitler or demanding his indictment for war crimes. Overhead flew a plane with a banner displaying John Wilkes Booth’s postassassination cry “Sic semper tyrannis” (Thus be it ever to tyrants). Brag Bolling, a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV), thought the statue was a mark of “insensitivity,” a “not-so-subtle reminder of who won the war and who will dictate our monuments, history, heroes, education and culture. . . . Why here?” Bolling asked.¹

Yet post–Cold War condemnations of Lincoln did not come solely from neo-Confederates or their libertarian allies such as economist Thomas DiLorenzo. If Lincoln’s self-confessed reactionary critics accused him of being a dictator, a war criminal, and the president responsible for centralizing power in the federal government, a much

¹ A shortened version of this article was presented to the Wepner Symposium at the University of Illinois–Springfield in October 2012. Brag Bolling quoted in Steve Clark, “Yes, Lincoln; yes, here,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, December 26, 2002.
different and unmistakably negative assessment came from Lerone Bennett Jr., an African American historian who in painstaking detail advanced the argument that Lincoln was a timid, scheming politician who never wanted to free the slaves but was instead forced into emancipation. Lincoln’s detractors nevertheless shared a propensity to focus their debunking efforts on Lincoln’s prewar statements, in which the future president told Illinois audiences he did not favor racial equality, statements that proved, they believed, Lincoln was not a racial egalitarian and was therefore unworthy of Americans’ adulation. For the detractors, such comments reflected Lincoln’s true racial views and confirmed that for his entire political career, he had been a white supremacist who wanted to rid the country of black people permanently by means of colonization. Consequently, they argued, Lincoln never really cared about emancipation; freeing the slaves, if he should even receive credit for so doing, was simply a tactic a typical politician would use to advance his real agenda, which was to maintain and aggrandize power or rid the country of black people, or both.

The senior editor of *Ebony* magazine for several decades and the author of a landmark 1968 essay titled “Was Abe Lincoln a White Supremacist?” (he answered in the affirmative), Bennett maintained that if by 1865 the Civil War had become a contest over whether American nationalism would remain based solely on white, male ethnicity or if it would instead be based on something larger and more inclusive, it was vital for Americans to acknowledge that Lincoln was in the former camp and to drop the fiction that the so-called Great Emancipator belonged in the latter. Such a stance, ironically, served the cause of the more conservative or libertarian critics of Lincoln who maintained that the sixteenth president was not all that interested in liberating the slaves and therefore must have had another agenda in mind: centralizing power in Washington, D.C., and asserting the power of the federal government over the states. Consequently, the idea that Bennett’s views were absurd and unworthy of serious attention entirely misses the point that his work on Lincoln did not remain cloistered within the African American community but migrated into venues that reached even larger audiences.2

By February 1968, when Bennett’s essay excoriating Lincoln first appeared, the Civil Rights Movement had achieved some important legislative victories, but much remained to be accomplished in terms of economic and social equality. In addition, rioting in places such as Watts in Los Angeles in 1965 had occurred, and Martin Luther King Jr. had come out against the Vietnam War in 1967, a conflict in which black citizens and the poor were disproportionately being drafted and killed. Americans from all levels of society wondered whether their country was unraveling, and it would not have been unusual in such a context for them to ask what Lincoln might have done to address such dilemmas. But it was Bennett’s view, analogous to William F. Buckley’s expressed a few years earlier, that Lincoln provided no guidance at all regarding current troubles because he was in fact a large part of America’s racial problems.3

Bennett claimed that he had once admired Lincoln, but his attitudes about him began to change during his childhood in 1930s Mississippi. He told one interviewer, “I was a child in whitest Mississippi reading for my life when I discovered for the first time that everything I’d been taught about Abraham Lincoln was a lie.” According to Bennett, he read Lincoln’s words from his debate with Stephen Douglas at Charleston, Illinois, where Lincoln had said that he did not have any desire to see black Americans made the equals of white citizens in the United States, and “I read it and I—and I was just—just absolutely shocked. And from that point on, I started to—researching Lincoln and trying to find out everything I could about him. . . . I was trying to save my life because I find it difficult to understand how people could say this man was the great apostle of brother—brotherhood in the United States of America.”4 Bennett attended Morehouse College

3. Buckley anticipated by two years some of the Lincoln criticism offered by Lerone Bennett, although his analysis of the sixteenth president served a different political agenda. After his New York city mayoral campaign, Buckley published The Unmaking of a Mayor (New York: Viking, 1966), a book that contained his reflections on Abraham Lincoln’s relationship to conservatism and the use of his “legacy” by politicians. In that work Buckley cited Lincoln’s words from the Charleston debate with Stephen Douglas as evidence that “concerning the big contemporary issues, Lincoln was not only, according to current terminology, a segregationist but also a racist” and averred that if there were a Lincolnian tradition on race and segregation, it “clearly suggests that the states should retain a measure of authority respecting at least some of the questions nowadays pre-empted in the various civil rights bills by the federal government.” See pages 84–90 for Buckley’s remarks on Lincoln.

in Atlanta and was a classmate of Martin Luther King Jr. He graduated in 1949 and went to work at the Atlanta Daily World shortly thereafter. He eventually moved to Ebony magazine, later becoming its editor. In addition, in the early 1960s he authored the books Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America (1962) and What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. (1964). Given Bennett’s later antipathy to Lincoln, it was curious that the latter work was reticent on the sixteenth president’s shortcomings. So Bennett did not explode unannounced onto the scene in 1968. In fact he had been writing and publishing in the United States for a long time on the centrality of African Americans to the American experience. Still, many were shocked by what Bennett wrote in 1968 and, perhaps, that an African American had written it.

Bennett leveled numerous and explosive accusations against Lincoln in his article. Given the state of American race relations in 1968, he thundered, it was clear that “Abraham Lincoln was not the Great Emancipator.” Indeed, Bennett believed the edict was extremely limited in its impact and that Lincoln would have preferred not to even issue it but was forced by events to do so. More troubling, Bennett believed, was that Lincoln was a racist who “had profound doubts about the possibility of realizing the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence and Gettysburg Address on this soil; and he believed until his death that black people and white people would be much better off separated—preferably with the Atlantic Ocean or some other large and deep body of water between them.” In substantial agreement with historians such as Richard Hofstadter, Bennett contended that the Emancipation Proclamation had “all the moral grandeur of a real estate deed” and, echoing Frederick Douglass’s words from 1863, claimed it did “not enumerate a single principle hostile to slavery.” He believed the act for which Lincoln was most famous, indeed revered, did not free a single slave and “on the basis of the evidence one can make a powerful case for the view that Lincoln never intended to free the slaves, certainly not immediately.” Nor did Bennett think that if


Lincoln had lived to serve out his second term, Reconstruction would have been substantially different. Lincoln’s postwar program “was going to be a Reconstruction of the white people, by the white people, and for the white people.” Bennett ended the essay with a harsh evaluation of Abraham Lincoln and the American political tradition, one that, unlike conservative political theorists such as Willmoore Kendall, he assuredly wanted derailed: “For, in the final analysis, Lincoln must be seen as the embodiment, not the transcendence, of the American tradition, which is, as we all know, a racist tradition. In his inability to rise above that tradition, Lincoln, often called ‘the noblest of all Americans,’ holds up a flawed mirror to the American soul. And one honors him today, not by gazing fixedly at a flawed image, not by hiding warts and excrescences, but by seeing oneself in the reflected ambivalences of a life which calls us to transcendence, not imitation.”

Reaction to Bennett’s piece was swift. In the New York Times, to cite one example, author and critic Herbert Mitgang wrote a scathing response, arguing that Lincoln had been opposed to slavery, even when it was politically unpopular to be so opposed, and although Mitgang did not deny the truth of Lincoln’s statements in his debates with Douglas, he argued that Lincoln was making tactical concessions while remaining consistent in his overall goal of stopping slavery’s expansion. In contrast to Bennett, Mitgang thought that Lincoln’s racial views changed during the Civil War to the point that by the end of his life, he was advocating integrated schools in Louisiana and limited

8. Bennett, “Was Abe Lincoln a White Supremacist?,” 738–52. Richard Hofstadter published The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It in 1948, a book which achieved fame, in part, for its harsh characterization of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. Echoing the arguments of a few of Lincoln’s contemporary detractors, Hofstadter provocatively claimed that the Proclamation “had all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading” and that it “did not in fact free any slaves.” Willmoore Kendall was a writer at William F. Buckley Jr.’s National Review magazine, which was at the time of Bennett’s 1968 essay the flagship journal of a burgeoning American conservative movement. In response to fellow conservative Harry V. Jaffa’s vigorously argued and pro-Lincoln Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), Kendall published an essay critical of Lincoln. In “Source of American Caesarism” he wrote, “Lincoln was the Caesar Lincoln claimed to be trying to prevent; and that the Caesarism we all need to fear is the contemporary Liberal movement dedicated like Lincoln to egalitarian reforms sanctioned by mandates emanating from national majorities, a movement which is Lincoln’s legitimate offspring.” See Willmoore Kendall, “Source of American Caesarism: Review of Harry V. Jaffa,” National Review, November 7, 1959, 461–62. Later, in his posthumously published The Basic Symbols of the American Tradition (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 91, Kendall and George Carey argued that by emphasizing equality, Lincoln had “derailed” the American political tradition.
suffrage for African American males. Bennett was having none of it, however, and responded a few weeks later, claiming that Mitgang had answered “facts with smears” and never addressed his point that Lincoln had been opposed to “sudden and general emancipation” all his life. Bennett found Mitgang’s defense of Lincoln’s statements at places such as Charleston weak, in that they proved Lincoln a “liar and hypocrite,” which was at the very least “curious,” if not “pathetic.” With some justification Bennett accused Mitgang of McCarthyism for claiming that Bennett’s views on Lincoln were not very different from those of the White Citizens’ Councils of Mississippi, whose leaders selectively used Lincoln’s utterances from 1858 to allege that the Great Emancipator was a racist and that he in fact agreed with them on the necessity of preserving a segregated United States. Bennett’s attacks on Lincoln were of course much different from those of the White Citizens’ Councils; Bennett was no segregationist, and he criticized the president because, in his view, Lincoln had not truly embodied the ideals of freedom and equality that Americans professed to hold, while the White Citizens’ Councils that distorted Lincoln’s racial views did so to advance an antiegalitarian, white supremacist agenda.

The quarrel between Bennett and Mitgang in the New York Times was hardly the only reaction to Bennett’s essay, although it was perhaps most prominent. The African American newspaper the New York Amsterdam News in a brief notice said “Ebony magazine should be congratulated” for publishing Bennett’s piece, an essay it claimed “does much to destroy an American myth,” and that “Mr. Bennett’s research ranks at the highest level” and “shows the need for a re-evaluation of the man Lincoln.” Another African American newspaper, the Pittsburgh Courier, commented at much greater length, telling its readers that “the Negro and a large body of the American people have been deceived for a long time by historians who deliberately concealed the true facts about the Civil War president.” The Courier did not question Bennett’s analysis and thought it was an outstanding piece of historical scholarship. The paper also noted that long before Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation, thousands of slaves had already been freed by the Confiscation Acts of 1861 and 1862 and thousands more had freed themselves by running away from south-

ern plantations to Union lines, which foreshadowed a future debate among scholars over the question of who really freed the slaves.

Lerone Bennett’s essay was an especially significant, if at times inaccurate, critique of Lincoln, in that it not only perpetuated hostility toward the president but also challenged the central and most lasting legacy of Abraham Lincoln, that of Great Emancipator. Equally important, and perhaps one reason why the reaction to Bennett’s essay was so harsh, was that Bennett confronted the standard narrative of American history: The United States was a place of ever-expanding freedom for all who arrived on its shores, and Lincoln’s presidency represented the culmination of that freedom narrative. Bennett’s essay directly challenged the idea that noble and powerful white Americans emancipated ignoble and powerless black slaves. His piece was part of a long and rich tradition of Lincoln criticism from African American thinkers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Archibald Grimké, Hubert Harrison, and Carter Woodson, all of whom to one degree or another saw an excessive veneration of the sixteenth president as a not-so-subtle form of intellectual subservience to the white majority. Still, his loathing of Lincoln was both more intense and long-lasting than the analysis put forward by previous African American critics. By attacking the legitimacy of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator, Bennett was doing more than simply engaging in a piece of historical scholarship. In fact, he was taking on the entire story of the American past and using animosity toward Abraham Lincoln as a vehicle for his ideas. In that sense the accuracy of Bennett’s charges of Lincoln’s racism was beside the point because he was attacking American exceptionalism and critiquing the interests American power had served both at home and abroad. As always, discourse about Abraham Lincoln was an argument not only about Lincoln but also about the complicated relationship between modern notions of freedom, equality, race, and federal power.

Thirty years later, Bennett further damaged Lincoln’s stature with a six-hundred-page magnum opus, Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln’s White Dream. Bennett told readers that his book was “a political study of the uses and abuses of biography and myth” and argued that “your

identity, whatever your color, is based, at least in part, on what you think about Lincoln, the Civil War, and slavery.” And in Bennett’s view this influence was vitally important “because Abraham Lincoln is not the light, because he is in fact hiding in the light, hiding our way.”

Forced into Glory not only attempted to discredit Lincoln; it indicted the entire American historical profession for portraying Lincoln as a Great Emancipator when he was actually an oppressor. Lincoln scholars had argued that the white supremacist statements Lincoln uttered and the colonization plans he pursued were to a degree attempts to cater to nineteenth-century voters, but Bennett maintained that Lincoln’s great speeches were words that hid his real agenda: to deport every black person out of the United States and thus create a less pluralistic country, one exclusively for white people. From Bennett’s standpoint Lincoln scholars were complicit in shrouding this truth from Americans and thus hindering racial progress. “The issue posed by all this is not the state of the soul of Abraham Lincoln but the state of the soul of the Republic,” Bennett declared, “which finds its deepest moral values in a White supremacist who opposed integration and wanted to deport all Blacks. One can say that the Republic has been unfortunately deluded by scholars who have systematically hidden the truth in one of the most extraordinary episodes in the history of scholarship.”

Bennett shared at least one characteristic with all of Lincoln’s enemies, past and present, in that he presented himself as an intellectual pioneer, an iconoclast, a debunker of myths devoted to the truth that had been suppressed by an allegedly nefarious Lincoln cult blind to the reality of its flawed idol. Bennett’s numerous charges, despite the intense criticism of Lincoln that had circulated throughout the United States since 1858, made more plausible those libertarian and neo-Confederate accusations that the Civil War was not fought over slavery, which was not Lincoln’s real concern, but was instead waged, as both groups vociferously argued, to expand federal power over the states.

Forced into Glory elaborated in much greater depth and more strident rhetoric Bennett’s central contention that the Emancipation Proclamation freed no slaves. The proclamation “enslaved and/or continued the enslavement of a half-million slaves, more slaves than it ever freed. Let’s rephrase it and put it another way: On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln reenslaved and/or condemned to extended slavery more Blacks than

16. I heard historian Gerard J. Prokopowicz make this point, or one very close to it, in a talk given in Richmond, Virginia, in 2009.
17. Bennett, Forced into Glory, 84; see 123–27 for more of Bennett’s criticism of historians.
he ever freed.”18 In Bennett’s view Lincoln never wanted to end slavery. Instead, it was the abolitionists who pressured Lincoln to rid the nation of slavery, Congress through its Confiscation Acts (bills Lincoln signed into law), the slaves who ran away from the farms and plantations during the conflict, and those who played a role in passing the Thirteenth Amendment who truly deserved acclaim for abolition.

The idea that Lincoln was forced by events to emancipate the slaves was hardly original. Carter Woodson had made the same point decades earlier.19 Nor was it shocking that a politician in a democracy might be influenced by public opinion to enact a policy he long favored. Indeed, in 1864 Lincoln said as much in a letter to Albert Hodges of Kentucky: “I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.”20 What made Bennett’s claim extraordinary was not simply that Lincoln was coerced into freeing the slaves but that he was an actual hindrance to their emancipation. His argument was, to an extent, in opposition to previous African American critics of the president. Although men such as Archibald Grimké, Hubert Harrison, and W. E. B. Du Bois had expressed decidedly negative opinions about Lincoln, their stance did not necessarily constitute loathing insofar as they had also called Lincoln “great,” America’s “greatest president,” and “perhaps the greatest figure of the nineteenth century.”21 Bennett, however, sharply disagreed with such characterizations. In his view the United States would have been better served had Lincoln not been president: “Lincoln was at best an incidental, accidental rider of a liberating wave that probably would have crested sooner—and higher—without him.”22 He cited philosopher Sidney Hook’s argument in The Hero in History that throughout history there are two types of men: “The eventful man in history is any man whose actions influence subsequent developments along a different course than would have been followed if these actions had not been taken.” In contrast, “the event-making man is an eventful man whose actions are the consequence of outstanding capacities of intelligence, will, and character

18. Ibid., 13.
22. Bennett, Forced into Glory, 44.
rather than accidents of position.” Bennett made it very clear that he believed Lincoln was the former, “the beneficiary of events that he neither shapes and, in Lincoln’s case, opposed.”

According to Bennett, if Lincoln did not actually believe in freeing the slaves, or only did so because he had to, then what the president truly advocated was white supremacy coupled with the colonization of black Americans outside the United States. Here Bennett made his most controversial claims about Lincoln (and really about the country that venerated him). He maintained that Lincoln as much as anyone else in nineteenth-century America did not subscribe to the idea of a multiracial nation. Indeed, if his colonization policies had been fulfilled, America would have remained racially exclusive: “For if Lincoln had been a strong and effective leader, there would be no Blacks here, not even the Blacks who say he was the strongest and best U.S. president. . . . At the same time,” Bennett asserted, “if Lincoln had succeeded there would be no Broadway, no musical comedy, no American music, no Grammy and Rock ‘n’ Roll, no Beatles or Gershwin or Copland or Fred Astaire, no American athletics to speak of, no Jim Brown or Michael Jordan or Dr. J., a thin White gruel of pale religion and food, and a Constitution and a democracy lacking the ballast of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments and the singing summons of Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King Jr., Earl Warren, and Bill Clinton, an America, in short, without color, rhythm, and soul—Australia with a Mississippi River.” Like Lincoln’s neo-Confederate opponents, Bennett thought Lincoln’s presidency was the turning point in American history, not because he succeeded in winning the war or freed the slaves or centralized power in Washington, D.C., but because his white supremacist policies failed.

From Bennett’s standpoint Lincoln was an indecisive leader morally indifferent to slavery and oppression. Lincoln was “the archetype of the sensitive, suffering, ineffectual, fence figure—in America, in the Third Reich, in Algeria, in South Africa—who is born on a fence and lives and dies on a fence, unable to accept or reject the political evil that defines him objectively.” Unlike those critics who saw Lincoln as Hitlerian in his expansion of executive power and his war crimes, Bennett claimed that Lincoln was a compromiser, a racist like those Germans who stood idly by while the Nazis carried out the Holocaust. “Lincoln was in and of himself, and in his objective being, an oppressor,” a conservative,

24. Bennett, Forced into Glory, 43.
25. Ibid., 51. For more on Bennett’s view of Lincoln’s racism, see 197.
when “to be a conservative at a time of extreme oppression, as in South Africa, as in the Third Reich, as in the Slave South, at a time when to be moderate is to be culpable, and to be a conservative is to be an accomplice, is to be a different kind of person.” Historians who defended Lincoln (or even tried to make his policies explicable), it followed, were no better than intellectuals in Nazi Germany who joined the Nazi Party and became apologists for Hitler’s regime. Bennett held that “with rare exceptions, you can’t believe what any major Lincoln scholar tells you about Abraham Lincoln and race.”

But what about the Confederacy? Many of Lincoln’s enemies then and more recently have maintained that the Confederacy was a “morally sound” cause—the words are those of Emory University philosopher Donald Livingston—and that it would have hastened the end of slavery if it had won the war. Bennett, by contrast, had no patience with that argument. A little more than midway through Forced into Glory, Bennett observed that “few modern scholars notice the similarities between the Third Reich and the Confederacy, and almost no one arraigns it or its leaders for crimes against humanity.” Elsewhere Bennett implied that Confederate president Jefferson Davis, General Robert E. Lee, and other high-ranking Confederates were war criminals who should have been severely punished after the war. Nonetheless, Bennett associated Lincoln with the Confederacy’s views, attributing Lincoln’s failure to answer Alexander Stephens’s “Cornerstone” Speech, despite being encouraged to speak out against it, inasmuch as “he was fighting for the old Union, for the Constitution as it was, with its slave clauses,

27. In a 2002 symposium on “The war Between the States” held in the pages of the Journal of Libertarian Studies (posted on the Mises Institute website, www.mises.org), Livingston claimed “that the 1860 attempt to dismember the Union by peaceful secession was morally sound, and that the North’s invasion to prevent secession and to create a consolidated American state was morally unsound.” Livingston and his intellectual compatriots, among them Thomas DiLorenzo, have argued that southern secession was constitutionally and morally justified; that secession would have aided rather than hindered the antislavery cause because northerners would not have been required to return fugitive slaves to the South; that because slavery was economically inefficient market forces would have caused it to wither away peacefully and thus the war was unnecessary; that secession—and the Confederacy itself—was of a piece with the American tradition of limited government and that the Union victory had centralized power in Washington, D.C. As a result, the Confederacy’s cause was “morally sound” and Lincoln’s was not. See also Joseph R. Stromberg, “The War for Southern Independence: A Radical Libertarian Perspective,” Journal of Libertarian Studies 3, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 31–53, http://mises.org/journals/jls/3_1/3_1_3.pdf (accessed August 28, 2010).
28. Bennett, Forced into Glory, 342. For more on Bennett’s indictment of the Confederacy, see page 406.
for South Carolina as it was, with mint juleps, cotton, and slaves, and for Illinois as it was, with Black Laws and a constitution barring Black settlers.” 29 In fact, Lincoln rarely reacted publicly to anything said by Confederate officials. It was part of his overall strategy of avoiding any form of recognition of a regime he considered illegitimate.

Bennett’s true heroes were Illinois senator Lyman Trumbull and abolitionists such as Wendell Phillips: “Trumbull is virtually unknown to White Americans who have worked night and day for more than 140 years to perpetuate the memory of a White separatist who wanted to deport all African Americans and who provides, moreover, the greatest example in all history of the wisdom of standing idly by in a great national crisis like slavery or apartheid or the Third Reich.” Bennett maintained that for most of his political career, Lincoln had not been in the forefront of the movement for racial justice. Here Bennett was particularly hard on scholars who defended Lincoln by claiming that everybody in the nineteenth century was a white supremacist. He cited Phillips, among others, as a prominent example of whites from that era who were, unlike Lincoln, racial egalitarians. Bennett believed it was no defense to say that Lincoln pandered to contemporary racist sentiment to get elected. “For a man who race-baits in order to get elected and who supports man-hunting, woman-hunting, and children-hunting because of his ambition has nothing to say to us,” Bennett thundered, “no matter how many historians sing his praises.” From Bennett’s standpoint “most major Lincoln scholars—comfortable, conservative, cautious White males—make themselves academic accomplices of the oppression and the slavery Lincoln supported.” 30 In his defense of Trumbull and Phillips, Bennett made an important point in emphasizing that there were white people who did speak up and try to end slavery and that Lincoln was not initially one of slavery’s more vocal opponents. But few modern, pro-Lincoln scholars have ever claimed otherwise, and it was a serious omission not to point out the extent to which Lincoln, Trumbull, and Phillips were all part of the same broad movement in the United States to end slavery and make freedom national. 31

29. Ibid., 343.
31. For recent works on Lincoln’s place in the broader antislavery movement and the Republican Party more specifically, see Eric Foner, The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010); James Oakes, Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861–1865 (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012). Of course, these books were not available to Bennett when he wrote Forced into Glory. Still, if Lincoln was the politician who held the views Bennett claimed, it is difficult to see why he was not a member of the Democratic Party rather than a Republican.
Notwithstanding Lincoln’s private and public advocacy of limited suffrage for African Americans, Bennett claimed that the president remained to his dying day an unapologetic racist who wanted America cleansed of all African Americans. Yet Bennett acknowledged one moment when the president came tantalizingly close to embracing racial equality. He quoted approvingly the section of the Second Inaugural Address in which Lincoln resolved that if the war lasts “until all the wealth piled by the bondman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, ‘the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.’” Bennett characterized these lines as the “one electric moment” in the speech. But “from this great [rhetorical height, Lincoln descended to the valley” of racist policies by stating on April 11, 1865, the last speech of his life, that he preferred that the franchise be “conferred on the very intelligent [Black men], and on those who serve our cause as soldiers.” From that day forward, Booth planned to assassinate Lincoln, in the hopes of reviving the Confederacy’s fortunes, for uttering the very words Bennett argued proved Lincoln was a racist: Lincoln “believed until his death the Negro was the Other, the Inferior, the Subhuman, who had to be—Lincoln said it was a necessity—subordinated, enslaved, quarantined to protect the sexual, social, political, and economic interests of Whites. Everything he did in his last one hundred days, everything he said, even the speeches his defenders are always praising, was based on this racist idea, which defined his life, his politics, and his Gettysburgs.”

Forced into Glory struck a nerve in the Lincoln community and among the public at large. The former director of the Lincoln Museum in Fort Wayne, Indiana, historian Gerald J. Prokopowicz, wrote in one review that Forced into Glory was “easily the most controversial Lincoln-related publication of this generation” and said that although it quoted Lincoln

32. Lincoln, in addition to publicly suggesting limited suffrage for African Americans in April 1865, had a year earlier privately suggested the same to Governor Michael Hahn of Louisiana. See David Donald, Lincoln (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 487–88, for this account. One wonders why, if Abraham Lincoln wanted to cleanse the United States of all African Americans, he would be pondering, in both private and public, limited suffrage?

33. Abraham Lincoln, quoted in Bennett, Forced into Glory, 617.

34. Ibid.

35. Abraham Lincoln, quoted in ibid., 618. Emphasis added by Bennett. In the next paragraph Bennett stated that “if the franchise had been confined to ‘very intelligent Whites’ this nation [the United States] would have perished from the earth long ago.”

36. Ibid., 624.
selectively and oversimplified the political context in which Lincoln operated, it was a book with which all Americans “will need to come to terms.”37 Michael Lind, author of What Lincoln Believed: The Values and Convictions of America’s Greatest President, said Bennett’s book contained “irrefutable” scholarship.38 Yet two of America’s most reputable scholars, Eric Foner and James M. McPherson, felt compelled to respond, to refute the irrefutable, in reviews published in the Los Angeles Times and New York Times, respectively. Foner thought Bennett’s “book deserves attention” because it “presents compelling evidence of how historians have consistently soft-pedaled Lincoln’s racial views.” Despite the volume’s merits Foner labeled Bennett’s assertion that Lincoln was a supporter of slavery and an oppressor “totally unfounded” and said “Bennett is guilty of the same kind of one-dimensional reading of Lincoln’s career as the historians he criticizes.”39 McPherson agreed that Forced into Glory “must be taken seriously,” but while acknowledging that “Lincoln did share the racial prejudices of his time and place” and advocated “the idea of colonizing blacks abroad,” McPherson concluded that “Bennett gets more wrong than he gets right,” especially in his “distortions in interpretation” and “distortion by omission.” McPherson made the obvious and unanswerable point that if Lincoln was not hostile to slavery, as Bennett maintained, then it was impossible “to understand why seven slave states seceded in response to Lincoln’s election.” Finally, Bennett’s idea that Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation “freed not a single slave” is one that McPherson stated “could not be more wrong”: “From Jan. 1, 1863, freedom would march southward with the Union Army, which became an army of liberation.”40

As for Lincoln’s allegedly undying wish to colonize African Americans beyond the North American continent, when Bennett claimed that “Lincoln believed that deporting Blacks and creating an all-White

39. Eric Foner, review of Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln’s White Dream, by Lerone Bennett Jr., Los Angeles Times Book Review, April 9, 2000. Bennett’s book was reviewed by these preeminent scholars (not to mention the director of the Lincoln Museum) in two of the nation’s most reputable newspapers, thus disproving Thomas DiLorenzo’s claim on page 186 of Lincoln Unmasked that Bennett’s book was “studiously ignored” by what he labeled “the Lincoln cult.” In 2008 DiLorenzo continued to assert that Bennett’s book had been “largely ignored.” On this point, see the last paragraph of this essay and its corresponding footnote.
country was a moral imperative,” he ignored available scholarship that contradicted his thesis. Although he was correct that for much of his career Lincoln—along with many other Americans—wanted to colonize blacks outside the United States, a result that certainly would have meant a less racially pluralistic future for the country, Bennett was incorrect to use the term ethnic cleansing, a twentieth-century phrase denoting murder or the forced removal of populations from their homes. Lincoln’s colonization plans were to have been voluntary, an important distinction that seems to have escaped Bennett’s attention. As for the idea that Lincoln tenaciously held on to his wish for colonization, Bennett based his case on the testimony of General Benjamin Butler, who claimed that in a meeting with Lincoln in the spring of 1865, the president told him he feared “a race war” could ensue once the military hostilities ended. Butler asserted that Lincoln wanted him to examine the practicality of removing African Americans from the United States, but Butler answered that colonization was not feasible. Bennett acknowledged that Butler’s story has “been questioned by some scholars,” but he did not let his reader know that historian Mark Neely Jr. damaged, perhaps irreparably, Butler’s account of this incident as early as 1979. Neely’s article in Civil War History did not even appear in Bennett’s notes or bibliography. Instead, Bennett quoted scholars who agreed with him, but he did not adequately alert his readers that there were others, such as Neely, who had challenged and perhaps discredited Butler’s story. Possibly the omission was because the information did not fit Bennett’s preconceived notions about Lincoln’s supposed pathological racism and because it would have destroyed one of the book’s chief arguments, that Lincoln was a racist who never changed his views about African Americans. Regrettably, this was a characteristic that many of Lincoln’s critics shared, which was a tendency to claim the president was a racist when in fact the evidence for such a charge remains to a certain degree ambiguous, especially considering that Lincoln was the leader of a broad-based social movement that was not only attempting to end slavery but also struggling mightily to widen notions of American citizenship to include African Americans. To be sure, Lincoln was in

43. Bennett, Forced into Glory, 616–17. To be sure, Bennett did say that historians had attempted to discredit Butler’s account of his meeting with Lincoln. The point being emphasized here is that he did not include the specifics of Neely’s important article.
some ways a typical nineteenth-century American who shared many of the racial assumptions of the age, but he fought hard to transcend them, which was a far cry from those Confederates and Copperheads who strenuously resisted Lincoln’s and the Republicans’ efforts. In fact, it would not be too much of an exaggeration, considering that it was Lincoln’s recommendation in April 1865 of limited suffrage for male African Americans that prompted Booth to assassinate him, to say that Lincoln was a white American who, whatever his motives, tried to do and did some good things for black people in the United States and was killed because of it.

Still, early in the twenty-first century some excellent work was published on Lincoln and colonization that possibly vindicated Bennett’s point about Lincoln holding on to the idea of colonization but at the same time discredited the idea that there was some type of “Lincoln cult” among professional historians. In 2008 Phillip Magness published a partial rebuttal to Mark Neely’s 1979 *Civil War History* article. Magness’s carefully worded and measured judgment in that piece was that “sufficient evidence exists to merit additional consideration of Lincoln’s colonization views later in life, and tends to caution against the conclusiveness that many scholars have previously attached to the view that Lincoln fully abandoned this position. The Butler anecdote remains an imperfect example, yet some of its more plausible details may indicate that Lincoln retained an interest in colonization, even if limited, as late as 1865.” Although the evidence remains inconclusive, if not insubstantial, and certainty about Lincoln’s views on colonization in 1865 may forever elude historians, Bennett may have been partially correct. But despite the claims of Bennett and indeed all Lincoln foes that a so-called Lincoln cult ignored or suppressed unpleasant truths about the president, Magness’s important and critical article was published in the flagship journal of Lincoln studies—the *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*.

47. Bennett spoke quite critically of Lincoln at the Sixth Annual Lincoln Forum in
Bennett omitted additional relevant information in *Forced into Glory*. He asserted that Lincoln was a hindrance to slavery’s immediate abolition but never specifically named the politician who was electable on a national scale in nineteenth-century America who would have hastened slavery’s demise faster and more fully than Lincoln. If Lincoln had been the despicable figure Bennett portrayed, or an actual hindrance to emancipation, then it is hard to ascertain how the antislavery Republican Party that nominated him for the presidency did not see it. Bennett also failed to inform the reader that the primary reason Lyman Trumbull became a senator in the mid-1850s was because of Abraham Lincoln. At a time when senators were chosen by state legislatures, Lincoln was not able to win enough votes in the Illinois legislature to secure the senatorial seat, so he told his supporters that Trumbull would be a suitable replacement because, although Trumbull was a Democrat, he opposed the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act that allowed the expansion of slavery into those territories. Lincoln’s support for Trumbull was hardly the action of an unprincipled politician or one who cared not at all if slavery existed. In fact, by telling his backers to support Trumbull, Lincoln engaged in a principled antislavery act, unfortunately one absent from Bennett’s narrative of Lincoln’s career. Nor did Bennett reveal that during the Lincoln-Douglas debates, Senator Douglas repeatedly linked Trumbull with Lincoln (both of whom had switched their political allegiances and joined forces in the antislavery Republican Party) by claiming that they had conspired “to abolitionize the old Whig party and the old Democratic party.”

In other words, Douglas drew no distinction between Lincoln and Trumbull but saw both men’s antislavery stances as equally villainous. In addition, Trumbull had made statements about

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on November 17, 2001. I was in attendance at this speech, and it is my recollection that although members of the forum were not pleased with the substance of Bennett’s talk and the historians in attendance challenged his ideas, he was given a respectful—some people thought too respectful given the charges he leveled against Lincoln—hearing that day. That Bennett spoke at the Lincoln Forum at all, as did M. E. Bradford at a different conference on Lincoln in the 1980s, also held in Gettysburg, demonstrated that the charge of a Lincoln cult is at the very least suspect. Cults do not invite critics to their meetings; scholars, however, do. Bennett’s remarks to the Lincoln Forum at Gettysburg were excerpted in *Forced into Glory*, 627–35. See also Allen C. Guelzo, review of *Colonization after Emancipation: Lincoln and the Movement for Black Resettlement* by Philip W. Magness and Sebastian N. Page, *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 34, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 78–87.

African Americans that were perhaps as offensive, if not more so, to Bennett’s moral sense as Lincoln’s words at Charleston. In 1858, to cite one example, Trumbull told a Chicago audience that “I want to have nothing to do either with the free negro or the slave negro. We, the Republican party, are the white man’s party. [Great applause.] . . . I would be glad to see this country relieved of them.” On the floor of Congress in 1859, Trumbull had said, “When we say that all men are created equal, we do not mean that every man in organized society has the same rights. We do not tolerate that in Illinois. I know there is a distinction between these two races because the Almighty himself has marked it upon their very faces; and, in my judgment, man cannot, by legislation or otherwise, produce a perfect equality between these two races, so that they will happily live together.”\footnote{Lyman Trumbull quoted in Michael Burlingame, Abraham Lincoln: A Life (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 1:526, 525.} Finally, in citing philosopher Sidney Hook, Bennett argued that Lincoln was not a heroic man worthy of imitation. Perhaps true, except that Hook deeply admired Lincoln. In a lecture delivered in India that was conceivably available to Bennett as the editor of Ebony magazine, Hook called the abolitionists Bennett admired “fanatics of virtue . . . God’s angry men, . . . who think they have a mandate from on high to impose virtue upon others at any cost” and “are usually blind to the virtues of any other way than their own.” In the same address Hook favorably compared Lincoln and Mahatma Gandhi: “Lincoln is unique among the statesmen not only of the United States but of the entire world in that he represents a fusion of idealism and intelligence.”\footnote{Sydney Hook, “Lincoln and Gandhi,” n.d., Sidney Hook Collection, box 34, folder 35, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, Stanford University.}

Bennett’s lapses were unfortunate but all too characteristic of the scholarship, such as it is, of many Lincoln critics. When confronted by an honest examination of their contentions, they refuse to allow that they might be wrong, that their work is riddled with selective use of the historical record, and that as a result, their contentions are perhaps not as original or worthy of consideration as they believe. Instead, in a form of inoculation against historians who they anticipate will condemn their frequently unsubstantiated arguments, Lincoln’s current detractors unceasingly attack their opponents as either dishonest or under the sway of some wicked Lincoln cult. The truth is, however, that the historical profession in the United States, notwithstanding all its numerous shortcomings and despite being likened to Hitler apologists for Nazism by Lerone Bennett Jr., is far more considerate and diligent...
in examining Lincoln’s flaws and the claims of his enemies than his rivals are in willing to concede Lincoln’s virtues and achievements.

The overall effect of Bennett’s work has been significant, although perhaps not in the way that many have believed. African American historian Gerald Horne has described Bennett’s popularity among blacks as “stratospheric,” and Lincoln biographer Allen Guelzo thought *Forced into Glory* symbolized “one of the most dramatic transformations in American historical self-understanding in the past century, and that is the slow, almost unnoticed withdrawal of African Americans from what was once the great consensus of blacks’ admiration for Abraham Lincoln.”51 That consensus had always been somewhat fragile and contested, but Guelzo was right that there were significant political consequences to Bennett’s (and neo-Confederate) loathing of Abraham Lincoln. From 1858 onward, Lincoln’s critics, especially that small minority of abolitionists and those who fashioned themselves their intellectual descendants, shared with twenty-first-century Americans a disdain for the slow, untidy compromises endemic to democratic politics and all too characteristic of politicians. This was not an attitude that Abraham Lincoln shared. He gloried in democratic politics. It is here, in the president’s enlightened, prudential approach to emancipation—a constitutional approach that favored concrete results over pure motives as the criterion for successful policy—that one will find an important reason why some people loathe Abraham Lincoln.52 Contempt for Lincoln, historically speaking, has often coincided with contempt for sluggish, messy democratic government and the flawed politicians who embrace it. Sadly, the work of the president’s critics in the post–Cold War era contributed to Americans’ cynical discontent with the political system Lincoln fought a war to preserve so “that all should have an equal chance.”53

It was impossible to claim, furthermore, that Bennett’s work remained as shocking as it had been in the 1960s, or that it was necessarily


representative of black opinion, when one considered the comments of other African Americans who admired Lincoln. Thomas Sowell, an influential conservative economist with libertarian leanings at the Hoover Institution, reviewed Guelzo’s book *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation* in 2005, sad that such a volume was even needed. The book was important, and here the economist conceded the increasing influence of Lincoln’s detractors, “because of the completely unrealistic view of the world—past and present—that prevails, not only among the ignorant but among the intelligentsia as well.” Writing as if he had Lincoln’s more recent adversaries in mind, Sowell declared that “since the 1960s, it has been fashionable in some quarters to take cheap shots at Lincoln, asking such questions as ‘Why didn’t he free all the slaves?’ ‘Why did he wait so long?’ ‘How come the Emancipation Proclamation didn’t just come right out and say that slavery was wrong?’” Sowell failed to acknowledge that such questions have been asked of Lincoln since the 1860s, but he correctly noted that the “people who indulge in this kind of self-righteous carping act as if Lincoln was someone who could do whatever he damn well pleased, without regard to the law, the Congress, or the Supreme Court.” Sowell explained that when Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation, he had to do so with the Supreme Court in mind, a Supreme Court “still headed by Chief Justice Roger Taney,” who in the *Dred Scott* case had argued that black people in the United States “had no rights which the white man needed to respect.” It was precisely for this reason that the proclamation was issued in language that was dry and uninspiring, for it was a military and legal document issued by the commander in chief during war, which meant it had to apply to those “slaves in territory controlled by enemy forces.” Finally, Lincoln’s issuance of the proclamation took political courage because there was “no big political support in the North for freeing slaves.” Many northerners opposed it, fearing that it would strengthen the resolve of secessionists. The country should be grateful to have had a leader like Lincoln in such “turbulent times,” but unfortunately there were detractors who, in Sowell’s judgment, “reduce other times—including our own—to cartoon-like simplicities that allow us to indulge in cheap self-righteousness when judging those who carry heavy responsibilities.”

Also in 2005, an African American politician of a more liberal persuasion, Barack Obama from Illinois, published an essay in *Time* magazine

honoring Lincoln’s strengths while recognizing his limitations. Obama encapsulated why Lincoln’s story continued to move Americans, yet, at the same time, the future president of the United States unwittingly gave voice to Bennett’s influence, if not additional elements of previous anti-Lincoln thought. Lincoln’s rise from poor obscurity and his strength in the face of tragic loss were reminders “of a larger fundamental element of American life—the enduring belief that we can constantly remake ourselves to fit our larger dreams.” Nevertheless, “as a law professor and civil rights lawyer and as an African American,” Obama could not “swallow whole the view of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator.” He was cognizant of Lincoln’s “limited views on race” and saw the Emancipation Proclamation as “more a military document than a clarion call for justice.” Obama’s comments here were somewhat equivocal: most Americans admired Lincoln’s rise from poverty, and the Illinois senator’s praise for the Emancipation Proclamation was somewhat tepid. Nevertheless, echoing the voice of W. E. B. Du Bois, Obama thought it was “precisely those imperfections” that made Lincoln “so compelling”: “For when the time came to confront the greatest moral challenge this nation has ever faced, this all too human man did not pass the challenge on to future generations.”

Senator Obama launched his presidential candidacy, moreover, from Lincoln’s hometown of Springfield, Illinois, in 2007, and as president he has been complimentary of Lincoln, averring at the 2009 Abraham Lincoln Association Banquet in Springfield that “it’s fair to say that the Presidency of this singular figure who we celebrate in so many ways made my own story possible.” President Obama’s embrace of Lincoln signaled an important post–Cold War shift in anti-Lincoln sentiment: namely, that a politically influential dissatisfaction with the sixteenth president emanating from the left wing of the political spectrum, a dissatisfaction that emerged only in the twentieth century from the unfulfilled egalitarian promises of the Civil War and Reconstruction, was on the decline, if not dead altogether.

Still, by the turn of the century, Lerone Bennett’s arguments appeared to be accepted into standard accounts or at the very least recognized as important enough to be taken into consideration in any assessment of Abraham Lincoln. In fact, one could even detect his influence in popular culture. A 2004 counterfactual documentary called C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America, operated on the premise that the Confederates had won the Civil War and perpetrated one of Bennett’s main contentions: Lincoln was portrayed as a weak, vacillating president, a president relatively unconcerned about slavery and whose most significant act, the Emancipation Proclamation, the narrator of the film claimed, “did not free a single slave.” Of course, such a depiction pales in comparison to the one seen by the American public in the Steven Spielberg 2012 biopic Lincoln, but that does not mean Bennett’s work does not remain significant.

Indeed, it is difficult to say whether Bennett’s influence has been felt primarily inside or outside the black community. Certainly, his arguments have carried weight there, but the drop in Lincoln’s standing with African Americans has also been caused by other factors, including the overall loss of prestige among all political leaders in the post-Watergate and post-Vietnam era. Most important, if President Obama, the most prominent African American politician in U.S., if not world, history finds in Abraham Lincoln a positive, useful image, the most significant impact of Bennett’s work may reside outside the black community. The illiberal, unintended effect of Bennett’s writing—especially considering his comparison of the Confederacy to the Third Reich—was to give succor to Lincoln’s conservative and

his piece connecting Lincoln and Marx was published in Jacobin magazine, a left-wing quarterly. See also Robin Blackburn, An Unfinished Revolution: Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln (London: Verso, 2011), 1–100. Or consider Corey Robin’s assessment of Lincoln’s status on the left. Robin is a left-wing political theorist and author of The Reactionary Mind, a critical analysis of conservative thought: “My sense is that he’s [Lincoln] fairly widely respected on the left. I know there’s Lerone Bennett’s work, which probably influenced a subset of black nationalist thinkers and activists, and still does to some degree. But I think the dominant position is ambivalently positive, acknowledging his limitations but aware of his achievements. [Eric] Foner’s book sort of stands in for the mainstream view of the left, I think.” Corey Robin, e-mail message to author, October 6, 2011; Foner, Fiery Trial.

58. Film narrator quoted in Gary Gallagher, Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know about the Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 104.

libertarian opponents, individuals sympathetic to the claims of the Richmond protestors, who asserted that Lincoln was the father of big government, a warmongering imperialist, a liar, and probably a racist and that a nefarious, professional Lincoln cult suppressed such unpalatable truths. These contemptuous portrayals have contributed to an atmosphere of public distrust in the United States, a vague sense that in the 1860s Lincoln and Union had been wrong and the South right and that the nation’s existence was somehow morally dubious.60 Such an outlook contributed to a deep cynicism toward the nation’s government and made effective governance, at least at the federal level, less likely if not impossible to achieve.61 Those who believed freedom, equality, and federal power were inimical to each other embraced such an outcome and their aversion to Lincoln intensified with the inauguration of the nation’s first black President in 2009, coincidentally the two-hundredth anniversary of Lincoln’s birthday. Bennett’s critique also received greater attention but was used by the president’s conservative and libertarian enemies to advance their decidedly negative portrait. Indeed, in 2008 Lincoln critic Thomas J. DiLorenzo claimed that Bennett’s “Forced into Glory is a much more powerful critique of Dishonest Abe than anything I have ever written. The Lincoln Cult, which would not dare to personally attack a serious African-American scholar like Bennett, has largely ignored the book instead.” More recently, Kentucky senator Rand Paul, a Republican with decidedly libertarian leanings and presidential aspirations, and one who has made it clear he is “not an enemy of Lincoln,” has called Forced into Glory “a great book.”62 For Lerone Bennett, whose writings indicated a belief that freedom and equality were inextricably linked and necessitated a strong federal government, and that because of a lack of consistent national commitment to racial equality there had never been a true Emancipation Proclamation in the United States, such a result must have been bittersweet indeed.

60. I owe the libertarian writer Timothy Sandefur a debt for this insight.
61. Donald T. Critchlow and Nancy MacLean, Debating the American Conservative Movement, 1945 to the Present (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 170.