

## ONLY HIS STEPCHILDREN: Lincoln and the Negro

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IF THE UNITED STATES had a patron saint it would no doubt be Abraham Lincoln; and if one undertook to explain Lincoln's extraordinary hold on the national consciousness, it would be difficult to find a better starting-point than these lines from an undistinguished poem written in 1865:<sup>1</sup>

One of the people! Born to be  
Their curious epitome;  
To share yet rise above  
Their shifting hate and love.

A man of the people and yet something much more, sharing popular passions and yet rising above them—here was the very ideal of a democratic leader, who in his person could somehow mute the natural antagonism between strong leadership and vigorous democracy. Amy Lowell, picking up the same theme half a century later, called Lincoln "an embodiment of the highest form of the typical American."<sup>2</sup> This paradox of the uncommon common man, splendidly heroic and at the same time appealingly representative, was by no means easy to sustain. The Lincoln tradition, as a consequence, came to embrace two distinct and seemingly incompatible legends—the awkward, amiable, robust, railsplitting, story-telling, frontier folklore hero; and the towering figure of the Great Emancipator and Savior of the Union, a man of sorrows, Christlike in his character and fate.

Biographers have struggled earnestly with this conspicuous dualism, but even when the excesses of reminiscence and myth are trimmed away, Lincoln remains a puzzling mixture of often conflicting qualities—drollness and melancholy, warmth and reserve, skepticism and piety, humbleness and self-assurance. Furthermore, he is doubly hard to get at because he did not readily reveal his inner self. He left us no

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Henry Stoddard, *Abraham Lincoln: an Horatian Ode*, cited in Roy P. Basler, *The Lincoln Legend: A Study in Changing Conceptions* (Boston, 1935), p. 234.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 264-265.

diary or memoirs, and his closest friends called him "secretive" and "shut-mouthed." Billy Herndon in one of his modest moods declared, "Lincoln is unknown and possibly always will be."<sup>3</sup> Plainly, there is good reason for scholarly caution in any effort to take the measure of such a man.

No less plain is the intimate connection between the Lincoln legend and the myth of America. The ambiguities in his popular image and the whisper of enigma in his portraits have probably broadened the appeal of this homespun Westerner, self-made man, essential democrat, and national martyr. Almost anyone can find a way to identify with Lincoln, perhaps because "like Shakespeare . . . he seemed to run through the whole gamut of human nature."<sup>4</sup> Whatever the complex of reasons, successive generations of his countrymen have accepted Abraham Lincoln as the consummate American—the representative genius of the nation. One consequence is that he tends to serve as a mirror for Americans, who, when they write about him, frequently divulge a good deal about themselves.

Of course the recurring election of Lincoln as *Representative American* has never been unanimous. There was vehement dissent at first from many unreconstructed rebels, and later from iconoclasts like Edgar Lee Masters and cavaliers of the Lost Cause like Lyon Gardiner Tyler. In the mainstream of national life, however, it became increasingly fashionable for individuals and organizations to square themselves with Lincoln and enlist him in their enterprises. Often this required misquotation or misrepresentation or outright invention; but lobbyists and legislators, industrialists and labor leaders, reformers and bosses, Populists, Progressives, Prohibitionists, and Presidents all wanted him on their side. New Deal Democrats tried to steal him from the Republicans, and the American Communist party bracketed him with Lenin. Lincoln, in the words of David Donald, had come to be "everybody's grandfather."<sup>5</sup>

Most remarkable of all was the growing recognition of Lincoln's greatness in the eleven states of the Confederacy, ten of which had never given him a single vote for President. This may have been a necessary symbolic aspect of sectional reconciliation. Returning to the Union meant coming to terms with the man who had saved the Union. No one took the step more unequivocally than Henry W. Grady, prophet of the New South, who told a New York audience in 1888 that Lincoln had been "the first typical American, the first who comprehended within himself all the strength and gentleness, all the majesty and grace of this Republic."<sup>6</sup> When Southerners talked to Southerners

<sup>3</sup> David Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon* (New York, 1945), p. 305.

<sup>4</sup> John T. Morse, Jr., *Abraham Lincoln* (Boston, 1895), II, 355.

<sup>5</sup> David Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered* (2nd ed.; New York, 1969), p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Davis, *The Image of Lincoln in the South* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1971), p. 159.

about it, they were usually more restrained. Nevertheless, by the early twentieth century, the Lincoln tradition was becoming a blend of blue and gray, as illustrated in *The Perfect Tribute*, a story from the pen of an Alabama woman about a dying Confederate soldier's admiration for the Gettysburg Address.<sup>7</sup>

Bonds of sympathy between Lincoln and the South had not been difficult to find. He was, after all, a native Southerner—implacable as an enemy, but magnanimous in victory and compassionate by nature. In his hands, nearly everyone agreed, the ordeal of Reconstruction would have been less severe. Even Jefferson Davis concluded that his death had been "a great misfortune to the South."<sup>8</sup>

In addition, Lincoln seemed to pass the supreme test. He could be assimilated to the racial doctrines and institutional arrangements associated with the era of segregation. The historical record, though not entirely consistent, indicated that his opposition to slavery had never included advocacy of racial equality. With a little editing here and some extra emphasis there, Lincoln came out "right" on the Negro question. This was a judgment more often understood than elaborated in Southern writing and oratory, but certain self-appointed guardians of white supremacy were sometimes painfully explicit in claiming Lincoln as one of their own. He had been willing, they said, to guarantee slavery forever in the states where it already existed. He had issued the Emancipation Proclamation with great reluctance. He had opposed the extension of slavery only in order to reserve the western territories exclusively for white men. He had denied favoring political and social equality for Negroes, had endorsed separation of the races, and had persistently recommended colonization of Negroes abroad. This was the Lincoln eulogized by James K. Vardaman of Mississippi, perhaps the most notorious political racist in American history, and by the sensational Negrophobic novelist, Thomas Dixon. In his most famous work, *The Clansman*, Dixon had Lincoln as President parody himself during a discussion of colonization:

We can never attain the ideal Union our fathers dreamed, with millions of an alien, inferior race among us, whose assimilation is neither possible nor desirable. The Nation cannot now exist half white and half black, any more than it could exist half slave and half free.<sup>9</sup>

When one remembers that all this time millions of black Americans were still paying homage to the Great Emancipator, dualism begins to seem pervasive in the Lincoln tradition. Racist elements, to be sure, were never very successful in promoting the image of Lincoln as a dedicated white supremacist, but support from an unlikely quarter would

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York, 1905), p. 46; Davis, *Image*, pp. 147-152.

eventually give the idea not only new life but respectability in the centers of professional scholarship.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Lincoln studies became a functional part of the literature of the Civil War, in which the problem of race was present but not paramount. Titles of the 1940's indicate the general bent of interest: *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis*; *Lincoln and the Patronage*; *Lincoln's War Cabinet*; *Lincoln and the Radicals*; *Lincoln and the War Governors*; *Lincoln and the South*. There was, it should be observed, no *Lincoln and the Negro*. That would come, appropriately, in the 1960's.

The sweep of the modern civil rights movement, beginning with the Supreme Court's anti-segregation decision in 1954, inspired a new departure in American historical writing. Never has the psychological need for a usable past been more evident. Black history flourished and so did abolitionist history, but the most prestigious field of endeavor was white-over-black history. Attention shifted, for example, from slavery as a cause of the Civil War to slavery as one major form of racial oppression. With this change of emphasis, the antebellum years began to look different. A number of monographs appearing in the 1960's, such as Leon F. Litwack's *North of Slavery*, demonstrated the nationwide prevalence of white-superiority doctrines and white-supremacy practices. Many Republicans and even some abolitionists, when they talked about the Negro, had sounded curiously like the slaveholders whom they were so fiercely denouncing. In fact, it appeared that the North and the South, while bitterly at odds on the issue of slavery, were relatively close to one another in their attitudes toward race. And Lincoln, according to Litwack, "accurately and consistently reflected the thoughts and prejudices of most Americans."<sup>10</sup>

The racial consensus of the Civil War era made it easy enough to understand why black Americans failed to win the equality implicit in emancipation, but certain other historical problems became more difficult as a consequence. For instance, if most Northerners in 1860 were indeed racists who viewed the Negro with repugnance as an inferior order of creation, then why did so many of them have such strong feelings about slavery? And why did racist Southerners fear and distrust racist Republicans with an intensity sufficient to destroy the Union? And does not the achievement of emancipation by a people so morally crippled with racism seem almost miraculous—like a one-armed man swimming the English Channel? No amount of talk about overwrought emotions or ulterior purposes or unintended consequences will fully account for what appears to be a major historical paradox, with Lincoln as the central figure.

When the civil rights struggle got under way in the 1950's, both sides tried to enlist Lincoln's support, but the primary tendency at first

<sup>10</sup> Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago, 1961), p. 276.

was to regard desegregation as a belated resumption of the good work begun with the Emancipation Proclamation. Many leading historians agreed that during the presidential years there had been a "steady evolution of Lincoln's attitude toward Negro rights."<sup>11</sup> The changes carried him a long way from the narrow environmental influences of his youth and made him, in the words of Richard N. Current, more relevant and inspiring than ever "as a symbol of man's ability to outgrow his prejudices."<sup>12</sup>

This was the liberal interpretation of Lincoln's record on racial matters. It came under attack from several directions, but especially from the ranks of intellectual radicalism and black militancy, both academic and otherwise. New Left historians, many of them activists in the battle for racial justice, could find little to admire in Abraham Lincoln. Compared with abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, he seemed unheroic, opportunistic, and somewhat insensitive to the suffering of black people in bondage. He was "the prototype of the political man in power, with views so moderate as to require the pressure of radicals to stimulate action."<sup>13</sup> His pre-war opposition to slavery, embracing the Republican policy of nonextension and the hope of ultimate extinction, reflected a "comfortable belief in the benevolence of history." It amounted to a "formula which promised in time to do everything while for the present risking nothing."<sup>14</sup>

Election to the presidency, in the radical view, produced no great transformation of his character. "Lincoln grew during the war—but he didn't grow much," wrote Lerone Bennett, Jr., a senior editor of *Ebony*. "On every issue relating to the black man . . . he was the very essence of the white supremacist with good intentions."<sup>15</sup> He moved but slowly and reluctantly toward abolishing slavery, and his famous Proclamation not only lacked "moral grandeur," but had been drafted "in such a way that it freed few, if any, slaves."<sup>16</sup> His reputation as the Great Emancipator is therefore "pure myth."<sup>17</sup> Most important of all, Lincoln probably believed in the inferiority of the Negro and certainly favored separation of the races. He was, in Bennett's words, "a tragically flawed figure who shared the racial prejudices of most of his white contemporaries."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Fawn M. Brodie, "Who Defends the Abolitionist?" in Martin Duberman (ed.), *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists* (Princeton, 1965), pp. 65-64.

<sup>12</sup> Richard N. Current, *The Lincoln Nobody Knows* (New York, 1958), p. 236.

<sup>13</sup> Howard Zinn, "Abolitionists, Freedom-Riders, and the Tactics of Agitation," in Duberman (ed.), *Antislavery Vanguard*, pp. 438-439.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Duberman, "The Northern Response to Slavery," in *ibid.*, pp. 396, 402.

<sup>15</sup> Lerone Bennett, Jr., "Was Abe Lincoln a White Supremacist?" *Ebony*, XXIII (Feb. 1968), 37.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Claxton Gregory, *No More Lies: The Myth and the Reality of American History* (New York, 1971), p. 182.

<sup>18</sup> Bennett, "Lincoln a White Supremacist," p. 36.

This, then, was the radical interpretation of Lincoln's record on racial matters, and what strikes one immediately is its similarity to the views of professional racists like Vardaman and Dixon. The portrait of A. Lincoln, Great White Supremacist, has been the work, it seems, of a strange collaboration.<sup>19</sup>

No less interesting is the amount of animus directed at a man who died over a hundred years ago. In the case of black militants, hostility to Lincoln has no doubt been part of the process of cutting loose from white America. Thus, there is little history but much purpose in the statement of Malcolm X: "He probably did more to trick Negroes than any other man in history."<sup>20</sup>

For white radicals too, rejection of Lincoln signified repudiation of the whole American cultural tradition, from the first massacre of Indians to the Viet Nam War. In what might be called the "malign consensus" school of United States history, Lincoln remained the Representative American, but the America that he represented was a dark, ugly country, stained with injustice and cruelty. Plainly, there is much more at stake here than the reputation of a single historical figure.

James K. Vardaman, it is said, used to carry with him one particular Lincoln quotation that he would whip out and read at the slightest opportunity. This excerpt from the debate with Douglas in 1858 at Charleston, Illinois, is now fast becoming the most quoted passage in all of Lincoln's writings, outstripping even the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural. Pick up any recent historical study of American race relations and somewhere in its pages you are likely to find the following words:

I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races,—that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people, and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will for ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.<sup>21</sup>

It is, of course, a quotation that bristles with relevancy. Problems that once preoccupied Lincoln's biographers, such as his part in bringing on the Civil War and the quality of his wartime leadership, have been more or less pushed aside by a question of newer fashion and greater urgency. It is well phrased in the preface to a collection of documents titled *Lincoln on Black and White* (1971): "Was Lincoln a racist?"

<sup>19</sup> Davis, *Image*, p. 156: "There is something sadly ironic in seeing black extremists and Ku Kluxers clasping hands over the grave of the Great Emancipator's reputation."

<sup>20</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York, 1965), p. 262.

<sup>21</sup> Roy P. Basler (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1953-55), III, 145-146.

More important, how did Lincoln's racial views affect the course of our history?"<sup>22</sup>

Anyone who sets out conscientiously to answer such a query will soon find himself deep in complexity and confronting some of the fundamental problems of historical investigation. In one category are various questions about the historian's relation to the past: Is his task properly one of careful reconstruction, or are there more important purposes to be served? Does his responsibility include rendering moral judgments? If so, using what standards—those of his own time or those of the period under study? Then there are all the complications encountered in any effort to read the mind of a man, especially a politician, from the surviving record of his words and actions. For instance, what he openly affirmed as a youth may have been silently discarded in maturity, what he believed on a certain subject may be less significant than the intensity of his belief; and what he said on a certain occasion may have been largely determined by the immediate historical context, including the composition of his audience.

Terminological difficulties may also arise in the study of history, and such is the case with the word "racist," which serves us badly as a concept because of its denunciatory tone and indiscriminate use.<sup>23</sup> Conducive neither to objectivity nor to precision, the word has been employed so broadly that it is now being subdivided. Thus we are invited to distinguish between ideological racism and institutional racism,<sup>24</sup> between scientific racism and folk racism,<sup>25</sup> between active racism and inactive racism,<sup>26</sup> between racism and racial prejudice,<sup>27</sup> between racism and racialism,<sup>28</sup> between hierarchical racism and romantic racialism.<sup>29</sup> In its strictest sense, racism is a doctrine, but by extension it has also come to signify an attitude, a mode of behavior, and a social system. The *doctrine*, a work of intellectuals, is a rationalized theory of inherent Negro inferiority. In a given person, however, it can be anything from a casual belief to a philosophy of life. As an *attitude*, racism is virtually

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<sup>24</sup> David M. Reimers (ed.), *Racism in the United States: An American Dilemma?* (New York, 1972), p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Banton, "Concept of Racism," p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Forrest G. Wood, *Black Scare: The Racist Response to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Berkeley, 1970), p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York, 1971), p. 2.

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<sup>25</sup> Arthur Zilversmit (ed.), *Lincoln on Black and White* (Belmont, Calif., 1971), n.p.

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<sup>32</sup> Fredrickson, *Black Image*, p. 101.

synonymous with prejudice—an habitual feeling of repugnance, and perhaps of enmity, toward members of another race. It can be anything from a mild tendency to a fierce obsession. Racism as a *mode of behavior* is prejudice activated in some way—a display of racial hostility that can be anything from mere avoidance of the other race to participation in a lynching. Racism as a *social system* means that law and custom combine to hold one race in subordination to another through institutional arrangements like slavery, segregation, discrimination, and disfranchisement. Individuals can help support such a system with anything from tacit acquiescence to strenuous public service in its defense. These multiple and graduated meanings of the word "racism" are important to remember in exploring the historical convergence of Abraham Lincoln and the American Negro.<sup>30</sup>

"One must see him first," says Bennett, "against the background of his times. Born into a poor white family in the slave state of Kentucky and raised in the anti-black environments of southern Indiana and Illinois, Lincoln was exposed from the very beginning to racism."<sup>31</sup> This is a familiar line of reasoning and credible enough on the surface. Any racial views encountered during his youth were likely to be unfavorable to the Negro. But more important is the question of how often he encountered such views and how thoroughly he absorbed them. Besides, the assumption that his racial attitudes were shaped more or less permanently by his early social environment does not take into account the fact that youth may rebel against established opinion. Lincoln did in a sense reject his father's world, leaving it behind him forever soon after reaching the age of twenty-one. Certainly his personal knowledge of black people was very limited. After catching a few glimpses of slavery as a small boy in Kentucky, he had little contact with Negroes while growing up in backwoods Indiana or as a young man in New Salem, Illinois. Those first twenty-eight years of his life take up just three pages in Benjamin Quarles's book, *Lincoln and the Negro*.<sup>32</sup>

If Lincoln entered manhood with strong feelings about race already implanted in his breast, one might expect to find indications of it in his earlier letters and speeches. For instance, on a steamboat carrying him home from a visit to Kentucky in 1841, there were a dozen slaves in chains. They had been, literally, sold down the river to a new master, and yet they seemed the most cheerful persons on board. Here was inspiration for some racist remarks in the "Sambo" vein, but Lincoln, de-

<sup>30</sup> Webster's Third New International Dictionary (Unabridged) defines "racism" as: "1. the assumption that psychocultural traits and capacities are determined by biological race and that races differ decisively from one another, which is usually coupled with a belief in the inherent superiority of a particular race and its right to domination over others. 2a. a doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles. 2b. a political or social system founded on racism. 3. installation."

<sup>31</sup> Bennett, "Lincoln a White Supremacist," p. 38.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Quarles, *Lincoln and the Negro* (New York, 1962), pp. 10-18.

scribing the scene to a friend, chose instead to philosophize about the dubious effect of "condition upon human happiness." That is, he pictured Negroes behaving, as George M. Fredrickson puts it, "in a way that could be understood in terms of a common humanity and not as the result of peculiar racial characteristics."<sup>33</sup> Although one scholar may insist that Lincoln's racial beliefs were "matters of deep conviction,"<sup>34</sup> and another may talk about "the deep-rooted attitudes and ideas of a lifetime,"<sup>35</sup> there is scarcely any record of his thoughts on race until he was past forty years of age. Long before then, of course, he had taken a stand against slavery, and it was the struggle over slavery that eventually compelled him to consider publicly the problem of race.

There is no escape from the dilemma that "relevance" makes the past worth studying and at the same time distorts it. We tend to see antebellum race and slavery in the wrong perspective. Race itself was not then the critical public issue that it has become for us. Only widespread emancipation could make it so, and until the outbreak of the Civil War, that contingency seemed extremely remote. Our own preoccupation with race probably leads us to overestimate the importance of racial feeling in the antislavery movement.<sup>36</sup> In fact, there is a current disposition to assume that if a Republican did not have strong pro-Negro motives, he must have acted for strong anti-Negro reasons, such as a desire to keep the Western Territories lily-white.<sup>37</sup>

Actually, much of the motivation for antislavery agitation was only indirectly connected with the Negro. For example, the prime target often seemed to be, not so much slavery as the "slave power," arrogant, belligerent, and overrepresented in all branches of the Federal government.<sup>38</sup> In Lincoln's case, no one can doubt his profound, though perhaps intermittent, sympathy for the slave. Yet he also hated slavery in a more abstract way as an evil principle and as a stain on the national honor, incompatible with the mission of America.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Fredrickson, "A Man but Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality," *Journal of Southern History*, in press.

<sup>34</sup> George Sinkler, *The Racial Attitudes of American Presidents, from Abraham Lincoln to Theodore Roosevelt* (Garden City, N.Y., 1971), p. 75.

<sup>35</sup> Fredrickson, "A Man but Not a Brother."

<sup>36</sup> See Banton, "Concept of Racism," pp. 22-24, for the "inductivist explanation" of racism, which, he says, "is chiefly found in the writings of American sociologists. They are acquainted with racism in its modern forms and work backwards, viewing earlier statements about race from a modern standpoint instead of setting them in the intellectual context of the time in which they were made."

<sup>37</sup> For example, although he carefully qualifies his stated conclusions, this is the effect of Eugene H. Berwanger's *The Frontier Against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana, Ill., 1967).

<sup>38</sup> See Larry Gara, "Slavery and the Slave Power: A Crucial Distinction," *Civil War History*, XV (1969), 5-19.

<sup>39</sup> "Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust," said Lincoln in 1854. In the same speech, he called slavery a "monstrous injustice," and then added, "I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world." *Collected Works*, II, 255, 278. Duberman, "Northern Response to Slavery," 309.

It is a mistake to assume that Lincoln's actions in relation to the Negro were determined or even strongly influenced by his racial outlook. He based his antislavery philosophy, after all, squarely upon perception of the slave as a man, not as a Negro. According to the Declaration of Independence, he declared, all men, including black men, are created equal, at least to the extent that none has a right to enslave another. This became a point at issue in the famous debates with Stephen A. Douglas, who vehemently denied that the Declaration had anything to do with the African race. Lincoln, in turn, accused his rival of trying to "dehumanize" the Negro. But he had constructed an argument against slavery which, carried to its logical conclusion, seemed to spell complete racial equality. So Douglas insisted, anyhow, while Lincoln protested: "I do not understand that because I do not want a negro woman for a slave I must necessarily want her for a wife."<sup>40</sup>

Opponents of slavery everywhere had to contend with the charge that they advocated Negro equality. In the Democratic press, Republicans almost invariably became "Black Republicans," and political survival more often than not appeared to depend upon repudiation of the epithet. Thus the race question was most prominent in the antebellum period as a rhetorical and largely spurious feature of the slavery controversy.

Lincoln's first general remarks about racial equality on record were made in 1854, when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise drew him back to the center of Illinois politics. What to do, ideally, with southern slaves, he pondered in a speech at Peoria. "Free them, and make them politically and socially our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this, and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not."<sup>41</sup> More often that year, however, he talked about the humanity of the Negro in denouncing the extension of slavery. Then came the election of 1856 and Fremont's defeat, which Lincoln analyzed with some bitterness: "We were constantly charged with seeking an amalgamation of the white and black races; and thousands turned from us, not believing the charge . . . but fearing to face it themselves."<sup>42</sup> It was at this point, significantly, that he became more aggressive and explicit in disavowing racial equality. He began using census figures to show that miscegenation was a by-product of slavery. He spoke of the "natural disgust" with which most white people viewed the idea of indiscriminate amalgamation of the white and black races. And, under heavy pounding from Douglas during the senatorial campaign of 1858, he answered again and again in the man-

<sup>40</sup> points to nationalism as one reason for opposition to abolitionism; but it should also be emphasized that national pride fortified the antislavery movement.

<sup>41</sup> *Collected Works*, III, 9-10, 29, 50, 95, 115-113, 146, 218, 280, 300-304, 470.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 233-236.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.

ner of the notorious Charleston passage quoted above.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, his strongest feeling about race appears to have been his vexation with those who kept bringing the subject up. "Negro equality! Fudge!!" he scribbled on a piece of paper. "How long, in the government of a God great enough to make and maintain this Universe, shall there continue knaves to vend and fools to gulp, so low a piece of demagoguism as this?"<sup>44</sup>

Most of Lincoln's recorded generalizations about race were public statements made in the late 1850's as part of his running oratorical battle with Douglas.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, nearly all of those statements were essentially disclaimers rather than affirmations. They indicated, for political reasons, the *maximum* that he was willing to deny the Negro and the *minimum* that he claimed for the Negro. They were concessions on points not at issue, designed to fortify him on the point that *was* at issue—namely, the extension of slavery. If he had responded differently at Charleston and elsewhere, the Lincoln of history simply would not exist. And words uttered in a context of such pressure may be less than reliable as indications of a man's lifetime attitude.

At least it seems possible that Lincoln's remarks in middle age on the subject of race were shaped more by his political realism than by impressions stamped on his mind in childhood. The principal intellectual influence, as Fredrickson has demonstrated, was Henry Clay, Lincoln's political hero, whom he studied anew for a eulogy delivered in 1852. Clay, in his attitude toward slavery, represented a link with the Founding Fathers. A slaveholder himself who nevertheless believed that the institution was a "curse," he began and ended his career working for a program of gradual emancipation in Kentucky. He helped found and steadily supported the American Colonization Society. In his racial views, moreover, Clay emphasized the Negro's humanity and reserved judgment on the question of innate black inferiority. Lincoln not only adopted Clay's tentative, moderate outlook but extensively paraphrased and sometimes parroted his words.<sup>46</sup>

Considering, then, the peculiar context of his most significant remarks on the subject of race, and considering also his dependence on Clay, it seems unwise to assert flatly, as some scholars do, that Lincoln embraced the doctrine of racism. Not that it would be astonishing to find that he did so. The assumption of inherent white superiority was almost universal and rested upon observation as well as prejudice. Comparison of European civilization and African "savagery" made it extremely difficult to believe in the natural equality of white

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 405, 408; III, 16, 88, 249.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 399.

<sup>45</sup> The principal exceptions are the Peoria speech of October 16, 1854, and the statement to the delegation of Negroes of August 14, 1862.

<sup>46</sup> Fredrickson, "A Man but Not a Brother." But for an argument belittling Clay's influence on Lincoln, see Marvin R. Cain, "Lincoln's Views on Slavery and the Negro: A Suggestion," *Historian*, XXVI (1964), 502-520.

and black races. Yet Lincoln's strongest statements, even if taken at face value and out of context, prove to be tentative and equivocal. He conceded that the Negro *might not* be his equal, or he said that the Negro *was not* his equal in *certain respects*. As an example, he named *color*, which certainly has a biological implication. But we cannot be certain that he was not merely expressing an aesthetic judgment or noting the social disadvantages of being black. He never used the word "inherent," or any of its equivalents, in discussing the alleged inferiority of the Negro, and it is not unlikely that he regarded such inferiority as resulting primarily from social oppression. In 1862, he compared blacks whose minds had been "clouded by slavery" with free Negroes "capable of thinking as white men." His last recorded disclaimer appears in a letter written as President-elect to a New York editor. He did not, it declared, "hold the black man to be the equal of the white, unqualifiedly." The final word throws away most of the declaration and scarcely suits a true ideological racist. Here there is a doubleness in the man as in the legend. It appears that he may have both absorbed and doubted, both shared and risen above, the racial doctrines of his time.<sup>47</sup>

Lincoln, who had four sons and no other children, was presumably never asked the ultimate racist question. He did indicate a disinclination to take a Negro woman for his wife, agreeing with most of his white contemporaries in their aversion to miscegenation. Otherwise, there is little evidence of racism as an attitude or racism as a mode of behavior in his relations with Negroes. Frederick Douglass, sometimes a severe critic of his policies, said emphatically: "In all my interviews with Mr. Lincoln I was impressed with his entire freedom from popular prejudice against the colored race."<sup>48</sup> During the war years in Washington, the social status of Negroes underwent a minor revolution, exemplified in the arrival of a black diplomat from the newly-recognized republic of Haiti. Lincoln, according to Current, "opened the White House to colored visitors as no President had done before, and he received them in a spirit which no President has matched since."<sup>49</sup> Douglass and others appreciated not only his friendliness but his restraint. There was no effusiveness, no condescension. "He treated Negroes," says Quarles, "as they wanted to be treated—as human beings."<sup>50</sup>

On the other hand, Lincoln in the 1850's did plainly endorse the existing system of white supremacy, except for slavery. He defended it, however, on grounds of expediency rather than principle, and on

<sup>47</sup> *Collected Works*, III, 16; IV, 158, V, 372-373.

<sup>48</sup> Allen Thomsdike Rice (ed.), *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1868), p. 163.

<sup>49</sup> J. C. Randall and Richard N. Current, *Lincoln the President* (New York, 1945-55), IV, 316.

<sup>50</sup> Quarles, *Lincoln and the Negro*, p. 204.

grounds of the incompatibility rather than the inequality of the races. Assuming that one race or the other must be on top, he admitted preferring that the superior position be assigned to the white race. Thus there was little association of institutional racism with ideological racism in his thinking.

Although Lincoln was by no means insensitive to the deprivation suffered by free Negroes,<sup>51</sup> he saw little hope of improving their condition and in any case regarded slavery as a far greater wrong. Moreover, it appeared that any serious attack on institutional racism would raise the cry of "Negro equality," and thereby damage the antislavery cause.

But then, if he hated slavery so much, why did Lincoln not become an abolitionist? There are several obvious reasons: fear for the safety of the Union, political prudence, constitutional scruples, a personal distaste for extremism, and perplexity over what to do with freed slaves.<sup>52</sup> In addition, it must be emphasized that Lincoln, as Lord Chamwood observed, "accepted the institutions to which he was born, and he enjoyed them."<sup>53</sup> Social reform was a fairly new phenomenon in antebellum America. Only a relatively small number of persons had adopted it as a life style, and Lincoln cannot be counted among them. This author of the greatest reform in American history was simply not a reformer by nature. He even acquiesced in the retention of slavery, provided that it should not be allowed to expand. For him, the paramount importance of the Republican anti-extension program lay in its symbolic meaning as a commitment to the principle of ultimate extinction. Some later generation, he thought, would then convert the principle into practice. What this amounted to, in a sense, was anti-slavery tokenism, but it also proved to be a formula for the achievement of political power, and with it, the opportunity to issue a proclamation of emancipation.

Of course, it has been said that Lincoln deserves little credit for emancipation—that he came to it tardily and reluctantly, under Radical duress. "Blacks have no reason to feel grateful to Abraham Lincoln," writes Julius Lester in *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama!* "How come it took him two whole years to free the slaves? His pen was sitting on his desk the whole time. All he had to do was get up one morning and say, 'Doggonnit! I think I'm gon' free the slaves today.'"<sup>54</sup> But *which* morning? That turned out to be the real question.

<sup>51</sup> See especially his comment on an assertion by Roger B. Taney alleging that the Negro's status had improved since the framing of the Constitution, *Collected Works*, II, 403-404.

<sup>52</sup> See discussion of factors discouraging abolitionism in Duberman, "The Northern Response to Slavery," pp. 398-401.

<sup>53</sup> Lord Chamwood, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1917), p. 455.

<sup>54</sup> Julius Lester, *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama!* (New York, 1968), p. 58.



Lincoln, it should be remembered, was under strong pressure from both sides on the issue of emancipation, and so the Radical clamor alone will not explain his ultimate decision. Nevertheless, when the war began, many Americans quickly realized that the fate of slavery might be in the balance. Veteran abolitionists rejoiced that history was at last marching to their beat, and Lincoln did not fail to read what he called "the signs of the times." Emancipation itself, as he virtually acknowledged, came out of the logic of events, not his personal volition, but the time and manner of its coming were largely his choice.

There had been enough Republicans to win the presidential election, but there were not enough to win the war. They needed help from Northern Democrats and border-state loyalists, who were willing to fight for the Union, but not for abolition. A premature effort at emancipation might alienate enough support to make victory impossible. It would then be self-defeating, because there could be no emancipation without victory. Lincoln's remarkable achievement, whether he fully intended it or not, was to proclaim emancipation in such a way as to minimize disaffection. He did so by allowing enough time for the prospect to become domesticated in the public mind, and by adhering scrupulously to the fiction that this momentous step was strictly a military measure. Much of the confusion about the Emancipation Proclamation results from taking too seriously Lincoln's verbal bowings and scrapings to the conservatives while all the time he was backing steadily away from them.<sup>58</sup>

The best illustration is his famous reply of August 22, 1862, to the harsh criticism of Horace Greeley, in which he said that his "paramount object" was to save the Union. "What I do about slavery, and the colored race," he declared, "I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do *not* believe it would help to save the Union."<sup>59</sup> The most striking thing about the entire document is its dissimulation. Although Lincoln gave the impression that options were still open, he had in fact already made up his mind, had committed himself to a number of persons, had drafted the Proclamation. Why, then, write such a letter? Because it was not a statement of policy but instead a brilliant piece of propaganda in which Lincoln, as Benjamin P. Thomas says, "used Greeley's outburst to prepare the people for what was coming."<sup>60</sup>

There were constitutional as well as political reasons, of course, for casting the Proclamation in military language and also for limiting its scope to those states and parts of states still in rebellion. In a sense, as historians fond of paradox are forever pointing out, it did not immediately liberate any slaves at all. And the Declaration of Independence,

<sup>58</sup> For a good statement of Lincoln's strategy, see Hans L. Trefousse, *The Radical Republicans, Lincoln's Vanguard for Racial Justice* (New York, 1962), p. 182.

<sup>59</sup> *Collected Works*, V, 388-389.

<sup>60</sup> Benjamin P. Thomas, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1962), p. 342.

it might be added, did not immediately liberate a single colony from British rule. The people of Lincoln's time apparently had little doubt about the significance of the Proclamation. Jefferson Davis did not regard it as a mere scrap of paper, and neither did that most famous of former slaves, Frederick Douglass. He called it "the greatest event in our nation's history."<sup>61</sup>

In the long sweep of that history, emancipation had come on, not sluggishly, but with a rush and a roar—over a period of scarcely eighteen months. Given more time to reflect on its racial implications, white America might have recoiled from the act. Lincoln himself had never been anything but a pessimist about the consequences of emancipation. Knowing full well the prejudices of his countrymen, he doubted that blacks and whites could ever live together amicably and on terms of equality. Over a century later, it is still too early to say that he was wrong.

With stark realism, Lincoln told a delegation of free Negroes in August 1862: "On this broad continent, not a single man of your race is made the equal of a single man of ours. Go where you are treated the best, and the ban is still upon you." And while blacks suffered from discrimination, whites suffered from the discord caused by the presence of blacks. "It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated," he said.<sup>62</sup> But Lincoln apparently never visualized a segregated America. For him, separation meant colonization, which, as a disciple of Henry Clay, he had been advocating at least since 1852. Perhaps the strangest feature of Lincoln's presidential career was the zeal with which he tried to promote voluntary emigration of free Negroes to Africa or Latin America. He recommended it in his first two annual messages, urged it upon Washington's black leadership, and endorsed it in his Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. He had foreign capitals circulated in a search for likely places of settlement. Furthermore, with funds supplied by Congress, he launched colonization enterprises in Haiti and Panama, both of which proved abortive.<sup>63</sup>

What surprises one the most about these almost frantic activities is their petty scale. Lincoln implored the delegation of Washington Negroes to find him a hundred, or fifty, or even twenty-five families willing to emigrate. The Haitian project, if completely successful, would have accommodated just five thousand persons—about the number of Negroes born every two weeks in the United States. It would have required an enormous effort even to hold the black population stable at four and one-half million, let alone reduce it appreciably. Back in 1854, Lincoln had admitted the impracticability of colonization as any-

<sup>61</sup> Speech at Cooper Institute, February 1863, quoted in Zilverman, *Lincoln on Black and White*, p. 133.

<sup>62</sup> *Collected Works*, V, 372.

<sup>63</sup> Quarles, *Lincoln and the Negro*, pp. 108-109, 191-194.

thing but a long-range program.<sup>61</sup> Why, then, did he betray such feverish haste to make a token beginning in 1862?

One interesting answer emerges from the chronology. Most of the colonization flurry took place during the second half of 1862. After that, Lincoln's interest waned, although according to the dubious testimony of Benjamin F. Butler, it revived near the end of the war.<sup>62</sup> After issuing the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, Lincoln never made another public appeal for colonization. It appears that his spirited activity in the preceding six months may have been part of the process of conditioning the public mind for the day of jubilee. The promise of colonization had always been in part a means of quieting fears about the racial consequences of manumission. Offered as the ultimate solution to the problem of the black population, it could also serve as a psychological safety valve for the problem of white racism. This combination of purposes had inspired a number of Republican leaders to take up the cause of colonization in the late 1850's. One of them, the brother of his future postmaster-general, had told Lincoln then that the movement would "ward off the attacks made upon us about Negro equality."<sup>63</sup>

In his second annual message of December 1, 1862, Lincoln said, "I cannot make it better known than it already is, that I strongly favor colonization." Then he continued in a passage that has received far less attention: "And yet I wish to say there is an objection urged against free colored persons remaining in the country, which is largely imaginary, if not sometimes malicious." He went on to discuss and minimize the fear that freedmen would displace white laborers, after which he wrote:

But it is dreaded that the freed people will swarm forth, and cover the whole land? Are they not already in the land? Will liberation make them any more numerous? Equally distributed among the whites of the whole country, and there would be but one colored to seven whites. Could the one, in any way, greatly disturb the seven? There are many communities now, having more than one free colored person, to seven whites; and this, without any apparent consciousness of evil from it.<sup>64</sup>

Here, along with his last public endorsement of colonization, was an eloquent plea for racial accommodation at home. The one might remain his ideal ultimate solution, but the other, he knew, offered the only hope in the immediate future.

Yet, if his plans for Reconstruction are an accurate indication, Lincoln at the time of his death had given too little consideration to the prob-

<sup>61</sup> *Collected Works*, II, 255.

<sup>62</sup> Benjamin F. Butler, *Butler's Book* (Boston, 1862), pp. 903-908.

<sup>63</sup> Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1970), p. 371. See also, Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Garden City, N.Y., 1959), p. 61.

<sup>64</sup> *Collected Works*, V, 534-535. See also Lincoln's letter to John A. Andrew, February 18, 1864, in *ibid.*, VII, 191.

lem of racial adjustment and to the needs of four million freedmen. How much that would have changed if he had not been killed, has been the subject of lively controversy.<sup>65</sup> Certainly his policies by 1865 no longer reflected all the views expressed in 1858, when he had repudiated both Negro citizenship and Negro suffrage. Now, by fiat of his administration in defiance of the Dred Scott Decision, blacks were citizens of the United States, and he had begun in a gentle way to press for limited black enfranchisement. He had overcome his initial doubts about enlisting Negroes as fighting soldiers, was impressed by their overall performance, and thought they had earned the right to vote.

Lincoln once told Charles Sumner that on the issue of emancipation they were only four to six weeks apart.<sup>66</sup> The relative earliness of his first favorable remarks about Negro enfranchisement suggests that he had again read the "signs of the times." It is not difficult to believe that after the war he would have continued closer to the Sumners than to the conservatives whom he had placated but never followed for long. And one can scarcely doubt that his postwar administration would have been more responsive to Negro aspirations than Andrew Johnson's proved to be.

But for several reasons Lincoln's role was likely to be more subdued than we might expect from the Great Emancipator. First, during peacetime, with his powers and responsibilities as Commander-in-Chief greatly reduced, he probably would have yielded more leadership to Congress in the old Whig tradition. Second, at the time of his death, he still regarded race relations as primarily a local matter, just as he had maintained during the debates with Douglas: "I do not understand there is any place where an alteration of the social and political relations of the Negro and white man can be made except in the State Legislature."<sup>67</sup> Third, Negroes as Negroes were nearly always connotative in Lincoln's thinking. Their welfare, though by no means a matter of indifference to him, had never been, and was not likely to become, his "paramount object." They were, in the words of Frederick Douglass, "only his stepchildren."<sup>68</sup>

Finally, in his attitude toward the wrongs of the free Negro, Lincoln had none of the moral conviction that inspired his opposition to slavery. He never seems to have suspected that systematic racial discrimination might be, like slavery, a stain on the national honor and a

<sup>65</sup> See especially, William B. Hesseltine, *Lincoln's Plan of Reconstruction* (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1960); Ludwell H. Johnson, "Lincoln and Equal Rights: The Authenticity of the Wadsworth Letter," *Journal of Southern History*, XXXII (1966), 83-87; Harold Hyman, "Lincoln and Equal Rights for Negroes: The Irrelevancy of the Wadsworth Letter," *Civil War History*, XII (1966), 258-286; Ludwell H. Johnson, "Lincoln and Equal Rights: A Reply," *Civil War History*, XIII (1967), 68-73.

<sup>66</sup> Trefousse, *Radical Republicans*, pp. 210-211.

<sup>67</sup> *Collected Works*, III, 146.

<sup>68</sup> *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (New York, 1962; reprint of 1892 edition), p. 485.

crime against mankind. Whether that is the measure of his greatness must be left to each one's personal taste. Of Copernicus we might say: What a genius! He revolutionized our understanding of the solar system. Or: What an ignoramus! He did not understand the rest of the universe at all.

