Lincoln and Negro Slavery:  
I Haven’t Got Time for the Pain

PHILLIP SHAW PALUDAN

“We been expecting you a couple of days and more. What’s kep’ you?—boat get aground?” . . .
“It warn’t the grounding—that didn’t keep us back but a little. We blowed a cylinder-head.”
“Good gracious! Anybody hurt?”
“No’m. Killed a nigger.”
“Well it’s lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt.”

Mark Twain, Huckleberry Finn

There doesn’t seem to be much more to say about Abraham Lincoln’s attitudes toward slavery. He thought it was evil morally, that it threatened the Union, that it endangered civil liberties, that it made the nation a hypocrite in its foreign relations, that it soiled the name of the republic, and, especially, that it created an economic environment where men and women were denied the fruits they had earned from their labor. He thought that neither supposedly inferior color nor intellect justified it. And it had the capacity to make him miserable. He summarized his hostility to slavery at Ottawa debating Stephen A. Douglas and deploring the “real zeal” for its spread:

I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites—causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity, and especially because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty—criticizing the Declaration of Independence, and insisting that there is no right principle of action but self interest.¹

Eloquent words, as usual, but missing here, and missing almost everywhere (though not totally) from Lincoln’s writings both public and private, and from recollections of his thoughts, is the fundamental horror and sin of slavery: It encouraged and propagated the torture and the violation of millions of dependent and ultimately powerless children, women, and men. It allowed rape, murder, mutilation, theft, and the destruction of families, degradation of daily life, and the humiliation and debasement of an entire body of people for generations. Slavery was bad because it profoundly damaged black people day by day, for too many score years before and after emancipation. Yet when Lincoln spoke and wrote about the evils of slavery, the damage to black people is a drop in the bucket.

There are drops in that bucket. To understand Lincoln’s feelings toward slavery, it is important to measure them. In doing so we can get a sense of why slaves were freed and why they were not. In that understanding is an opportunity to understand Lincoln, his times, and the modern world’s use of him.

There is a modern frame of mind that seems to demand that good things must be done from the purest motives; that we should measure the inner soul or character of a person to determine her/his true worth. From President Bill Clinton’s winning capacity to “feel your pain” to his troubles because his personal sexual morals were at issue and through reassurance that President George W. Bush is a “compassionate Conservative,” we see this willingness to seek and judge the inner leaders, not just their policies. Lincoln hasn’t escaped this modern judgment. He is often judged not only by deed, but also by motive, not by result, but by personal incentive. So much of the recent flap about Lincoln’s racism is really a fight about what his motives were. Lerone Bennett’s work essentially argues that Lincoln’s emancipation efforts were a sham because Lincoln was driven by a “white dream” of a white America. Personally, says Bennett, Lincoln did not believe that blacks could be equal to whites. “To say that he was a racist is to understate the case.” Further, Lincoln “pretended to be an emancipator for tactical reasons.”

2. The question of how much damage slavery did to how many people, or the question of damage vs. resistance, from Stanley Elkins to Herbert Gutman and beyond to the nuances of works such as Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), or Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: The Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), is not argued here. Slavery permitted and nurtured an environment where every horror mentioned was possible and very often realized. That some slaves managed to avoid the worst of it hardly denies the evil of the institution itself.

Lincoln is especially susceptible to that kind of judgment. For no other leader have so many pure personal qualities been claimed. Especially he has been designated as our most compassionate leader. Stories of his tenderheartedness pervade Lincoln writings, especially popular writings. He pardoned soldiers in large numbers—whenever he could. He was merciful to Confederate soldiers. He commuted the sentences of hundreds of Native Americans, he treated individuals and states with compassion, “with malice toward none, with charity for all.” What he dealt with was “too vast for malicious dealing.” David R. Locke, better known as humorist Petroleum V. Nasby, said, “He was as tenderhearted as a schoolgirl.” Writing to Henry Wilson, William Herndon attributed Lincoln’s feelings toward slavery to the fact that “Lincoln is a man of heart—aye as gentle as a woman’s and as tender—but he has a will as strong as iron. He therefore loves all mankind—hates Slavery—every form of Despotism.” Wilson agreed: “Your description of the Loving, tender, true, Just man was a correct one.”

Modern writing carries this vision of a compassionate Lincoln to an extreme. A trip to Web sites on the Internet reveals how Lincoln has been almost sanctified. Search “Fanny McCullough and Lincoln” and you find him associated with the compassion of Jesus. Writers and speakers often quote the end of his second inaugural with its softhearted ideal of “malice toward none and charity for all,” but more often than not ignore the words that follow this sweetness: “with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right.”

The “Jesufying” began almost at the moment of his death. Lincoln died on Good Friday. By Easter Sunday one of the nation’s most influential ministers, Henry Bellows, was saying “Heaven rejoices this Easter morning in the resurrection of our lost leader.” Blacks immediately began calling Lincoln their savior, their great messiah. By 1866 Josiah Holland, Lincoln’s first biographer, was calling Lincoln the “savior of the Republic, emancipator of a race, true Christian, true man.” Holland’s book ended with a prayer to the sainted Lincoln: “Humble child of the backwoods . . . we receive thy life and its immeasurably great results, as the choicest gifts that any mortal has ever bestowed on us.” Lincoln has become Jesus.

There is no doubt that Lincoln could be compassionate. One reason that the general public believes that Lincoln was a compassionate man

is that he was one—when it came to friends and young soldiers—to the young especially. His letter to Fanny McCullough conveys empathy and a thoughtful sympathy that has seldom been equaled:

Dear Fanny
It is with deep grief that I learn of the death of your kind and brave father; and especially that it is affecting your young heart beyond what is common in such cases. In this sad world of ours sorrow comes to all, and to the young, it comes with bitterness agony because it takes them unawares. The older have learned to expect it. I am anxious to afford some alleviation of your present distress. Perfect relief is not possible, except with time. You can not now realize that you will feel better. Is not this so? And yet it is a mistake. You are sure to be happy again. To know this, which is certainly true, will make you some less miserable now. I have had experience enough to know what I say; and you need only to believe it to feel better at once. The memory of your dear father, instead of an agony, will yet be a sad sweet feeling in your heart, of a purer, and holier sort than you have known before.6

But, as Richard Current demonstrated, “Lincoln the Tenderhearted” needs qualification. The president allowed hundreds of deserters to be executed. Thirty-eight Indians were hanged in reprisal for the Sioux uprising in 1862. He executed Nathaniel Gordon for slave trading. And, of course, Lincoln preferred a military strategy designed to kill as many Confederates as possible—demanding attacks rather than maneuvers to win the war. Armies of soldiers were his targets, not strategic locations. Michael Burlingame also disposes of the belief that Lincoln sat like a saint when provoked, seldom, if ever, displaying a temper. While more tolerant than most people, Lincoln could shout, ridicule, intimidate, and lay hands upon offensive adversaries and visitors. By the time he got to Washington, he was a milder-tempered man, but William Stoddard, one of Lincoln’s secretaries, put the matter well: “Does the good natured, soft hearted, easy going . . . tenant of the White House ever really lose his temper? The country generally does not believe that he ever does or can, but the right answer to the question is that under exceedingly trying circumstances he generally succeeds in keeping down the storm which is continually stirred up by the treacheries, cowardices, villainies and stupidities, which almost daily and hourly he is compelled to see and understand and wrestle with and overcome.”7

7. Quoted in Michael Burlingame, The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 208. Chapter 7, at 89 pages, is tied with one other as the longest chapter in the book.
Lincoln “generally” displayed his empathetic qualities in all these circumstances. But were those qualities reflected when it came to the condition of slaves? There is very little evidence of Lincoln’s sensitivity to the suffering of slaves in bondage. My count rests at five instances in a lifetime of fifty-six years. And slavery was a subject that Lincoln spoke on hundreds of times. But only two statements about slave suffering come directly from Lincoln. The others rest on memories, recollections gathered from friends and neighbors by men like William Herndon.

Lincoln’s minimal interest in black pain is not news to historians. Lerone Bennett brands Lincoln as a racist because he never looked at slavery from the slave cabin. But even those Lincoln defenders who attend to the issue haven’t considered it as carefully as they might. They know the fact of Lincoln’s disinterest in black pain but haven’t explored what it means. In the most recent study of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, Allen Guelzo observes that “[Lincoln] spoke against slavery he was speaking against the institution, and not necessarily for its black victims . . . he was not enough moved by American slavery’s singular injustice to its American captives to call for their immediate emancipation.” Guelzo notes that Lincoln wanted to end slavery gradually, not by the swift sword of immediatism. He observes Lincoln’s law practice and finds no abolitionist eagerness there. In fact, the Matson case found Lincoln advocating that Mr. Matson be allowed to re-enslave a runaway and her children. And Lincoln and Mary both benefited when her slaves from the Todd holdings were sold. Little moral outrage against slavery showed itself then.⁸ Guelzo gets the main point right, but he is at pains to show Lincoln’s prudence in seeking emancipation and to demonstrate, rightly, that Lincoln’s respect for the legal order guided his hand when it was time for emancipation. He doesn’t explore very deeply the meaning and nature of Lincoln’s lack of compassion. And Guelzo does more than most writers on Lincoln.

Other historians also obscure the nature of Lincoln’s hostility to slavery. Douglas Wilson says only that “Lincoln hated slavery all his life.” He points to a protest by Lincoln and Dan Stone to show that hatred, but says little more about the nature of their feelings. Michael Burlingame notes Lincoln’s distaste of cruelty to human beings and animals and his anger at slave traders, and he recounts the stories that Lincoln felt the horrors of the New Orleans slave market. But Burlingame, after noting how many historians now agree that Lincoln seriously opposed slavery, then goes on to catalogue Lincoln’s statements expressing his hostility to slavery. Burlingame does speculate

that it was slave trading that bothered Lincoln but explores no further what other parts of slave suffering might have bothered him. In doing that, he joins those historians in their general omission of the question of whose pain Lincoln deplored while hating the institution.\textsuperscript{9}

Benjamin Thomas recognized that Lincoln was affected by the slavery he saw in New Orleans, but that “the deep compassion that Lincoln revealed in later life had not become evident yet.” He is suspicious of one piece of evidence we will look at later—John Hanks’s recollection of Lincoln’s outrage at slave selling. But Thomas doesn’t deeply explore the nature of Lincoln’s attack.\textsuperscript{10}

The most recent biography of Lincoln, by Richard J. Carwardine, admits that Lincoln grew toward greater acceptance of black rights, then goes on to note that the Emancipation Proclamation was not issued for humanitarian reasons; and yet, Carwardine argues that even in his early protests against slavery, Lincoln showed sensitivity to the suffering of slaves. But his proof rests on a letter to Mary Speed and on John Hanks’s recollection, both of which, as we shall see, are suspect.\textsuperscript{11}

Kenneth J. Winkle argues that Lincoln did not support racial equality in 1850s Illinois, but he did support a free-labor argument that assumed that blacks might one day achieve equality through their own efforts. Yet Winkle follows the pattern of not taking the next step to ask who suffered most from the slavery that Lincoln protested.\textsuperscript{12}

The most influential discussions about Lincoln and African Americans were published in two articles of the late 1960s—provoked by Bennett’s claim that Lincoln was a “honky,” a racist. Don Fehrenbacher’s widely known article “Only His Stepchildren” focuses on how Lincoln accommodated the racism of his time even as he moved toward emancipation. Despite being born and raised in a world alive with anti-black prejudice, Lincoln had few encounters with slavery after he moved to rural Indiana and then central Illinois. And Fehrenbacher notes “there is scarcely any record of his thoughts on race until he was past forty years of age.”\textsuperscript{13} Lincoln was not unusual in the context of much antislavery agitation. For “much of the motivation for antislavery agitation was only indirectly connected with the


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Negro . . . the prime target often seemed to be not so much slavery as the ‘slave power.’”

But Fehrenbacher does err, I think, when he declares, “In Lincoln’s case, no one can doubt his profound, though perhaps intermittent, sympathy for the slave.”14 He cannot keep from affirming Lincoln’s compassion for black people, and yet at the same time Fehrenbacher notes the president did not base his antislavery feelings on his racial views. The Declaration of Independence’s assertion that all men were created equal was his foundational position. This is not to say that racial concerns weren’t dominant in his political world. Democrats played the race card constantly, and Republicans had to trump it. But the issue was “largely spurious.” Still Lincoln had to respond; and he did by denying that he wanted full equality. Throughout the 1850s these denials were frequent, but Fehrenbacher argues that they were more likely political expedients and not indicators of his true feelings. In fact, Lincoln’s statements were “tentative and equivocal.” He said that black people “might not be” his equal or equal to whites in “certain respects.” He conceded that if whites or blacks had to be ranked, he preferred that his own race be superior. But he never showed any enthusiasm for racist arguments. And when president he “opened the White House to black visitors in a way that set aside all precedent.”15

Fehrenbacher emphasizes the importance of appeasing conservatives if Lincoln was to preserve the Union, meanwhile noting that he moved toward abolition goals, not away from them. Lincoln told Charles Sumner that he was just six weeks behind antislavery crusaders. But Fehrenbacher also notes that the welfare of African Americans, “though by no means a matter of indifference to him, had never been, and was not likely to become, his ‘paramount object.’” For the Great Emancipator, blacks were “only his stepchildren,” as Frederick Douglass had said.16

George Frederickson was a bit less impressed by Lincoln’s egalitarian ethos. While Fehrenbacher gave Lincoln the benefit of the doubt, Frederickson noted that Lincoln did not advocate, and maybe didn’t believe in, full black equality. He described Lincoln as a devoted disciple of Henry Clay who recognized that blacks shared an equal humanity with white people, but not full equality. In 1829 Clay asserted that blacks were “rational beings, like ourselves, capable of feeling, of reflection, and of judging of what naturally belong to them.

15. Ibid., 107.
16. Ibid., 112.
as a portion of the human race.” But Frederickson uses Lincoln’s interest in colonization as a sign that the president was a “pragmatic white supremacist in his concept of domestic race relations.” He understood that in the United States white majorities wanted blacks subordinated. But Lincoln advocated colonization because he had “a principled egalitarianism in his world outlook,” if not in his domestic outlook. But if he believed that man was man worldwide in fundamental rights, Lincoln still accepted prohibitions against jury duty and voting that limited black rights, based on the necessity to respect a strongly held majority prejudice. But this practical necessity argument might ultimately justify slavery itself. Holding these views, Lincoln saw the African American as “a man but not a brother.”

While sensitive to Lincoln’s pragmatism and aware of his egalitarian ideals, none of these authors give direct attention to just what he was leaving out, or avoiding, in his challenges to slavery. I think it is important to do so in part to engage the nature of Lincoln’s argument against slavery and equally to understand the context of those remarks and the full painful qualities of the slavery that he avoided talking about. Historians have stated a fact: “Lincoln seldom protested against black pain.” It is valuable to get the feel of that fact and to understand it.

Since I have been arguing that Lincoln’s empathy toward slaves was limited, let’s start with the vision of a Lincoln, who, despite the paucity of comments on slave suffering, still felt it. Advocates of the compassionate Lincoln point to a recollection by John Hanks, Lincoln’s cousin, a recollection by E. Grant Gentry, and a letter that Lincoln wrote in 1841 to Mary Speed (the half-sister of his best friend Joshua Speed) as the major sources for Lincoln’s feelings. I would add his 1855 letter to Speed.

The memories by Hanks and Gentry both tell stories of a trip to New Orleans. Lincoln took two trips down the Mississippi to New Orleans, one in 1828 and another in 1831. The first he took with Allen Gentry, the second with Denton Offutt, John Johnston, and, allegedly, John Hanks.

The first of these memories, of the 1828 trip, has a slightly complicated provenance. It appears in a book by Francis Marion Van Natter, citing an affidavit by E. Grant Gentry, attesting to testimony given by Allen Gentry, with the affidavit in Van Natter’s possession. We thus have testimony (Van Natter’s) about testimony (E. G. Gentry’s) about

testimony (Allen Gentry’s). The fog between the historical fact and today is pretty thick. But let’s take the best evidence we have and see what it tells us.

Describing the 1828 trip, Gentry vividly remembered a day in New Orleans when he and the nineteen-year-old Lincoln came upon a slave market. Pausing to watch, Gentry recalled looking down at Lincoln’s hands and seeing that he “doubled his fists tightly; his knuckles went white.” Men wearing black coats and white hats buy field hands, “black and ugly,” for $500 to 800. And then the real horror begins: “When the sale of “fancy girls” began, Lincoln, “unable to stand it any longer,” muttered to Gentry “Allen that’s a disgrace. If I ever get a lick at that thing I’ll hit it hard.” The story is dramatic and elaborate.\(^{18}\) It is an incident that would likely be burned into the memories of both men. People who heard this story, or heard of it, were likely to link it firmly to Lincoln’s attitude toward slavery.

The story also has another source. Louis Warren repeats it in his study of “Lincoln’s Youth.” This time it comes from Absalom, Allen’s son, who told it to Mrs. Bess Ehrman, who conveyed it to the Lincoln Life Foundation. It is almost the same story. Allen remembers standing watching a slave sale and Lincoln was “very angry” and said “If I ever get a chance to hit this thing I’ll hit it hard.”\(^{19}\) Gentry himself seems to have told his family about the scene, but he didn’t pass it on to the public. He died many years before the war. His descendants passed his stories on.\(^{20}\)

The Gentry material does show Lincoln’s empathy with slaves’ pain. And if Gentry recalled it accurately, years after it happened, Lincoln’s personal virtue is, if not established, at least reasonably inferred. The man who did good deeds was a good man.

But at least one part of Gentry’s story rings false. While he may be right about the prices of “fancy girls,” the price for field hands seems low. Buyers knew that their prosperity rested on the hard work of field hands—pretty or plain. It is likely that the prices of field hands would have matched the prices for “fancy girls.”\(^{21}\)

John Hanks’s evidence also has its flaws; more major ones I think. Hanks described the 1831 trip in an interview with William Herndon in 1866. According to him, Lincoln took a trip down the Mississippi in 1831 with Denton Offutt, John Johnston, and Hanks himself. While visiting the city for several days, Lincoln had the chance to observe slavery in all its horrors. The first thing Hanks describes in New Orleans is the shock of slavery:

There it was we saw Negroes chained—maltreated—whipt & scourged. Lincoln saw it—his heart bled—said nothing much—was silent from feeling—was sad—felt bad—was thoughtful & abstracted—I can say knowingly that it was on this trip that he formed his opinions of slavery: it ran its iron in him then & there—May 1831. I have heard him say—often & often.22

This seems pretty compelling testimony of Lincoln’s hatred of slavery because blacks suffer. Again, it was the sort of emotionally charged outburst people would remember. It might be accurate . . . but then again. Lincoln himself, writing an autobiography for the campaign in 1860, seems to make a special point of saying that Hanks never made it to New Orleans: “Hanks, having a family, and being likely to be detained from home longer than at first expected, had turned back from St. Louis.”23

Furthermore, Lincoln speaks of the trip but never says that New Orleans shaped his attitudes toward anything. He talks of the trip but then finds it necessary to remark that Hanks wasn’t in the town when this alleged incident occurred. One might expect that Lincoln would then say something about how the New Orleans slave pens affected him. But after describing Hanks’s departure, Lincoln makes no mention of slavery or the South. He moves on to tell his readers where Hanks lives, that he is a cousin to Lincoln’s mother, and then says that John Johnston also went on the trip. It is the kind of information one might expect in a personal letter to friends and family. But, what is the point of such minutia in a campaign biography? Lincoln doesn’t say, and quickly turns to his experience in the Black Hawk War. The horrors of the New Orleans trade are not revived or recalled or even mentioned.

22. Herndon’s Informants, 457. Herndon noted, “I can say that this testimony can be implicitly relied on. Mr. Lincoln loved this man—thought him truthful—honest and noble. Lincoln has stated this to me over and over again.”

23. Collected Works, 4:64. Burlingame, in Inner World of Lincoln, 45, says that Lincoln’s memory may be “faulty” on this point. I doubt that Lincoln would pay so much attention to the question if his memory was so faulty. He described not only when Hanks left but why. Why would this matter in a campaign biography?
The comment about Hanks’s absence, in fact, sticks out strangely, as if Lincoln wants to get Hanks out of the picture in New Orleans.

Also interesting in Hanks’s testimony to Herndon is the unusual comment in a marginal note by Herndon that “I can say that this testimony can be implicitly relied on. Mr. Lincoln loved this man—thought him truthful—honest and noble. Lincoln has stated this to me over and over again.” Does this protest too much? Herndon was much more of an abolitionist than Lincoln was, and Hanks’s information confirmed Herndon’s views. Also, it was while Herndon was compiling the Hanks interview that William Lloyd Garrison visited Springfield and stayed at Herndon’s house. Suspicious also is that in an earlier (June 13, 1865) interview with Hanks when New Orleans is mentioned, Hanks describes the trip but mentions nothing about Lincoln’s outrage at slavery. He does make the comment that “There can be and is no mistake in these facts or the time they took place.” Others of Herndon’s informants mention Lincoln’s trips to the Crescent City but do not link them with Lincoln’s feelings about slavery.24

Tangentially confirming the importance of New Orleans slavery in Lincoln’s life at the same time, there is a recollection, published in 1901, by Robert Browne, who knew Lincoln when Browne was an office boy and schoolboy in the 1850s. Browne recalled Lincoln saying “I saw [slavery] myself when I was only a little older than you are now and the horrid pictures are still in my mind.”25 The context suggests that Lincoln is speaking about New Orleans. But he doesn’t say so clearly, and after close to fifty years Browne’s memory may not actually add much information to the other recollections of Lincoln’s being appalled by cruelty to slaves.

But there is firsthand evidence about Lincoln’s reactions to slave suffering; firsthand, but ambiguous. It was September 27, 1841, and Lincoln wrote to his friend, Mary Speed, the half-sister of his best friend Joshua Speed. Lincoln had visited with her during a six-week stay at Speed’s plantation near Lexington. Lincoln recalled a steamboat boat trip recently taken into the world of slavery. “By the way” the passage began, “A fine example was presented on board the boat

24. Herndon’s Informants, 44, 72–73, 114, 259, 381, 429. Hanks’s later testimony about Lincoln’s outrage is 457–8. In Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln: Compiled and Edited by Don E. and Virginia Fehrenbacher (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996) 198, the editors give Lincoln’s statement arising from this situation an E—the lowest possible creditability mark they give. Lincoln “said” “By God boys; let’s get away from this thing. If ever I get a chance to hit that thing I’ll hit it hard.” Herndon does say, however, that Lincoln spoke to him about the ugliness of a slave auction. See Burlingame, 22–23. See David Donald, Lincoln’s Herndon (New York: DaCapo, 1988), 99–104.
for contemplating the effect of condition upon human happiness.”
A slave trader [Lincoln called him “a gentleman”] had “purchased”
twelve “Negroes” [Lincoln did not use the word “slaves” in this letter,
although he did speak once of “perpetual slavery.”] in various parts of
Kentucky and was taking them to “a farm” in the South. Here began
the description of the twelve slaves “chained six by six together.” Each
slave [Lincoln wrote “each of them”] had an iron clevis on the left
wrist and fastened to the main chain “like so many fish upon a trot
line.” But the physical pain did not impress so much as the fact that
“they were being separated forever from the scenes of their childhood,
their friends, their fathers and mothers, and brothers and sisters, and
many of them from their wives and children, and going into perpetual
slavery where the lash of the master is proverbially more ruthless and
unrelenting than any other where. . . .”

It was a scene that would have provoked fury and outrage in the
writings of any abolitionist we know of. Yet Lincoln first said that
“Nothing of interest happened during the passage” and commented
on how well the Negroes seemed to take the horror they were fac
ing. “Amid all these distressing circumstances . . . they were the most
cheerful and apparently happy creatures on board.” A slave who had
been sold away from his wife played the fiddle, and others “danced,
sung, cracked jokes, and played cards” every day. “How true it is that
‘God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb,’ or in other words, that He
renders the worst of human conditions tolerable, while He permits
the best, to be nothing better than tolerable.”

In his lifetime, Lincoln had witnessed William Lloyd Garrison’s
announcement of the birth of immediatism, read of Nat Turner’s rebel
lion, which spilled the blood of fifty-five white people, mostly women
and children, seen hundreds of abolition newspapers and pamphlets
describing in detail slavery’s horrors, and heard not a few abolition
speakers. It was after these events that he wrote this most extensive
and specific discussion describing the pain that slavery inflicted on
black people. and Lincoln is interested predominantly in slave songs
and dance and not the violence of bondage. At best he ameliorates
slavery’s horror with an inference that black folks have a special ca
pacity to deal with captivity.

Of course Lincoln was writing to a Kentucky friend, someone he
liked personally who probably defended slavery. She was part of the
circle that included his best and closest friend. She was also a woman,
and he may have wished to spare her delicate feelings. This early in

27. Ibid.
his life he might have been unready for rejection or the alienation of friends.²⁸

There is another explanation, a more personal one, that deserves attention. But it answers almost none of the questions we want to answer. Here is his wife’s view of how Lincoln expressed his feelings. “With all the president’s deep feeling, he was not a demonstrative man, when he felt most deeply he expressed the least.” This echoes to some degree the experience of his friends. Men who knew him well, who had lived near him for years, traveled on the circuit, saw him almost daily, year after year, almost uniformly said that they did not feel that they knew him intimately. His law partner of fifteen years, William Herndon, wrote, “Mr. Lincoln was a complex—shut mouthed man . . . keeping his secrets and his policies in his own heart.” David Donald has argued that Lincoln had only two intimate friends in his life, Joshua Speed and Orville Browning. It is notable that neither intimacy lasted. It is also worth noting that both men were conservatives on race and slavery questions.²⁹

Now, perhaps perversely, it is possible that Mary’s comments provide a full explanation for the paucity of evidence about Lincoln’s feelings toward slaves—he felt their pain, he just didn’t speak it, and the sign that he felt most compassion was that he didn’t express it: the less evidence the more truth.³⁰ But that approach has disastrous, indeed, obliterating, consequences for historical inquiry. And so we ought to proceed looking for evidence to unravel the knot of Lincoln’s attitudes toward black people.

But as we peruse Lincoln’s words throughout his career, his compassion for the slave makes very few appearances, though at times we do glimpse Lincoln’s recognition that slavery hurts, that it makes black people miserable. On August 24, 1855, Lincoln wrote to Joshua Speed. Again the river is the venue as Lincoln revisits his 1841 trip: “In 1841 you and I had together a tedious low water trip, on Steam


³⁰. It seems possible that Mary’s observation grew from her own needy interpretation of her husband’s silence and distance from her.
Boat from Louisville to St. Louis. You may remember, as I well do, that from Louisville to the mouth of the Ohio there were on board ten or a dozen slaves, shackled together with irons. That sight was of continual torment to me; and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio, or any other slave border.” Slaves shackled in irons are not the only torment Lincoln claims to feel. Catching runaways also troubles him: “I confess I hate to see the poor creatures hunted down, and caught, and carried back to their stripes and unrewarded toils; but I bite my lip and keep quiet.”

This letter does give some direct evidence that slavery makes Lincoln unhappy for its cruelty to blacks. The 1841 trip still lingers in his mind (but the 1831 trip isn’t mentioned), and Lincoln has told us that catching runaways and shackled slaves are a “continual torment” to him. And yet, as scholars have observed, what is troublesome about this 1855 letter is its contrast to the 1841 letter to Mary Speed. Then Lincoln wrote about the happiness that blacks could muster in the face of misery. But he even sweetened that vision by saying that nothing of importance happened. And his references to the “happy” slaves might even have had the effect of reassuring slave owners that blacks suffer less than whites would. Furthermore, the misery Lincoln feels, or reports feeling, is usually his own misery—the institution has the “capacity to make me miserable,” he tells Speed. And as for the misery of three-and-a-half-million slaves? Still, it is true that Lincoln did speak here directly about the pain of slavery from the slave’s perspective. But it is one of the rare exceptions in Lincoln’s writings throughout a life of fifty-six years in which the condition of four million men, women, and children slaves troubled and ultimately helped divide an entire nation.

Maybe we can get a better understanding of Lincoln’s strange omission by looking at several of his encounters with slavery. It began with small steps. In all likelihood Lincoln shared the biases of his youth in Kentucky and Indiana; “nigger” was a familiar word and black people were disparaged. But we have no evidence that he used the word to wound or attack the blacks he met or knew of. He did not live in a world where many blacks lived and so had few occasions to deal with racial matters. But as he grew up, he surely heard about debates in Indiana and later Illinois over slavery as the states joined the union, and then decided whether or not to obey the antislavery guidelines of the Northwest Ordinance. There was mob and individual violence in the southern parts of those states over race relations, racial accusations being used to justify slavery. And he would have known about

the struggles over a proslavery constitution in Illinois in 1824, when he was thirteen.

The first solid evidence about Lincoln’s attitudes toward African Americans came when he was twenty-eight years old. He and the other representative from Springfield, Dan Stone, filed a protest in the Illinois legislature March 3, 1837, that arose in response to abolitionist protests. Abolitionists had launched petition and postal campaigns decrying the many evils of slavery as anti-abolitionist riots broke out all over the North, as southern legislatures demanded support for silencing abolition speakers and authors, and Congress had passed “gag rules” to paralyze petitions demanding that Congress end slavery in the District of Columbia and the territories. Springfield lawmakers replied. With a vote of seventy-seven to six in favor of a resolution, they said that they disapproved “highly” of abolitionism and affirmed that the Constitution made slavery “sacred to the slave-holding states.” They said nothing about the evils of slavery.

Six weeks later Lincoln and Stone filed their protest, which did mention the institution. It was vague on the details. Slavery was founded on both “injustice” and “bad policy.” But rather than explore that injustice or bad policy, Lincoln and Stone then swept into their condemnation the assertion that abolition doctrines tended to increase the evils of slavery rather than abating them. Here was some vague understanding that slaves might suffer, but it eroded that sensitivity by blaming the people who protested against that pain. To their credit Lincoln and Stone at least declared the injustice of slavery, but little was said about the day-to-day tortures that slaves endured.32 For the slaves, the devil was in the details of their pain. Lincoln had only a minute or two for that pain.

Lincoln’s silence on slave pain contrasted starkly with abolitionist writings. In 1839 Theodore Dwight Weld published his two-hundred-page testimony against the agonies that slavery fostered, *American Slavery As It Is: The Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*. Taking his testimony from southern newspapers’ advertisements for runaways and from southern and northern observers of the institution at work, Weld provided page after page of horrors. In close to one year alone he reported 25 floggings, 28 cases of slaves chained, fettered, and handcuffed, 119 brandings and maimings, 22 instances of slaves’ teeth knocked out. And all of this was only what was reported in southern sources. Weld’s book merely echoed what had been said by abolitionists around the North in newspapers, pamphlets, and from the stump. Closer to home

Lincoln surely knew that his friend, Owen Lovejoy, attacked slavery in April 1860 on the floor of the House of Representatives in a speech called “The Barbarism of Slavery.” “Slavery,” Lovejoy declared, “has the violence of robbery, the blood and cruelty of piracy, and the offense and brutal lusts of polygamy, all combined and concentrated in itself, with aggravations that neither one of these crimes ever knew or dreamed of.” Senator Charles Sumner had given a speech about the evils of slavery (also called the “Barbarism of Slavery”), which was equally concerned with brutality to blacks. But Lincoln never reacted, or responded directly to such words. It is not as though Republicans in the party were all silent on slave suffering. “Radicals,” Eric Foner reminds us, “consistently stressed the cruelties and injustices inflicted on the slave.” Joshua Giddings emphasized this approach, speaking of the sins of the slave trade, of murder, and other brutality. Other radical Republicans spoke of slaves burned alive and of families destroyed. While it is true, as William Gienapp observes, “concern for the welfare of the slave did not motivate a majority of Republicans,” it is also true as he notes, “Without question, for some Republicans the moral aspects of the controversy were paramount.”

But Lincoln was a gradualist out of deep conviction—a man who proposed, in the middle of the Civil War, one month before the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, a plan to end slavery that would allow almost forty years for it to die. He wanted emancipation to allow black and white to learn “to live themselves into new relationships to each other” (my italics). Lawyer, politician, successful player in the economic system, Lincoln was devoted to the Constitution and the rule of law—and to bringing about changes in the nation that would last. Institutions, structures, systems would insure that stability and permanence would abide. “Lincoln’s search for order” meant a sort of rescue from the mobile life he had led. It also meant that there was something he could rely on, something more stable than the cycle of love and loss he experienced with his mother, his sister, Ann Rutledge, Matthew Gentry, and then the emotional roller coaster he experienced in his marriage to Mary Todd. With Lincoln, personal emotions were dangerous, filled with the possibility of deep pain; institutions and the ideals they were formed to protect were the best, perhaps the only, things he could trust. He couldn’t take much time for personal, individual suffering by the slaves that he would free.

A year before Weld’s publication Lincoln himself noticed a similar atrocity. In his Lyceum Speech he mentioned that a black man in St. Louis, accused of murder, had been chased by a mob and burned to death for his crime. But where Weld used his horror stories to condemn human bondage, Lincoln observed that the Negro who was burned “had forfeited his life, by the perpetuation of an outrageous murder, upon one of the most worthy and respectable citizens of the city; and had he not died as he did, he must have died by sentence of the law, in a very short time afterwards. As to him alone, it was as well the way it was, as it could otherwise have been.” Lincoln’s lesson was that people should obey the law, not that a black man being burned to death was a particular horror.\(^{35}\)

As he became a prominent political figure after 1854, Lincoln could express at times, and in general terms, the high costs of slavery. He protested powerfully when Democrats played the race card, pointing out in general yet compelling terms what slavery meant to blacks. “By all these means you have succeeded in dehumanizing the Negro; . . . you have put him down; and made it forever impossible for him to be but as the beasts of the field; you have extinguished his soul, and placed him where the ray of hope is blown out in darkness like that which broods over the spirits of the damned. . . .” And yet this catalogue still missed the specific agonies suffered by black men women and children. And Lincoln, as was his wont, still managed to see white peril in black slavery. All these terrible deeds threatened white masters, “are you quite sure that the demon which you have roused will not turn and rend you?”\(^{36}\) Lincoln spoke consistently and eloquently against slavery after being awakened to slavery’s expansionist possibilities. It is a “moral wrong,” it is a “terrible wrong,” a “gross outrage on the law of nature,” “a monstrous injustice,” “unqualified evil to the Negro.” But all these protests either stand alone, with no more said than that slavery is evil, or are linked to harms and threats to the political-constitutional system. Slavery threatens the Union, undercuts civil liberty, and especially undermines the system of free labor, which gives hope to workers that they can advance and achieve the fruits of their own labor. In addition, the spread of slavery defies the intentions of the framers of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence who believed in the principle of equal liberty.

But there is only one reference in the six years of debate and ora-

\(^{36}\) Collected Works, 3:96.
tory, from 1854 to 1860, to what slaves suffer under the system. In March 1860 Senator Douglas supported a slave code (a “sedition law” Lincoln called it) that punished public attacks on slavery. Public antislavery talk, Douglas argued, was a threat that would encourage slave runaways or revolts. In challenging the law, Lincoln perhaps heard the cries from black bondage. Supporters of slavery, Lincoln said, demand that opponents must cease their protests. “We must vote for Douglas’ new Sedition laws; we must withdraw our statement that slavery is wrong. If a slave runs away, they overlook the natural causes, which impelled him to the act; do not remember the oppression or the lashes he receive, but charge us with instigating him to flight. If he screams when whipped, they say it is not caused by the pains he suffers, but he screams because we instigate him to outcrying.”

Lincoln’s insensitivity to the pains of slavery did not arise from unfamiliarity with African Americans. Richard Hart has shown that “there were at least twenty one African Americans . . . living within a three block radius of Lincoln’s Springfield home” by 1860. Many had been there throughout the sixteen years that the Lincolns lived at Eighth and Jackson and during the twenty-four years that Lincoln lived in the town. He and Mary had black servants and met blacks on the streets every day. Springfield had a population of 234 African Americans in 1861. Lincoln knew a black barber, William Fleurville (“Billy the Barber”), and probably had his hair cut by him or the other black barber in town, Samuel Ball. He tried cases involving blacks (34 of over 5,000 cases). He was on close personal terms with people who owned slaves, in Springfield and out. He married into the Todd family of Kentucky. He visited Kentucky as an adult and lived for about three weeks on a slave plantation. He and Mary and Robert and Eddie stopped in Lexington for about two weeks on their way to Washington in 1847. His visits to Kentucky put him in the position, William Townsend notes, to see several kinds of atrocities. He also knew of the activities of Springfield’s blacks whose meetings and occasional speeches (often condemning and describing slavery) at those meetings were covered by local papers. While a congressman in Washington, Lincoln not only saw the domestic slave trade at work, he became friends with Joshua Giddings and Horace Mann who, according David Donald, “helped him see the atrocities that occurred every day in the national capitol.” There was an arsenal of both public

and private experiences of slavery and racism to be drawn on. But Lincoln almost never unlocked that arsenal. 38

So is Bennett right? Lincoln’s lack of interest in slave pain was natural from a Kentucky-born white man? Personal racial bias does not explain Lincoln’s distance from the scars of slaves. More than once Lincoln did say that he would not grant blacks the right to vote or to serve on juries. But a racist Democratic Party, playing the race card to defeat him in the prewar years, evoked these statements. It is worth noting that in wartime elections, faced with similar racist barrages, Lincoln’s only concession was to talk about colonization and to say nothing about what would be denied blacks. Under pervasive racist attacks, Lincoln expanded steadily the rights of black Americans, free and slave.

Lincoln did not believe that blacks were biologically inferior; environment oppressed and damaged them. Speaking to a delegation of blacks in August 1862, the president argued for a colonization plan to send blacks to Africa or the Caribbean. Colonization has been highlighted as the major manifestation of Lincoln’s racism. And in this speech he said, “You and we are different races. We have between us a broader difference than exists between almost any other two races. . . . This physical difference is a great disadvantage to us both, as I think your race suffer very greatly, many of them by living among us, while ours suffer from your presence.” Prejudice? Perhaps. But also a clear and unvarnished statement of the racial facts of life in mid-nineteenth-century United States. And, Lincoln did not stop with pointing out prejudice. In the same speech he asked that the black leaders of the project be “men . . . capable of thinking as white men, and not those who have been systematically oppressed.” He believed that environment, not biology, built mental ability. Black men, though of a different race, could think “as white men,” once free of their chains. 39

38. Richard Hart, “Springfield’s African Americans as a Part of the Lincoln Community,” Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association 20 (Winter 1999): 35–54; Townsend, Lincoln and the Bluegrass: Slavery and Civil War in Kentucky (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1955), 1226–132; David Donald, Lincoln (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 165. Donald says that Lincoln “had . . . little personal knowledge of slavery.” I think this incorrect—he had lived with it in his visits to Kentucky and seen it in New Orleans. Donald predominantly emphasizes Lincoln’s hostility to slavery on grounds of threats to white society. Donald discounts the possibility that Lincoln saw whipping posts and slave auctions in Lexington because Lincoln himself doesn’t mention them (see 625 n.) My point is that Lincoln didn’t mention them, though the chances that he saw them are quite good.

Colonization itself was a plan that recognized racial differences and resentments. But it hardly deserves to be called “ethnic cleansing,” as both Lerone Bennett and Eric Foner have termed it.\[^{40}\] The plan, which Lincoln believed in deeply for some time, was voluntary and was merely one of several approaches that the president adopted to emancipate slaves and to persuade white majorities that emancipation would not threaten white supremacy.\[^{41}\] It reflected Lincoln’s understanding that white prejudice (deplorable though it was) had to be recognized in any change of racial conditions in America. Lincoln accompanied his last public call for colonization with an extended argument that even if blacks did not colonize Africa or the Caribbean, their presence in the United States posed no threat to white interests. The ratio of 1.7 black to whites hardly endangered whites; blacks would not rush north when emancipation destroyed the impetus to become runaways. Colonization would reduce the labor supply and thereby raise wages of all laborers. Both races might benefit from an open multiracial economy.\[^{42}\]

Lincoln did not downplay the suffering of slaves to advantage his own race. He could make racist comments, use the word “nigger,” but almost never do so to inflict pain or condemn. And certainly his attacks on the dangers and evils of slavery showed his profound hostility to the institution. But the pains of slaves were seldom mentioned. Why?

One reason for Lincoln’s comparative silence about slave suffering is rather obvious: the nature of society’s racism, and his own personal goals and ambition. Most white Americans believed in the biological inferiority of black people. They accused their abolitionist supporters of everything from free love to anarchy. Lincoln fell short of full heartfelt egalitarianism for pragmatic, political reasons. Politically ambitious as he was, Lincoln had to skirt very carefully accusations that he was an abolitionist. His constituents would punish him for abolition views. Lincoln represented such a district as a state legislator, and he aspired to something more. He had to avoid sounding like an abolitionist as well as voting their ticket. Otherwise, as in the debates with Douglas, his opponents would tar him with abolitionism and all the attendant evils of interracial intercourse (they knew and used the varied meanings of the word).

Antislavery parties were anything but popular when Lincoln began


\[^{41}\] The idea that colonization is “the” solution Lincoln chose to racism and that he envisioned “total” separation of the races is wrong. See error in George M. Frederickson, “America’s Original Sin,” New York Review of Books, 25 March 2004, 36.

\[^{42}\] Collected Works, 5:534–36.
Phillip Shaw Paludan

his political career. The voting harvest of the Liberty Party in the 1840s shows what antislavery advocates were up against. In 1840 presidential candidate James Birney got 153 votes in Illinois out of the 93,000 cast. Four years later he amassed 3,537 of the state total of the 108,000 cast. Lincoln’s district gave Birney zero votes in 1840 and 2,246 in 1844. Sangamon County (Springfield) gave no votes to any Liberty party candidate in the federal and state elections during those four years until 1844, when Birney got 18. Lincoln’s political universe promised nothing to abolition politicians.43

But in Lincoln’s case there might have been other pressures to mute his empathy. First of all, he was suspicious of emotional appeals in general. His plea for reason, for respect for the rule of law, for making obedience to the law the political religion of the nation; his insistence that “all conquering mind” and reason replace passionate moralizing in reforming drunkards, all testify to his doubts about the excesses of emotionalism and sentiment. It is true that Lincoln enjoyed the romantic poetry of his age, filled with gloomy recollections of times gone by and rebuttals to pride faced with man’s mortality. But when Lincoln himself engaged in writing that kind of poetry, one of his most intense poems was a lamentation for the insanity of a young friend, Matthew Gentry, whose reason had been overthrown.44

There may also be a question of manhood here. Lincoln spoke against slavery to appeal to the most influential audience—the male voters of the time. Whatever the reality such voters were supposed to be addressed with reason, logic, in manly terms—not “hysterically” like women. Opponents of abolition often called people like Garrisonians and others “women,” just as they attacked women’s rights advocates for “unsexing themselves.” Lincoln may also have been reacting against the antislavery message of women novelists and pamphleteers who usually appealed to the hearts of audiences by presenting stories in which families were separated, children torn from Mother’s arms, and noble slaves beaten to death. The immensely popular Uncle Tom’s Cabin and other sentimental tales told this story in this way. And hearts were moved to value abolition over union and order and gradual change—all essential parts of Lincoln’s outlook on society and the nation. Lincoln may have shared Ann Douglas’s criticism of Harriet Beecher Stowe and other women antislavery writers for their mawkish sentimentalism and their emphasis on “feeling right” as a solution to the degradations of slavery. They seemed to believe that if they felt very sad about the plight of slaves, they have done something for them. Surely evoking

43. Erastus Wright Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.
the feelings of northerners was a prerequisite to undermining slavery itself. That usually required arguments outside the constitutional system, with appeals to the wisdom of the heart, divine laws, and natural justice. While he spoke often of natural justice, Lincoln usually avoided direct appeals to the heart, to the feelings of his audience.

Lincoln also limited his emotional ties of home and family, a world designated as women’s sphere at the time. He left his parents’ family as soon as possible to start out on his own. He fit very well into the camaraderie of men but felt very awkward around women. His was a world, generally, of masculinity and comradeship with other young men, lawyers, and the circuit. He stayed on the circuit many times when he could have gone home to be with Mary and his boys. There was some tenderness among men (Walt Whitman celebrated it), but predominantly that world celebrated toughness and strength, pushing on, acting like a man, not giving in to emotions, not “unmanning” oneself. Such a background may explain a bit more about Lincoln’s lack of deep empathy for the slaves.

Yet what is striking is how irrelevant such empathy was in bringing freedom to the slave. Abolitionists did set an emotional impassioned tone, perhaps imperative to capturing consciences in the North. But what actually freed the slaves was white people’s perception that slavery hurt white people and that black freedom would not threaten them. And, of course, that black soldiers were potent allies in preserving their union. Lincoln’s main contribution lay in combining these goals with the high purposes of equality under a government of laws that the world might aspire to.

However much or however little pain Lincoln felt for the suffering slaves didn’t matter. He spent very little time weeping over their plight—all he did was to free them. Lincoln’s critics have made more than they should of Lincoln’s lack of concern for the pains of slavery. Lerone Bennett’s accusation of racism on these grounds is only the most egregious. Others have shied away from digging deeply into the question, while others have explained it away almost apologetically—justified by his political situation. I think that Lincoln’s lack of specific empathy for slave life was essentially irrelevant. In a practical sense, it didn’t matter if Lincoln had the heart of William Lloyd Garrison or of a southern Whig. He didn’t have to feel or display deep feelings from his aching heart. Or even do the right thing for the right reason. The fact remains that Lincoln helped create a party that challenged the South and its institution; he preserved a Union.

that depended on freedom; and step-by-step throughout his presidency he expanded the domain of freedom for slaves. No one in his generation was more effective in doing that—whether warmhearted sympathetic abolitionist or devotee of the rule of law, the constitution, and the nation’s best ideals. Black people, slaves especially, would have been glad if Lincoln felt their pain. But my guess is that, given a choice, they were happier that he freed them.