

A Man but Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality

By GEORGE M. FREDRICKSON

"IN ALL MY INTERVIEWS WITH MR. LINCOLN," FREDERICK Douglass recalled in the 1880s, "I was impressed with his entire freedom from popular prejudice against the colored race."¹ But in an oration delivered in 1876 at the unveiling of a monument to Lincoln, Douglass felt obliged to remind his black audience that "Abraham Lincoln was not, in the fullest sense of the word, either our man or our model. In his interests, in his associations, in his habits of thought, and in his prejudices, he was a white man. He was preeminently the white man's President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men. He was ready and willing at any time during the first years of his administration to deny, postpone, and sacrifice the rights of humanity in the colored people to promote the welfare of the white people of this country."²

Although these statements may seem contradictory, they provide a good point of departure for a reconsideration of Lincoln's racial attitudes. Taken together, they suggest that the Civil War President was neither a common Negrophobe nor a principled champion of racial equality. Any such refusal to put Lincoln in a ready-made category would of course undercut the recent popular debate on his racial views and policies, a heated discussion which has generated sharply conflicting moral judgments. Marshaling the evidence that supports its case, one side portrays Lincoln as a hero of the egalitarian tradition, while the other dismisses him as a typical white racist.³ Spokesmen for both positions

¹ Allen T. Rice, ed., *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time* (New York, 1888), 193.

² Douglass, "Oration Delivered on the Occasion of the Unveiling of the Freedman's Monument in Memory of Abraham Lincoln, Washington, D. C., April 14, 1876," in Benjamin Quarles, ed., *Frederick Douglass* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1968), 74.

³ For the opposing views see Lerone Bennett, Jr., "Was Abe Lincoln a White Supremacist?" *Ebony*, XXIII (February 1968), 35-38, 40, 42; and Herbert Mitgang, "Was

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are apparently in search of a usable Lincoln, whose humanity or bigotry—as the case may be—can serve as an object lesson for those concerned with the current state of race relations. Participants in the debate are in danger of losing sight of the fact that Lincoln's racial beliefs derived from a situation and climate of opinion different in many respects from our own. Obviously, the viewpoint of the man often sanctified as "the Great Emancipator" is bound to be relevant to any historically based perspective on black-white relations in the United States. But to understand what Lincoln means today, one must determine more precisely what his attitudes were and where they came from. As Douglass's comments suggest, this is not as simple a matter as some have made out, and its resolution demands that one resist the temptation to seek direct support for contemporary ideological positions.

A basic problem confronting any student of Lincoln's thought and attitudes is how to distinguish the deeply held convictions of the man from the evasion and equivocation of the politician responding to public opinion. This essay is based on the assumption that a careful reading of Lincoln's public and private utterances over a long period of time can provide an insight into his actual beliefs, provided one always takes into account the conditioning effect of the political context in which he operated. As a professional politician Lincoln had to make his compromises and adjustments, and he was always careful to work within the limits allowable by public opinion at a given time. But these limits were not always clearly defined, and even when they were, options might exist inside the prevailing consensus. The position Lincoln was to take on the race question in the 1850s was not totally predetermined by political calculation. If his key utterances of that period are located in the larger context of a pattern of belief that manifested itself throughout his career, one finds a complex process at work, involving the conscientious effort to adapt a certain set of personal principles and preferences to the circumstances of the time. These principles and preferences can perhaps be traced back to Lincoln's early decision to affiliate with the party of Henry Clay rather than that of Andrew Jackson.

In one of the debates with Stephen A. Douglas in 1858 Lincoln described Clay as "my beau ideal of a statesman, the man for

Lincoln Just a Honkie?" *New York Times Magazine*, February 11, 1968, pp. 34-35, 100-107. Better balanced discussions of Lincoln's racial ideas and policies can be found in Benjamin Quarles, *Lincoln and the Negro* (New York, 1962); and Arvarh E. Strickland, "The Illinois Background of Lincoln's Attitude Toward Slavery and the Negro," *Illinois State Historical Society, Journal*, LVI (Autumn 1963), 474-94.

whom I fought all of my humble life."⁴ It is more than probable that Lincoln was initially attracted to the embryonic Whig or anti-Jacksonian party in the 1830s by his admiration for Clay and his sincere adherence to the Kentuckian's principles and programs. In identifying himself as a Clay supporter at the outset of his political career in 1832, Lincoln was by no means taking the easy and opportunistic course for a young Illinois politician on the make. The lines between Clay and Jackson were already drawn, and it is clear that the Jacksonians were the majority in Illinois and even, at that time, in Lincoln's own Sangamon County.⁵ What Clay meant to Lincoln did not become fully apparent until the 1850s when the latter delivered his moving eulogy and then went on to assume self-consciously the mantle of Clay as a moderate opponent of slavery. But from the beginning of his career the Clay influence and example powerfully affected Lincoln and shaped his thinking.

What is relevant here, of course, is not the full scope of Clay's nationalist philosophy as it affected Lincoln but rather the enduring influence of Clay's perspective on slavery and race. Time and again in the 1850s Lincoln would have recourse to Clay in the debate over the extension of slavery in the territories. He quoted Clay, paraphrased him, and at times virtually plagiarized from him, not merely for the practical political purpose of winning recalcitrant Whigs to the Republican cause but because he indeed thought of himself as taking up where Clay had left off. If the Clayite foundations of Lincoln's free-soil Republicanism have not been fully apparent to historians, it is because they have fixed their attention on Clay as the Great Compromiser and have tended to lose sight of Clay's significance as a racial moderate and proponent of gradual emancipation. Clay, it must be admitted, was not entirely consistent in these matters. As a practical politician with presidential ambitions who represented a border slave state in Congress, he was subject to pressures that forced him at times to compromise his principles and muffle his antislavery sentiments. Clay began his political career in 1799 as an outspoken advocate of gradual emancipation in Kentucky, but by the end of the 1830s he was responding to the antiabolitionist hysteria infecting all the slaveholding states by taking positions that brought him for a time perilously close to the southern proslavery camp. Yet Clay never retracted his early pronouncements that slavery

⁴ Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (8 vols. and index, New Brunswick, N. J., 1953-1955), III, 29; cited hereinafter as Basler, ed., *Collected Works*.

⁵ Albert J. Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858* (2 vols., Boston and New York, 1928), I, 115.

was an evil—"a universally acknowledged curse"—or repudiated his hope that the institution would eventually disappear.⁶ In 1849, after giving up his presidential ambitions, he once again took up the cause of gradual emancipation in Kentucky and wrote a public letter to Richard Pindell on behalf of this unsuccessful movement, demonstrating anew his strong personal preference for a society based on free labor.⁷

Clay differed from the South's outspoken defenders of slavery not only in his underlying attitude toward "the peculiar institution" but also in his characteristic estimate of the black character. In 1829 Clay affirmed that blacks are "rational beings, like ourselves, capable of feeling, of reflection, and of judging of what naturally belongs to them as a portion of the human race."⁸ In the 1830s and 1840s, when an insurgent racism was denying the basic humanity of blacks, Clay held back from such judgments. In his Pindell letter of 1849 he openly attacked the argument for slavery based on inferiority of race. In a passage later quoted by Lincoln he wrote:

An argument in support of reducing the African race to slavery is sometimes derived from their *alleged* intellectual inferiority to the white races; but, if this argument be founded on fact (as it *may* be, but which I shall not now examine), it would prove entirely too much. It would prove that any white nation which had made greater advances in civilization, knowledge and wisdom than another white nation, would have a right to reduce the latter to a state of bondage. Nay, further, if the principle of subjugation, founded upon intellectual superiority, be true, and be applicable to races and to nations, what is to prevent its being applied to individuals? And then the wisest man in the world would have a right to make slaves of all the rest of mankind!⁹

These statements reveal that Clay was something less than a convinced proponent of racial equality. But set against the climate of Negrophobia in the mid-nineteenth century they seem relatively benign. Clay was arguing that blacks are human beings, who have, in rudimentary form at least, the same basic desires and capabilities as whites. In his attempted *reductio ad absurdum* of the proslavery racial argument he admitted the possibility that blacks are intellectually inferior to whites. But Clay's tentativeness

⁶ On Clay's attitude towards slavery see Clement Eaton, *Henry Clay and the Art of American Politics* (Boston and Toronto, 1957), 118-36; and Calvin Colton, ed., *The Works of Henry Clay* (10 vols., New York and London, 1904), VI, 335.

⁷ Clay to Pindell, February 17, 1849, Colton, ed., *Works of Henry Clay*, III, 346-52.

⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 213.

⁹ *Ibid.*, III, 347. Italics are mine.

on this question, his denial of its applicability to the slavery issue, and his willingness to equate black "inferiority" with the backwardness of some white nations stood in sharp contrast with currently fashionable assertions that black inferiority was exceptional and inherent.¹⁰ Furthermore, as a lifelong proponent of African colonization Clay denied the fundamental racist argument that blacks were incapable of self-government. He defended colonization in his Pindell letter of 1849 by arguing that in Africa blacks could "enjoy the great blessings of liberty, and sivil [*sic*], political, and social equality"¹¹

Clay's colonizationism, of course, had other implications. As one of the founders and leading spirits of the American Colonization Society, Clay maintained with others of his persuasion that gradual emancipation was impracticable unless accompanied by colonization. Deportation of freed blacks was deemed necessary because of the allegedly deep-seated and unconquerable prejudices of the whites, prejudices which would lead to race war if freed blacks were put in a position to demand political and social equality. At the root of this popular revulsion to blacks, Clay argued, was a horror at the prospect of intermarriage with human beings of a different color.¹² In defending colonization and opposing emancipation on the soil because of the power of white prejudice, Clay made two notable statements that were later paraphrased by Lincoln for his own purposes. In denouncing the abolitionist proposal for immediate emancipation in 1842 Clay asserted that "such are the feelings—prejudice, if you please (and what man, claiming to be a statesman, will overlook or disregard the deep-seated and unconquerable prejudices of the people?)—in the slave states, that no human law could enforce a union between the two races."¹³ In 1849 in the Pindell letter he maintained that any plan for emancipation must be accompanied by colonization, because "the color, passions, and prejudices would forever prevent the two races from living together in a state of cordial union."¹⁴

These basic views of Clay were to be reaffirmed by Lincoln, who absorbed not only the doctrines but even some of the terminology of his precursor. In his fundamental attitudes toward slavery and

¹⁰ See George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*, (New York, 1971), 43-164, *passim*.

¹¹ Colton, ed., *Works of Henry Clay*, III, 352.

¹² See Fredrickson, *Black Image*, 1-42; and Colton, ed., *Works of Henry Clay*, I, 210-14, 219-20.

¹³ Clay's reply to Mr. Mendenhall, Richmond, Indiana, October 1, 1842, Colton, ed., *Works of Henry Clay*, I, 220.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 349.

race Lincoln remained, apparently to the end of his career, a Henry Clay-type Whig colonizationist. Or, more accurately perhaps, he was Henry Clay relieved of the burden of slaveholding and a slaveholding constituency, a difference in situation which permitted Lincoln a greater freedom in implementing Clay's basic philosophy than the Kentuckian himself had ever enjoyed.

The earliest hint of Lincoln's attitude toward slavery came in 1837 when he and one other member of the Illinois state legislature protested for the record against a previously approved resolution condemning abolitionism. They objected, not out of sympathy for the abolitionists, whom they conceded did more harm than good, but because the original resolution had not made it clear that slavery was an evil institution, "founded on both injustice and bad policy . . ." ¹⁵ This early attempt to be antislavery in principle while steering clear of abolitionism foreshadowed Lincoln's position in the 1850s.

Four years later, in 1841, Lincoln described privately his direct impression of a coffle of south-bound slaves encountered on an Ohio riverboat. Contrary to his later recollection of the incident, he was struck at the time by the apparent happiness of the slaves rather than by their misery. It is significant, however, that he did not draw the obvious racist conclusion by generalizing about the peculiarities of the black temperament but instead made his perception the basis of a general observation about human nature. The slaves' contentment was "a fine example . . . for contemplating the effect of *condition* upon human happiness." It illustrated the supposedly universal truth that God "renders the worst of human conditions tolerable, while He permits the best, to be nothing better than tolerable." ¹⁶ Such philosophizing was hardly indicative of antislavery zeal, and it can easily be condemned as a manifestation of complacency, insensitivity, or lack of imagination. But it was nevertheless based on the assumption, increasingly rare in the 1840s, that blacks responded to conditions in a way that could be understood in terms of a common humanity and not as the result of peculiar racial characteristics.

Lincoln had no occasion before the 1850s to discuss explicitly the phenomenon of racial prejudice. But in his temperance address of 1842 and elsewhere he held to the conservative principle that firmly established public opinion on any question must be respected because it was providential and would therefore change only in God's good time. ¹⁷ Clearly, if opposition to black equality con-

¹⁵ Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, I, 75.

¹⁶ Lincoln to Mary Speed, September 27, 1841, *ibid.*, 260.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 275.

stituted a strong and general conviction of the white community, Lincoln would be prepared to accept it as a fact of life, not readily altered even if morally wrong.

After the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 Lincoln emerged as an important spokesman for free-soil principles. In his well-known speeches during the half-dozen years before his election to the Presidency he promulgated a racial philosophy that combined the principles adumbrated above: moral opposition to slavery, acceptance of the basic humanity of blacks, and a conservative position on the prospects for racial equality in the United States. To see these views in perspective, it is important to recognize that the years after 1854 not only saw an effort to extend and nationalize slavery but also provided the occasion for a torrent of racist propaganda. Extreme racism, based on the pseudoscientific concept of genetic inferiority, was employed by some proslavery apologists to demote blacks to the status of domestic animals, by Douglas and the advocates of popular sovereignty to demonstrate that democracy and the Declaration of Independence applied only to whites, and by some Republicans who saw the containment of slavery as the penning up of a radically inferior black population. ¹⁸ The fact that spokesmen for all positions in the debate over slavery extension made racist appeals would seem to suggest that differences in racial philosophy had little to do with the ideological origins of the Civil War. ¹⁹ A strong case can be made for this point of view. Certainly, there was a clash of sectional interests and on a deeper level, perhaps, an irrepressible conflict of societies with differing value systems. But the argument can be pressed too far. Inseparable from the conflict of interests and ideologies were differences in the degree, emphasis, and application of racism. There *were* Republicans who rivaled the Democrats and the southerners in their racism—many of them were in fact ex-Democrats who cut their political teeth in a party that had condoned race baiting since the time of Jackson. There were also Republicans, usually from a Liberty party, Free-Soil, or Conscience Whig background who came close to accepting the radical abolitionist premise of racial equality. ²⁰ But at the center of the

¹⁸ Fredrickson, *Black Image*, 43-164; Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana, 1967), 123-37.

¹⁹ See David M. Potter, *The South and the Sectional Conflict* (Baton Rouge, 1968), 113-18, for a discussion of how the emphasis of historians on the North-South racial consensus has led away from the kind of understanding of sectional differences required to explain the Civil War.

²⁰ On the spectrum of Republican racial attitudes see Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York, 1970), 261-300.

party, representing its basic position in the 1850s, were ex-Whigs of mildly antislavery antecedents like Abraham Lincoln, the compromise candidate of 1860, who not only held a middle ground on questions of antislavery policy but also espoused a moderate racial philosophy in the tradition of Henry Clay. Men of this persuasion offered some resistance to extreme racism while at the same time carefully avoiding what they regarded as the dangerous racial utopianism of the abolitionists. They reflected, to some extent at least, the racial views of an earlier America—the conservative, quasi-environmentalism of the Founding Fathers and the early colonizationists. Their importance was that they gave the Republican party a racial emphasis compatible with a practical defense of white supremacy—and hence acceptable to public opinion—without going to the extreme of denying black humanity and thereby undermining the moral basis of opposition to slavery.

It is to Lincoln's speeches that one turns for the fullest exposition of this philosophy. That Lincoln was opposed to the extension of slavery on moral as well as economic and social grounds has been conclusively demonstrated by Don E. Fehrenbacher and should require no further elaboration.²¹ But Lincoln's specifically racial pronouncements could stand reexamination. The question of innate biological differences between the races was avoided by Lincoln until the senatorial campaign of 1858. In his reply to Douglas at Ottawa he conceded that there was "a physical difference between the two [races], which in my judgment will probably forever forbid their living together upon the footing of perfect equality . . ." This of course is the classic statement often used to demonstrate Lincoln's dyed-in-the-wool racism. But it should be noted that Lincoln made this concession in the course of refuting Douglas's argument that the Negro was not a man entitled to equality by the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln concluded this section of his speech by saying: "I agree with Judge Douglas he is not my equal in many respects—certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment. But in the right to eat the bread, without the leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, *he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man.*"²² Here Lincoln distinguished between an elemental human equality affirmed by the Declaration of Independence and denied by slavery and a full social and political equality that might legitimately be withheld on racial grounds. And what was the nature of these crucial racial differences? All that Lincoln was willing to affirm un-

²¹ Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850's* (Stanford, Calif., 1962).

²² Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, III, 16; see also *ibid.*, II, 520.

equivocally was white superiority in color. He was, following the example of Henry Clay's Pindell letter of 1849, tentative on the question of intellectual and moral distinctions.

In the context of the time, when dogmatic statements of innate inferiority were heard on almost every hand, such tentativeness denoted a relatively open-minded or liberal position. Even some of the most radical Republicans were ready to concede the probability, if not the certainty, of innate white superiority of some sort.²³ But what can be made of Lincoln's unequivocal statement that blacks are inferior in color? It seems reasonable to assume that Lincoln sensed in the attitudes of white Americans, and probably in himself as well, a strong distaste for Negroid physical features and a powerful preference for white pigmentation as the human norm. If one were to follow the thinking of the sociologist Harry Hoetnick, one might argue that Lincoln had laid bare a basic source of racial prejudice—the "somatic norm image" (or ideal of physical beauty) inevitably possessed and treasured by the dominant group in a racially "segmented society."²⁴ If pushed too far, such a mode of explanation can easily lead to a psychological determinism that obscures the importance of immediate social and economic factors. But if there is any truth at all in Winthrop D. Jordan's analysis of early American racial attitudes, it becomes difficult to deny that anti-Negro feelings and actions derive, to some extent at least, from a color complex deeply rooted in Western culture—a predisposition that can turn into virulent racial prejudice when associated with social fears and economic interests.²⁵ Like many comparatively benevolent or "liberal" whites throughout American history, Lincoln could reject the most blatant forms of racist ideology without escaping an underlying emotional commitment to whiteness and white supremacy. Lincoln differed from some others similarly disposed in that his political situation, and perhaps his fundamental honesty as well, impelled him to make his attitude explicit. In 1854, for example, he confessed that his "own feelings" would not allow him to contemplate the political and social equality of blacks.²⁶ Was Frederick Douglass therefore deceived in his belief that Lincoln was free from "popular prejudice against the colored race"? Douglass of

²³ Congressman Owen Lovejoy, the most radical of Illinois Republican leaders, conceded in 1860 that blacks were inferior but denied that racial inferiority constituted a justification of slavery. Cited in Fredrickson, *Black Image*, 51.

²⁴ Hoetnick, *The Two Variants in Caribbean Race Relations: A Contribution to the Sociology of Segmented Societies* (London, New York, and Toronto, 1967), *passim*.

²⁵ Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968).

²⁶ Speech at Peoria, October 16, 1854, Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, II, 256.

course did not meet Lincoln until the summer of 1863 and by then the latter's feelings may have changed. But another possibility exists. Perhaps Lincoln's exceptionally egalitarian manner resulted from a depth of self-awareness that made it possible for him to control his prejudices precisely because he acknowledged their existence and recognized their irrational character.

Whatever the validity of such psychological speculations, it is clear that Lincoln confronted the phenomenon of racial prejudice in himself and others and applied his findings in a cautious and pragmatic fashion to questions of policy. In his Peoria speech of 1854 he justified his reluctance to recommend immediate emancipation to the people of the South by pointing to what he believed was the practical impossibility of elevating the freed blacks to a position of equality: "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. Whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgment, is not the sole question, if indeed, it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill-founded, can not be safely disregarded."²⁷ Here Lincoln echoed Clay's conservative doctrine that a statesman must adjust himself to "the deep-seated and unconquerable prejudices of the people" and provided the real underpinning for his later contention that the races could never live together in "perfect equality," or, as Clay had put it, "in . . . cordial union."

Lincoln's well-known advocacy of colonization as the only solution to the race problem followed inevitably from his premise that insurmountable white prejudices made racial equality impossible in the United States. His first opportunity to comment publicly on the colonization idea was his 1852 eulogy to Henry Clay. After praising Clay for his lifelong devotion to the cause of black expatriation, Lincoln concluded: "If as the friends of colonization hope, the present and coming generations of our countrymen shall by any means, succeed in freeing our land from the dangerous presence of slavery; and, at the same time, in restoring a captive people to their long-lost father-land, with bright prospects for the future; and this too, so gradually, that neither *races nor individuals* shall have suffered by the change, it will indeed be a glorious consummation."²⁸ In the Peoria speech of 1854 Lincoln alluded to emancipation accompanied by colonization as the only practical way of getting rid of slavery, but conceded that the plan's "sudden execu-

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

tion is impossible."²⁹ In 1855 he addressed the Illinois Colonization Society; the surviving outline of his speech suggests that it consisted largely of a sympathetic account of the history of the colonization movement, a subject on which Lincoln was apparently well versed.³⁰

In his 1857 Springfield speech Lincoln once again took up the subject of colonization: "The enterprise is a difficult one," he conceded; "but 'when there is a will there is a way;'. . . Will springs from the two elements of moral sense and self-interest. Let us be brought to believe it is morally right, and, at the same time, favorable to, or, at least, not against, our interest, to transfer the African to his native clime, and we shall find a way to do it, however great the task may be." Lincoln went on to argue on this occasion that the Republican belief in the "manhood" of the Negro was more likely to create a "public sentiment" on behalf of colonization than the Democrat's effort to "crush all sympathy for him, and cultivate and excite hatred and disgust against him . . ." Colonization would not succeed, Lincoln was arguing, unless accompanied by a humanitarian interest in the Negro and some respect for his capabilities. By apparently denying his humanity, Douglas and other supporters of popular sovereignty were laying the groundwork for "the indefinite outspreading of his bondage." Furthermore, he added, the Republican program of restricting slavery to its present domain had the long-range benefit of denying slaveholders a chance to sell their surplus bondsmen at high prices in new slave territories, thus encouraging them to begin the process of gradual emancipation by sending the excess to Liberia.³¹ Here Lincoln laid bare the full thrust of his antislavery program by revealing the close connection in his thinking between the restriction of slavery and the promotion of colonization. Southern slaveholders, he implied, would never be induced to emancipate and colonize their slaves unless they were driven by necessity. It was partly to create such a necessity that Lincoln and other sincerely antislavery Republicans advocated restriction of slavery to its existing limits. In the last analysis, their hopes for both the end of slavery and expatriation of the black population depended on the creation of economic and population pressures in the South that would compel the acceptance of gradual emancipation and colonization. Perhaps the only basic fallacy in such a program was

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 255.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 298-99.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 409-10.

the assumption that the South would allow such a situation to develop without adopting desperate measures to prevent it.

Since colonization was such an important element in Lincoln's long-range scenario for ending slavery, it may seem surprising that he did not stress his hopes for black expatriation in the 1858 senatorial campaign against Douglas. In the great debates themselves he did no more than quote the section of his Peoria speech that alluded to the long-range hope for colonization.³² Perhaps Lincoln kept his colonizationism under wraps because he was unsure of his political ground, uncertain whether an emphasis on black expatriation would add to or subtract from his vote total. Although often endorsed by notables and public figures, colonization had never been a genuinely popular movement, even in the North. It promised to get rid of an allegedly dangerous and undesirable free black population, but it was also likely to be a very complex and costly enterprise, requiring large appropriations by state and federal governments and necessitating a greater degree of centralized planning and direction than antebellum opinion was characteristically willing to tolerate. It may be surmised that many Negrophobes in Illinois would have been happy to get rid of the free blacks in the state and even to see slavery disappear gradually in the South but were reluctant to pay the price of even the most limited and partial colonization scheme. Lincoln also knew that his chances for victory depended not only on winning a share of the anti-Negro vote but also on holding within the Republican coalition the radical, quasi-abolitionist minority of northern Illinois. To some of these radicals colonization was anathema because it was a concession to "the caste spirit" and an affront to their egalitarian idealism. There is every reason to believe, however, that the long-range prospect of colonization was in the back of Lincoln's mind when he spoke of the "ultimate extinction" of slavery in the "House Divided" speech. In his reply to Douglas at Ottawa he elaborated on the House Divided statement, arguing that once the public mind was again secure in its former belief that slavery was "in the course of ultimate extinction. The crisis would be past and the institution might be let alone for a hundred years, if it should live so long, in the States where it exists, yet it would be going out of existence in the way best for both the black and the white races."³³ What he undoubtedly meant by the "best way" was a process of gradual, voluntary emancipation accompanied by the colonization of freedmen outside the United States.

³² *Ibid.*, III, 14-15.

³³ *Ibid.*, 18.

In one little-noticed speech of the 1858 campaign Lincoln demonstrated how colonization was related to a liberal hope that all men everywhere would someday enjoy the blessings of self-government. According to the newspaper report of his speech at Carlinville, Lincoln contended that "Negroes have natural rights . . . as other men have, although they cannot enjoy them here, and even [Chief Justice] Taney once said that 'the Declaration of Independence was broad enough for all men.' But though it does not declare that all men are equal in their attainments or social position, yet no sane man will attempt to deny that the African *upon his own soil* has all the natural rights that instrument vouchsafes to all mankind." But those who would countenance the extension of slavery were apparently not sane men, because their view that the Negro was subhuman meant to Lincoln that "even upon his own soil he has no rights which white men are bound to respect."³⁴

If the report of this speech was correct, Lincoln was saying in effect that every race had the right and capability of self-government but only on its "own soil." In one respect this was an antiracist position, because it conflicted with the concept of racial imperialism promulgated during this period not only by southern expansionists, who dreamed of a Caribbean slave empire, but also, as Harry V. Jaffa has demonstrated, by Stephen A. Douglas and the other northern Democratic proponents of an unrestrained Manifest Destiny under the banner of popular sovereignty for whites only.³⁵ The idea of whites moving into the tropics and denying the possibility of self-government to other races was apparently unacceptable to Lincoln. The promise of colonization was that it would transplant blacks to regions where they could rule themselves and develop their own democratic institutions free of white interference. This concept of a democratic world of distinct races enjoying perfect self-government on their "own soil" repudiated internationalist racism while affirming the inevitability of domestic racism. It implied "the ideal of racial homogeneity," the belief that equality in a given nation or climatic zone could exist only for the one racial group which had attained a dominant position because of its superior adaptability to the physical environment. It followed that a society guaranteeing equality for all its inhabitants would have to be racially homogeneous.³⁶ There can be little doubt that Lincoln accepted this basic doctrine. In the Peoria

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 79-80. Italics are mine.

³⁵ Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Garden City, N. Y., 1959), 48-49, 65-69, 99-103.

³⁶ See Fredrickson, *Black Image*, 130-64.

speech of 1854 he conceded Douglas's dictum that "this government was made for the white people and not for the negroes."³⁷ At Ottawa in 1858 he acknowledged that when two distinct races inhabited the same territory "necessity" dictated that one be supreme. He then added, "I, as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong, having the superior position."³⁸ Lincoln, like some of the founders of the American Colonization Society, was a pragmatic white supremacist in his concept of domestic race relations but indulged a principled egalitarianism in his world outlook. Although this combination actually offered little benefit to American blacks, it did help give substance to the claim that Republicans adhered more closely to the democratic ideal than the proponents of slavery or popular sovereignty.

On the surface Lincoln's racial philosophy seems logically consistent. But deeper probing reveals an unresolved conflict at the root of his thought. The contradiction in Lincoln's racial ideology came, as Richard Hofstadter has suggested, from his somewhat arbitrary distinction between slavery and white supremacy.³⁹ Slavery, according to Lincoln, flagrantly contradicted the Declaration of Independence, but the denial to blacks of political and civil equality did not. To make this point Lincoln distinguished between the natural rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and the full privileges of citizenship, which the majority could grant or withhold from any minority as it saw fit.⁴⁰ Harry V. Jaffa, a leading student of Lincoln's thought, has argued in *The Crisis of the House Divided* that Lincoln was not only consistent but completely justified in taking such a position: "Lincoln did not believe he had a moral right to deprecate the opinion of his countrymen which denied political equality to Negroes. To have done so would have meant denying the right of white men to judge the conditions under which their government could best secure their rights. But the Declaration of Independence asserts that the people have an indefeasible right to judge of the security of their rights, and Lincoln could not deny the legitimacy of their judgment concerning the status to be accorded the Negro without denying that right."⁴¹ Unfortunately, this argument tends to undermine the moral distinction that Jaffa is elsewhere so concerned with making between Lincoln's free-soilism and Douglas's popular sovereignty. If the white

³⁷ Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, II, 281.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 16.

³⁹ Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York, 1948), 116-17.

⁴⁰ See Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, II, 265-66, 405-407, 499-501, 520.

⁴¹ Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*, 377.

majority believed that the defense of its rights required that blacks be denied social and political equality, what prevented it from going one step further and deciding, on the basis of popular sovereignty, that the protection of its liberty also required black enslavement? Only the abstract and legalistic distinction between natural rights and the privileges of citizenship. And, as critics of this distinction have often pointed out, no group can in fact exercise or protect its "natural rights" without having a voice in how it is governed.

On one occasion Lincoln himself made what amounted to an open admission that his distinction was a legalistic evasion of the spirit of democratic government. In the Peoria speech he attacked slavery by appealing to the Declaration of Independence and in particular to the concept of the "consent of the governed." Slavery, he contended, was a flagrant denial of the Declaration because it allowed one man "to govern another man, *without that other's consent*." Pushing the concept of government by consent to its logical outcome, Lincoln concluded with the following imperative: "Allow all the governed an equal voice in the government, and that, and that only is self government." Realizing perhaps that he had just obliterated any clear distinction between natural and political rights, he quickly added that he was not of course "contending for the establishment of political and social equality between the whites and blacks" or "combating the argument of NECESSITY, arising from the fact that the blacks are already amongst us . . ." ⁴² Lincoln, in other words, conceded here that denial of black citizenship was inconsistent with his basic political doctrines and fell back on the argument from practical "necessity." Ultimately, then, an alleged racial necessity forced a violation of the principle of government by consent and consigned blacks to an inferior political and civil status. But the trouble with the pragmatic argument of racial necessity was that it could also be used as a justification for slavery itself and even for the extension of slavery. At the core of his thinking, then, Lincoln was trapped by what Gunnar Myrdal has called "the American dilemma," and for him it was truly insoluble. Blacks as men were entitled to equality, but whites were unalterably prejudiced against them and would never permit the actual attainment of equal rights. For Lincoln the Negro was—to alter the abolitionist battle cry—a man but not a brother.

Yet the very fact that Lincoln was caught in a moral and ideological dilemma sets him off from those racists who avoided the

⁴² Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, II, 266.

dilemma completely by defining blacks as subhuman. When Douglas in effect denied the full humanity of the Negro and told cheering crowds that the Declaration of Independence applied to whites only, Lincoln objected in vigorous terms, condemning in principle a situation that he in fact found himself powerless to alter. In the 1858 campaign Douglas attempted to make race the main issue by accusing the Republicans of advocating a political and social equality and thereby promoting the "amalgamation" of the races. Lincoln responded defensively by denying the charge and then tried to turn the tables on proponents of popular sovereignty by arguing that since slavery was the chief cause of miscegenation in the United States, the restriction of its spread would in fact reduce the possibilities of race mixture.⁴³ In these attempts to neutralize the race issue as it affected the North while seeking to focus attention on the abstract inequity of slavery as an institution, Lincoln came close to arguing, in the manner of other leading midwestern Republicans, that his party, and not the Democrats, was "the white man's party."⁴⁴

When he campaigned in Ohio in 1859, again at the heels of Douglas, who was stumping the state for the Democrats, Lincoln's strategy underwent a subtle change of emphasis which brought out more clearly the relatively benign side of his racial philosophy. He made much in his speeches of a recent statement of Douglas in which "the Little Giant" had maintained that he was for the Negro against the crocodile but for the white man against the Negro. Lincoln described this statement as part of a Democratic campaign to debauch the public mind on the slavery issue by demoting the Negro "from the rank of a man to that of a brute."⁴⁵ Douglas's statement, he told his Ohio audience, meant that "As the negro ought to treat the crocodile as a beast, so the white man ought to treat the negro as a beast."⁴⁶ Lincoln apparently believed that Douglas had gone too far in articulating a crude Negrophobia. What the latter was now saying was perhaps acceptable to the voters of southern Illinois but too extreme for those of Ohio and many other northern states. Lincoln correctly assumed that an explicit denial of Negro humanity was incompatible with moral opposition to the extension of slavery and therefore unacceptable to a growing northern free-soil majority. Despite the ambivalence of his own position, he emerged in the Ohio campaign as a functional op-

⁴³ *Ibid.*, III, 80, 84, 88-89.

⁴⁴ See Berwanger, *Frontier Against Slavery*, 133-34.

⁴⁵ Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, III, 423-24.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 432; see also p. 444.

ponent of extreme racism. In his speech in Cincinnati he went so far as to deny that there was "a necessary conflict between the white man and the negro" and affirmed "that there is room enough for us all to be free . . ."⁴⁷

Lincoln, however, had not given up his belief that the only way blacks could become fully free was by emigrating from the United States. After his election to the Presidency and the outbreak of the War for the Union, Lincoln believed for a time that Providence had provided a golden opportunity for realizing his long-standing dream, inherited from Henry Clay, of ending slavery and solving the race problem by a carefully organized program of gradual emancipation and colonization. The story of Lincoln's hesitant progress toward emancipation and his determined but abortive effort to set in motion some kind of colonization program is so well known that it seems unnecessary to go over it again.⁴⁸ A more fruitful approach is to concentrate on the principal question that remains in dispute: Did Lincoln toward the end of the war change his basic views on racial equality in such a way as to affirm the possibility of a biracial democracy?⁴⁹

The best point of departure is Lincoln's address of August 14, 1862, to a delegation of blacks whom he had invited to the White House. The purpose of the meeting was to arouse black interest in colonization, and Lincoln repeated his long-standing view that racial equality was impossible on American soil: "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." When blacks ceased to be slaves, Lincoln continued, they were still "far removed from being placed on an equality with the white race. . . . The aspiration of men is to enjoy equality with the best when free, but on this broad continent, not a single man of your race is made the equal of a single man of ours." Whatever one

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 446.

⁴⁸ See for example the excellent accounts in Quarles, *Lincoln and the Negro* and in V. Jacque Voegeli, *Free but Not Equal: The Midwest and the Negro During the Civil War* (Chicago and London, 1967). For detailed discussions of specific colonization projects see Warren A. Beck, "Lincoln and Negro Colonization in Central America," *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly*, VI (September 1950), 162-83; and Paul J. Scheips, "Lincoln and the Chiriqui Colonization Project," *Journal of Negro History*, XXXVII (October 1952), 418-53.

⁴⁹ For an exchange on this question see Ludwell H. Johnson, "Lincoln and Equal Rights: The Authenticity of the Wadsworth Letter," *Journal of Southern History*, XXXII (February 1966), 83-87; Harold M. Hyman, "Lincoln and Equal Rights for Negroes: The Irrelevancy of the 'Wadsworth Letter,'" *Civil War History*, XII (September 1966), 258-66; and Johnson, "Lincoln and Equal Rights: A Reply," *ibid.*, XIII (March 1967), 66-73.

thought about this situation, he went on, it was an unalterable fact of life, and "It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated." Lincoln's argument, ostensibly at least, derived from a conservative fatalism about popular attitudes and not from personal Negrophobia; in accord with the traditional colonizationist philosophy it made white prejudice and not natural black incapacity the main barrier to equality. In calling for educated free blacks to lead the exodus, Lincoln invoked an ethnocentric kind of environmentalism. In his opinion, newly freed bondsmen, "whose intellects are clouded by Slavery . . ." needed the direction of blacks "capable of thinking as white men," because they had not been "systematically oppressed."⁵⁰ The address to the Negro deputation stands as the classic statement of Lincoln's quasi-racism, because it simultaneously denied black equality as practical option for American society while affirming it as a theoretical possibility in another place and under other circumstances.

Turning directly now to the question of whether Lincoln gave up these doctrines in the last year and a half of the war, one confronts a fragmentary and confusing record. Faced with the practical failure of all his deportation schemes, Lincoln had by 1864 apparently "sloughed off that idea of colonization," or so his secretary John Hay reported.⁵¹ Yet according to General Benjamin F. Butler, Lincoln conferred with him in early April 1865, shortly before the assassination, about the possibility of colonizing freed blacks and especially those who had borne arms for the Union. "But what shall we do with the negroes after they are free?" Lincoln reportedly asked Butler. "I can hardly believe that the South and North can live in peace, unless we can get rid of the negroes. Certainly they cannot if we don't get rid of the negroes whom we have armed and disciplined and who have fought with us . . . I believe that it would be better to export them all to some fertile country with a good climate, which they could have to themselves." After appealing to Butler for logistical advice on black removal, Lincoln laid bare the root of his fears: "If these black soldiers of ours go back to the South I am afraid they will be but little better off with their masters than they were before, and yet they will be free men. I fear a race war, and it will be at least a guerilla war because we have taught these men how to fight."⁵² Historians are naturally reluctant to take Ben Butler's word for anything, but some recent scholars have found

⁵⁰ Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, V, 371-73.

⁵¹ Tyler Dennett, ed., *Lincoln and the Civil War in the Diaries and Letters of John Hay* (New York, 1939), 203.

⁵² Butler, *Autobiography and Personal Reminiscences of Major-General Benj. F. Butler* (Boston, 1892), 903.

good reason to accept his account of this conversation. Ludwell H. Johnson has pointed out that Butler had no conceivable motive for lying in this instance, and Herman Belz has found that the basic thrust of Lincoln's comments was "in accord with views . . . [he] expressed elsewhere concerning reconstruction."⁵³ If Butler's recollection is substantially correct, as it appears to be, then one can only conclude that Lincoln continued to his dying day to deny the possibility of racial harmony and equality in the United States and persisted in regarding colonization as the only real alternative to perpetual race conflict.

The thesis that Lincoln changed his views on the possibility of equal rights rests almost entirely upon two statements he made recommending a partial black suffrage for the reconstructed government of Louisiana. In a letter of March 1864 to the newly elected loyalist governor of that state, he proposed that the upcoming constitutional convention consider extending the suffrage to "very intelligent" blacks and "those who have fought gallantly in our ranks," adding cautiously that "this is only a suggestion, not to the public, but to you alone."⁵⁴ Lincoln may have been inspired to make this recommendation because of a visit he had received the previous day from two wealthy and cultivated representatives of the free mulatto population of New Orleans. The visitors presented a petition demanding the right to vote, signed by a thousand freeborn men of color, all of whom were substantial property owners.⁵⁵ Hence, the possibility exists that Lincoln saw the free blacks of Louisiana as a peculiar case with some claim to special consideration. The convention failed to enact a partial black suffrage, however, and Lincoln accepted its decision. In the last public speech before his assassination he made a final plea for congressional recognition of the Louisiana government. In answering the objection of Radical Republicans that "the elective franchise is not given to the colored man," he confessed that he himself would "prefer that it were now conferred on the very intelligent, and on those who serve our cause as soldiers." But he went on to point out that under the new constitution the legislature was empowered to confer the suffrage on blacks and that the best policy was to recognize the government in the hope that extension of the suffrage would come in good time.⁵⁶

Before concluding that Lincoln had become a convinced and op-

⁵³ Johnson, "Lincoln and Equal Rights: A Reply," 68; Herman Belz, *Reconstructing the Union: Theory and Policy During the Civil War* (Ithaca, 1969), 282-83.

⁵⁴ Lincoln to Michael Hahn, March 13, 1864, Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, VII, 243.

⁵⁵ Quarles, *Lincoln and the Negro*, 227-28.

⁵⁶ Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, VIII, 403-404.

timistic advocate of political equality for blacks by April 1865, other possibilities have to be taken into account. One, already mentioned, is that Louisiana, with its unique caste of educated, freeborn mulattoes, was regarded by Lincoln as a special case and not as a source of precedent for the reconstruction of other states. Another is that Lincoln was recommending partial suffrage as a way of heading off an impending Radical demand for full political equality. A few months later President Andrew Johnson, whose opposition to racial equality was clear and unequivocal, would propose a limited black suffrage to the provisional governor of Mississippi with exactly this purpose in mind.⁵⁷ Furthermore, Lincoln at no point contemplated making even limited suffrage a condition for readmission to the Union. Black suffrage, if it came, would have to stem from the voluntary action of southern whites. Local white preferences, in other words, would be allowed to determine the extent of black political participation. Finally, Lincoln's particular concern with suffrage for blacks who had served in the Union army may take on a new connotation if the fears he expressed to Butler are given credence. It was the ex-soldiers whom Lincoln allegedly saw as the possible catalyst for race war, and it may be that he was subtly suggesting to white southerners that the best way to neutralize this potential source of trouble was to give black veterans the vote, thereby satisfying their personal demands for equality in the hope that this would make them contented and willing to forgo strenuous agitation on behalf of their voteless brothers.

All this is frankly speculative. But equally speculative and, on balance, less plausible is the theory that Lincoln did an about-face in the last year and a half of the war and ended up as a convinced believer in the possibility of full racial equality. Lincoln was a flexible man, but the deeply rooted attitudes and ideas of a lifetime do not change easily. Although no final answer can be given to the question of whether Lincoln changed his mind, the weight of evidence and logic seems to support the hypothesis that Lincoln died with the same basic views on black-white relations that he had held tenaciously throughout his public life.

⁵⁷ Eric L. McKittrick, *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (Chicago, 1960), 166, 190.