

a person comparatively well disposed toward Indians who yet shared many of the ethnocentric attitudes of his time—Lincoln was all of these. Above all, as Professor Nichols has shown us so well, the Great Emancipator was a goal-oriented executive. It is doubtful that without him the goal would have been reached.

## CHAPTER 7

## LINCOLN AND BLACK FREEDOM

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A CENTRAL CHALLENGE of Reconstruction history can be defined by two questions: first, how did it happen that a racist, white North freed black slaves and made all blacks the equal of whites before the law and at the ballot box? Second, what went wrong? *Lincoln and Black Freedom* focuses on pieces of the puzzle: the actual and potential roles of the presidency, specifically of Lincoln as president; and then, on the limits of the possible—the opportunity, if any, for Republican leaders in the 1860s to have established firmly in practice the equality that they made the law of the land. The focus required a reexamination of Lincoln's presidential record in respect to the status of Southern blacks. Lincoln emerged as a consistent, determined friend of black freedom, but a friend whose style of leadership obscured the strength of his commitment—and still does.<sup>1</sup>

In the popular mind the image of Lincoln as Emancipator may endure. Scholarship, though divided on the issue, has cast serious doubt upon its historical validity. More than that of any other historian the work of J. G. Randall, for two decades the leading academic authority on Lincoln, in stripping emancipation of its "crust of misconception" (Randall's phrase) discredited the Emancipation Proclamation and Lincoln as Emancipator. His Lincoln acted against slavery without enthusiasm, forced by political and military necessity to issue a paper pronouncement that set no slave free. Though recognizing Lincoln's strong moral judgment against slavery, Randall portrayed Lincoln as more deeply committed to gradualism, compensation, and colonization than to emancipation itself. Randall's views reverberated across college campuses in the arresting prose of two distinguished historians, Richard Hofstadter and Kenneth M. Stampp. According to Hofstadter, the proclamation "had all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading." In Stampp's words, "If it was Lincoln's destiny to go down

in history as the Great Emancipator, rarely has a man embraced his destiny with greater reluctance than he." Richard N. Current, who completed Randall's *Lincoln the President* after Randall's death and became a leading authority in his own right, found justification for the title of Emancipator in Lincoln's support for the Thirteenth Amendment, but he let stand Randall's view that expediency had pushed Lincoln the president into an actively antislavery policy. As more recent historical writing increasingly, and validly, presents blacks as active participants in achieving emancipation, Randall's interpretation is implicitly accepted, Lincoln's role diminished, and the popular image of the Emancipator overtly attacked as robbing blacks of credit "for setting themselves free."<sup>2</sup>

The term *freedom* as I have used it encompasses more than the absence of property rights in men. It includes as well release from the bondage of discrimination imposed by white prejudice through law. More than the reassertion of Lincoln's claim to the title of Emancipator, the conclusion that Lincoln was a friend of black civil and political rights is controversial. Here again the persistence of Randall's influence has been significant. Hostile to abolitionists and Radicals, Randall found and commended contrasting qualities in Lincoln: pro-Southern empathy, generosity toward the vanquished, an unqualified priority for speedy restoration of the Union, respect for state rights, willingness to let the Southern people (i.e., white Southerners) "solve their own race problem."<sup>3</sup>

Historians writing in the spirit of the civil rights revolution of our time repudiated Randall's pro-Southern, anti-Radical bias but generally accepted his characterization of Lincoln's policy. One wrote regretfully that it was difficult to reconcile Lincoln's role "with our own consciences."<sup>4</sup> Current found a way. He enlisted Lincoln on the side of civil rights by holding him up as an example of "man's ability to outgrow his prejudices," citing as evidence the respect with which Lincoln as president treated blacks, notably Frederick Douglass.<sup>5</sup> This was limited reassurance. Other historians discovered a bond between Lincoln and the Radicals, in goal if not in method. A few went so far as to hold that at the time of his death Lincoln was about to align himself with the Radical policy of a broad enfranchisement of Southern blacks. That view has not been generally accepted. Indeed, Lincoln's racial attitudes have attracted closer scrutiny than his racial policy.

For a time in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly after Lerone Bennett's charge in *Ebony* that Lincoln was a white supremacist, the Lincoln image seemed in danger of being transformed into a symbol of white America's injustice to black America. Even sympathetic scholarly replies left Lincoln sadly wanting in moral indignation at the racial discrimination that permeated American society, North and South. He was also faulted for lack of thoughtful concern for the future of the freed slaves. By the 1970s another development compromised the Emancipator. Writings on Reconstruction had become sharply critical of federal policy toward Southern blacks and traced back to the war years what were seen as its fatal flaws in the postwar era. Lincoln was not the focus of these studies but by implication, and at times by direct accusation, he was held responsible.

The vulnerability of Lincoln's reputation as friend of black freedom in his day, and in the historiography of ours, derives in considerable part from his style of presidential leadership. In dealing with matters affecting the status of blacks it left his purpose and his resolve open to understandable doubt. On occasion he acted boldly. More often, however, Lincoln was cautious, advancing one step at a time, and indirect, exerting influence behind the scenes. He could give a directive without appearing to do so, or even while disavowing it as such. Seeking to persuade, he would fashion an argument to fit the listener. Some statements were disingenuous, evasive, or deliberately ambiguous.

Examples of Lincoln's less than forthright style are familiar, though not always recognized as such. Best known is his response to those urging emancipation during the weeks when he had decided to issue the proclamation but was awaiting a propitious moment. He gave no public indication of his intent, he questioned the efficacy of an executive order, and he wrote the famous reply to Horace Greeley. That letter was skillfully fashioned to deflect criticism from both Radicals and their opponents, but principally the latter. Lincoln stated that what he did, or did not do, about slavery and "the colored race" was determined by what he believed would help save the Union. Later he acknowledged that even as he issued the proclamation he had been uncertain whether it would do more good than harm. The same action might not have been taken by another president, equally committed to saving the Union but of lesser moral conviction that all men everywhere should be free.

Lincoln's decision on the proclamation was not his first decision as president to move against slavery. His earlier offensive also is illustrative of his presidential style. It was behind the scenes in late 1861 that he pressed Delaware to enact a plan of emancipation, drafting alternative bills to guide the state legislature. More open was the initiative that followed in March 1862 when he sent Congress a special message asking passage of a joint resolution promising financial aid to any state that would adopt gradual abolishment of slavery. More open, but not altogether open. He had worked three months on the message—"all by himself, no conference with his cabinet." Shortly thereafter he confided to Wendell Phillips that he meant slavery "should die," that the message, like the drink slyly requested by the Irishman in legally dry Maine, contained "a drop of the crathur . . . *unbeknown to myself*"; that is, the message was stronger than it appeared to be.<sup>6</sup> A passage therein characterizing the resolution requested of Congress as "merely initiatory" and expressing hope that it "would soon lead to important practical results" had suggested as much but ambiguously.<sup>7</sup> Seeking implementation of the proposal, Lincoln attempted to persuade border-state representatives with assurances and arguments that strain credulity. His basic argument, though fervent, was unrealistic: compensated emancipation by Union slave states would discourage the enemy and shorten the war. If such action were taken, Lincoln told their congressmen, he would countenance no coercive measure against slavery by the federal government. This assurance must not be made public lest it force a quarrel with the Greeley Radicals.

Lincoln followed his initial request with two additional ones to Congress. A special message in July presented the draft of a bill to compensate any state that abolished slavery "either immediately or gradually." In December his annual message included the text of a constitutional amendment to the same end—giving the states until 1900 to act. Ostensibly conservative and deferential to the rights of the states, the proposed amendment held more than a single "drop of the crathur." One provision stated that all slaves "who shall enjoy actual freedom by the chances of war" would be "forever free." Note that for a not inconsiderable number (many slaves were already fleeing to Union lines), freedom would be legalized not by state action but by constitutional amendment. Only loyal owners would be compensated. Although Lincoln expressed, and would continue to express,

the judgment that gradual rather than sudden emancipation would be better for all, the amendment he drafted would have sanctioned immediate emancipation. Here was antislavery medicine of stronger proof than its label. A comparable stratagem was embodied in the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. It offered, or seemed to offer, protective immunity to slavery in the Confederate states if they returned to the Union. The likelihood that any would do so within the 100-day grace period between the two proclamations was practically nil. This was not the only product of Lincoln's pen that appeared to offer more protection to slavery than he was prepared to give.

With the final Emancipation Proclamation issued, Lincoln in early 1863 turned his antislavery effort to occupied Louisiana, again acting indirectly and discreetly. An earlier effort at restoration had led to the election of two Unionists as congressmen, and they were briefly seated during the last days of the Thirty-Seventh Congress. Lincoln made it a point to cultivate them. As Benjamin F. Flanders, one of the two, later reminded Lincoln: "You took me by the hand and said there was a strong effort to break down your administration and asked me to support you. . . . I did it then to the extent of my influence and have ever since."<sup>8</sup> Lincoln used Flanders and his colleague Michael Hahn as conduits to encourage local Union leaders to take an anti-slavery stance. He dispensed patronage as Flanders, Hahn, and the local Free State leader, Thomas J. Durant, considered necessary in order to carry the state for freedom. Through Secretary Salmon P. Chase, Lincoln not only dispensed such patronage but sought to neutralize the influence of proslavery Unionists. One of their number was appointed to the important post of collector of the New Orleans customhouse with the understanding that his brother-in-law, the owner and editor of an influential proslavery newspaper, would change its editorial policy to one of support for emancipation.

All this, and more, Lincoln did in such a way as to keep an appearance of neutrality and of respect for the right of Louisianians (white) to decide freely the slavery issue. He so adroitly rejected an overture from proslavery Unionists to return Louisiana to the Union with the old slave constitution that their first reaction was disbelief—surely, Lincoln would not refuse readmission to a state because of slavery! They continued to expect that he would make proslavery concessions; so did some Free State leaders. Even to Gen. Nathaniel P. Banks, who had taken over command from Benjamin F. Butler,

Lincoln expressed his objective—i.e., to end slavery by state action before readmission—as only a wish, something he would be “glad” for Louisiana to do. He admonished, however, that reorganization as a free state be “pushed forward,” completed by the time Congress met in December 1863.<sup>9</sup>

Lincoln acted directly to obtain his goal only when the leader of the Free State movement, and registrar, wrote him in the fall of 1863 that it would not be possible to complete the work of reorganization before Congress met, that public sentiment in occupied Louisiana could not by then be brought to support emancipation. Durant gratuitously added that no harm would come of delay, a conclusion incompatible with Lincoln’s fear of political defeat in 1864 with incalculable consequences for the advancement of emancipation. Thereupon Lincoln turned to Banks as commanding general, making him “master of all.”

Lincoln’s Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction was similarly precipitated by the situation in Louisiana. Its purpose was to hasten the return of Louisiana and other occupied territory as *free* states by removing the condition Lincoln had been understood as desiring, namely a broad geographic and electoral base for reorganization. Now, in order to obtain emancipation, he would accept reconstruction by a small minority, a mere one-tenth of prewar voters. Yet the requirement that slavery be abolished, instead of being explicitly stated in the proclamation, was so worded that Richard Current has recently concluded that “it did no such thing.”<sup>10</sup> Lincoln had obfuscated his purpose even while pushing it forward. Yet there is no question but that he was determined to insist on the destruction of the institution of slavery as a prerequisite to readmission. His approval of General Banks’s plan to destroy slavery by using military authority to set aside the slavery provisions of the old state constitution and *then* obtaining the consent of voters for the *fait accompli*—a policy of “consent *and* force”—makes Lincoln’s purpose unmistakable.

There is even evidence strongly suggesting that General Banks, with the president’s approval, was prepared to set aside the confirming election if won by candidates identified as proslavery. Lincoln’s approval of high-handed military action to obtain state sanction of slavery’s demise was not limited to Louisiana. He directed Gen. Frederick Steele to follow a similarly manipulative procedure in Arkansas, but there the plan was overtaken by the course of local events.

My favorite example of Lincoln’s elusive style is the note he wrote that ensured passage of the Thirteenth Amendment through the House of Representatives on January 31, 1865. The Democratic opposition had been assiduously and secretly undermined by Lincoln’s promises of patronage and by Secretary of State William H. Seward’s mobilization of an extraordinary lobby, but opposition to the amendment gained last-minute strength from rumors that Southern commissioners were on their way to Washington for peace talks. When James Ashley, in charge of the measure on the floor of the House, feared the vote would be lost without a denial of the rumor direct from the president, Lincoln sent a one-sentence response: “So far as I know, there are no peace commissioners in the city, or likely to be in it.”<sup>11</sup> Peace commissioners, as he well knew, were on their way—not to “the city” but to Fortress Monroe.

The style of presidential leadership that characterized Lincoln’s effort on behalf of freedom is only partially explained by his skill as pragmatic politician. It derived as well from the nature of the man, the goal he sought, and the obstacles to its attainment. The goal and the man were integrally related. Holding to the principle that all men are created equal and entitled to certain inalienable rights, Lincoln’s goal was to realize that principle, to use his own words, “as nearly . . . as we can.” The qualification is as critical to an understanding of Lincoln’s role as is the objective: “So I say in relation to the principle that all men are created equal, let it be as nearly reached as we can.”<sup>12</sup> The words carry no expectation for perfection, no demand for immediate fulfillment. By temperament Lincoln was neither an optimist nor a crusader. Human fallibility, of which he was keenly aware, did not lessen his conviction that in a self-governing society a generally held feeling, though unjust, “can not be safely disregarded.”<sup>13</sup> Lincoln would accept what he saw as “necessity,” i.e., a limitation imposed by realities. He did not, however, submit to necessity with complacency. Characteristic was his query: “Can we all do better?”<sup>14</sup> He stood ready to do more when more could be accomplished.

As Lincoln advanced the nation toward freedom for all, the direction he set was steady; the pace was determined by his political judgment, his sense of timing, and his acute awareness of the constraints under which he labored. Those constraints were formidable. There was the need to preserve the Union and the duty to uphold the Constitution, a constitution that recognized and protected slavery.

Both obligations were those of solemn oath and of deep conviction. There was the practical imperative of keeping power out of the hands of an opposition party that would sustain slavery and the political hazard of any step toward equality for blacks in view of the intractable racism pervasive among whites. Fully alert to the force of racial prejudice, Lincoln met it by maneuver and sapping rather than by frontal attack.

War, and the participation of blacks as soldiers, made it possible to "do better." And Lincoln did. Keeping political support intact, he moved from his prewar advocacy of restricting slavery's spread to a foremost responsibility for slavery's total, immediate, uncompensated destruction by constitutional amendment. To borrow the terms used by George MacGregor Burns, Lincoln's presidential leadership was both "transactional" (i.e., a matter of exchange, compromise, deference to majority sentiment) and "transforming" (i.e., a moral leadership that helps achieve needed social change). The title of Emancipator is validated by the consistency of direction evident throughout his presidency, not alone by the Emancipation Proclamation and/or the Thirteenth Amendment, and validated by his skill in seizing the opportunities war opened. Lincoln was not pushed into antislavery action by military and political expediency. He was no reluctant emancipator.

To recognize Lincoln's role as "transforming" leader in no way diminishes that of others—of the forthright abolitionist, the outspoken Radical in Congress, the slave fleeing to precarious freedom, the black soldier fighting with spade and arms (with arms less often than he wished). All were essential participants in the process that led to slavery's destruction. To credit Lincoln is a reminder, however, that presidential leadership can be critically important in effecting social change. It also constitutes recognition of "transactional" skill added to moral purpose as an essential of effective presidential statesmanship. The demise of an entrenched, evil social institution, even after it has become an anachronism, does not automatically follow upon an appeal to conscience; nor did death for the South's peculiar institution follow with inevitability the outbreak of civil conflict.

There is less evidence of Lincoln as friend of black rights than of Lincoln as Emancipator. That evidence, however, conforms to the pattern of Lincoln's style and purpose in dealing with emancipation, and thereby carries weight. Its significance is further enhanced by

recognition that Lincoln's first priority was the destruction of slavery, an objective that could be jeopardized by open support for the rights of free blacks. From the distant perspective of a century, victory over slavery may appear to have been inevitable and Lincoln's priority misplaced. To contemporary antislavery spokesmen the outcome as late as mid-1864 was frighteningly uncertain, contingent upon the success of Union forces on the battlefield and of the Republican party in the political arena. Frederick Douglass held that a victory for the Democratic party in 1864 would have been "a fatal calamity," leaving slavery "only wounded and crippled not disabled and killed."<sup>15</sup> Lincoln's concern that slavery be "killed" continued even after passage of the abolition amendment through Congress. His apprehension that the amendment might not be ratified is evident in his very last public address.

Once Lincoln's style and the priority he gave emancipation are recognized, there is no mistaking the fact that he considered the unequal treatment of free blacks an injustice. "Not a single man of your race is made the equal of a single man of ours," he bluntly stated to a group of black leaders upon whom he was urging colonization. He added: "It is a fact, about which we all think and feel alike, I and you."<sup>16</sup> The interpolation has been generally overlooked, for which Lincoln may have been as responsible as the historians who have deleted it. Whether or not he had arranged the interview in order to use colonization as a means of diffusing opposition to emancipation, as many historians now believe, Lincoln's purpose certainly was not the disclosure of his racial attitude. Yet as he indicated to his black audience, Lincoln's emotions as well as his sense of justice were stirred by the inequality to which white prejudice subjected blacks. His feelings are evident in the sardonic response he ordered sent to the man who wrote him that "white men is in class number one and black men is in class number two & must be governed by white men forever." The reply asked whether the writer was a white man or a black one "because in either case you can not be regarded as an entirely impartial judge. It may be that you belong to a third or fourth class of yellow or red men, in which case the impartiality of your judgment would be more apparent."<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Lincoln responded with indignation on learning of the exploitation of freed slaves by lessees of abandoned plantations in the Mississippi Valley. Only matters of utmost import loosened the tight rein Lincoln kept on a display of emotional reaction.

Although the uncertainty of slavery's destruction, the political hazard posed by white racism, and the multitude of wartime demands necessarily left decisive action to the future, Lincoln took steps toward equal status for blacks where he felt it possible to do so. His initiative brought the official diplomatic recognition of two black nations, Haiti and Liberia. In urging colonization upon black Americans, and in directing efforts to find suitable places, he sought assurance from governments that black colonists would be made citizens, legal "equals of the best." Through an official opinion of the attorney general, the Lincoln administration quietly repudiated the Dred Scott dictum that blacks were not citizens and had no rights as such under the Constitution. That opinion was made available to the military governor of Louisiana in August 1863 when, on the president's instruction, he was authorized to register all loyal citizens, an encouragement, though not a directive, to enroll as voters the free blacks of New Orleans. With issuance of the Reconstruction Proclamation in December 1863 Lincoln appeared to rule out black voting in the reorganization of seceded states; in fact, he did not. Publicly he indicated only in general terms that variants from the procedure outlined would be accepted; privately through Secretary Chase he again gave approval for the registration of blacks. Lincoln's actions were generally unknown, discreet, and indirect. Until a free state was established, he left to others the initiative in respect to black enfranchisement.

Louisiana was the one state that provided Lincoln relative freedom to push for more than emancipation. The plan General Banks put into effect was highly irregular and rested upon the military to an extent Lincoln had hoped to avoid, but it gave Louisiana a reorganized, elected government that Lincoln could and did recognize as a free state—i.e., one with slavery abolished—before a state convention met to rewrite the prewar constitution. This was not the case in Arkansas or Tennessee. Nine days after the inaugural of Michael Hahn as free state governor, Lincoln sent him a mere "suggestion"—that the upcoming Louisiana constitutional convention admit some blacks to the franchise, mentioning specifically "the very intelligent," and "those who have fought gallantly in our ranks." Marked "private," the letter was not made generally public, though Governor Hahn used it behind the scenes. Both he and General Banks recognized Lincoln's "mild and graceful" suggestion (Hahn's phrase) for what it was, a directive.<sup>18</sup> Neither man had previously looked with favor on black

enfranchisement, at least so soon, yet they pressured members of the convention. Their effort did not succeed in fulfilling Lincoln's wish, but by changing at least twenty votes it reversed a majority decision to forbid ever giving the vote to blacks and in its place obtained a constitutional provision authorizing black enfranchisement on the basis of military service, taxation, or intellectual fitness (the latter an extremely elastic qualification) by simple act of the Louisiana legislature. This limited but not insignificant advance unmistakably was due to Lincoln. Governor Hahn after Lincoln's death (and B. Gratz Brown while Lincoln still lived) attributed the provision to the president. Hahn also credited to Lincoln's influence other constitutional provisions favorable to blacks, the education of all children without distinction of color and the enrollment of all men, black and white, in the state militia. Lincoln's desire that blacks share public education is well documented.

The framing of the Louisiana constitution did not mark the end of Lincoln's interest and influence. He helped mobilize support for ratification of the document by letting "the civil officers in Louisiana, holding under me, know this is my wish," and implied discipline for those who did not "openly declare for the constitution."<sup>19</sup> When Louisiana's representatives came knocking at the doors of Congress, Lincoln privately assured Radicals reluctant to seat them that the administration's influence was being exerted for enfranchisement. William D. Kelley, the Pennsylvania Radical, was among those convinced. Extension of suffrage to blacks "was not a mere sentiment with Mr. Lincoln. He regarded it as an act of justice to the citizens, and a measure of sound policy for the States."<sup>20</sup> Working with Lincoln for Louisiana's admission in the fall and winter of 1864, Banks too gave private assurances. And in his public speeches in New England, the general interpreted the authorization in the Louisiana constitution as "under the circumstances . . . a command."<sup>21</sup> Back in New Orleans, Republican leaders of the Lincoln-Banks faction, both white and black, openly supported black enfranchisement.

Of utmost significance was Lincoln's insistence that Banks return to New Orleans for the express purpose of "advancing the new State government." His return was with "plenary power," to use Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton's phrase. Lincoln further strengthened Banks's hand by stating publicly in his last address his own desire for qualified suffrage, and did so in such a way as to leave open the

possibility of a broad enfranchisement. By the time Banks reached New Orleans Lincoln had been assassinated. At a memorial mass meeting Banks directly assured blacks in the audience that "Abraham Lincoln gave his word that you will be free, and enjoy all the rights invested to all citizens," and that the last day of fulfillment "was not far distant."<sup>22</sup> Listeners recognized that the general was promising enfranchisement. Apparently he expected to succeed by ruthless removals of Conservatives from office (which he began) and by influencing the next elections. He informed Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, that "we can carry an election triumphantly at any time if we are not disturbed [i.e., not disturbed in ousting hostile officeholders]." Even the question of Negro suffrage, he stated, would then be settled "without involving the Administration in any trouble, and satisfactorily to the country."<sup>23</sup> President Johnson did not leave General Banks undisturbed. Instead of sustaining the general, Johnson dismissed him from command.

Lincoln's support for black suffrage is sometimes minimized as limited to suffrage for only the black elite. This was not the case. Lincoln recognized, and used, military service as the most persuasive argument for extending the franchise. Most black privates could not sign their names. Nor did Lincoln restrict his encouragement for black suffrage to Louisiana. Chase did not understand as limited to that state the presidential approval for black voting during the process of reorganization. Banks believed Lincoln meant enfranchisement in Louisiana to be a model for other states. B. Gratz Brown cited Lincoln's pressure on Louisiana as an argument for extending suffrage to blacks in Missouri. Moreover, we now know that in December 1864 Lincoln was ready to accept Reconstruction legislation that would admit Louisiana with its 1864 constitution but require other returning states to include black suffrage in theirs. Although the extent of enfranchisement Lincoln desired is a matter of some uncertainty, my conclusion is that he was ready to go at least as far as the majority in Congress. With the Radicals unable to obtain any such legislation by the time Congress adjourned in March 1865, Banks's mission indicates Lincoln's intent to use executive power to obtain whatever was possible at the state level. In short, Lincoln was still looking to realize the principle of equality "as nearly . . . as we can."

No student of history can with confidence fault Lincoln's political judgment of what was attainable in the 1860s, or how best he could

achieve the maximum possible. The distance between the dominant racial sentiment of Lincoln's day and that of our own is too great. As late as October 1864 the electorate of Maryland, except for the soldier vote, would have rejected emancipation and celebrated not the end of slavery but the "Death Knell of Abolitionism."<sup>24</sup> The best that could be obtained from Unionist Missouri in 1863 was emancipation as of July 4, 1870, with continuing servitude for those over forty during their entire lifetime and for those over twelve until they reached twenty-three. Immediate and unconditional emancipation was established in Missouri only after Lincoln's death, in June 1865. In the free North white opposition to equal status for blacks suffered erosion during the course of the war, but remained tenacious. In August 1862 Illinois voters rejected a new constitution as a whole but overwhelmingly approved provisions that would have enshrined in the state's constitution prohibitions against any Negro migrating into the state and against any resident Negro voting or holding office. Before the war only four states, all in New England, provided equal suffrage. No others extended this right to blacks during the war years. In the fall of 1865 Republican attempts to do so in Connecticut, Wisconsin, and Minnesota failed in referendum voting.

The time has come to disengage Lincoln from the present and let the historic record speak for itself. To do so will diminish neither the man nor the tasks that remain before us to attain racial justice. Without hazard we can relinquish Lincoln as a mirror of the present and beacon to the future, whether of guidance or of warning. Grant that his circumspect style of presidential leadership as an instrument to reach equality irrespective of race offers no acceptable model for the present, since forthright advocacy from the oval office can now mobilize a national consensus to this end. Grant that the achievements beyond abolition that Lincoln nurtured, though essential, are insufficient for the 1980s. But let us take care to recognize that Lincoln's record as friend of freedom is impressive—that it was no reluctant concession to the pressures of a grim war, or the expediency of politics.

To summarize: Lincoln let war come rather than retreat on the expansion of servitude. Within a year of the war's beginning he determined that slavery "should die." Nine months later he boldly proclaimed as a war measure emancipation for the slaves of loyal and disloyal alike in areas of rebellion. He did so though uncertain whether the Emancipation Proclamation would strengthen, or weaken, the

Union war effort. By mid-1863 he was ready to deny readmission to any state unwilling to abolish the institution. In order to force state action in occupied territory he boldly employed the power of patronage plus that of military authority—the latter without the covering justification of military necessity. Refusing to let freedom rest solely upon the precarious authority of presidential proclamation and congressional legislation, or upon the uncertainty of state action, Lincoln succeeded in obtaining passage of the abolition amendment. Meanwhile he had officially recognized blacks as citizens and used the weight of his high office in an effort to set former slaves on the road to equality through access to the ballot box.

On the most divisive issue this nation has ever faced, the status of black Americans, Lincoln's presidential record stands without need of myth, apology, or transformation into symbolism. The preeminent meaning of Lincoln the president lies in the historic substance of his role as friend of black freedom. It is a meaning sufficient for all time.

During the years immediately following Lincoln's death his party established an impressive record on black rights. Republicans passed the first civil rights legislation in the nation's history, and passed it over President Andrew Johnson's veto. In the face of unrelenting opposition from Democratic opponents, the party also succeeded in making the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments the supreme law of the land. They followed the amendments with federal enforcement acts of broad scope. Yet the Republican record has suffered harsh censure from historians of our day, criticism prompted in large measure by the failure to realize equal citizenship in practice. That the promise of legislation and constitutional amendment was fulfilled in the South only briefly and partially is a fact beyond dispute. Subjected to white violence and soon deprived of the potential for political power granted in 1867, the vast majority of freed slaves remained for decades an impoverished agrarian underclass, economically dependent upon white landowners and merchant creditors, socially subordinated as a caste to whites of all ranks. It does not necessarily follow, however, that Northern Republicans were responsible for what went wrong. The last section of *Lincoln and Black Freedom* examines an assumption and a related accusation often accepted as fact: namely, the assumption that the political leaders of the 1860s had the power to insure a

democratic, racially equalitarian outcome and the accusation that they promised racial equality, then wantonly betrayed the promise.

To examine the indictment it is necessary first of all to make clear what it was Republicans in the immediate post-Civil War years sought to realize through the courts and the ballot box. It was not racial equality. What they sought for the freed slaves was equality of citizenship. Strictly speaking, racial equality is a biological condition rather than a consequence of political or societal action. In our day race itself is a challenged concept. That no inferiority or superiority is biologically inherent in a people because of color or ethnicity is now generally accepted. Discrimination or enforced segregation based upon either is regarded as morally insupportable. These perceptions were not commonly held in the mid-nineteenth century, at least not among white Americans. Republican leaders sought and obtained equal citizenship in law while lacking scientific assurance or personal conviction of racial equality. It might be argued that this should enhance rather than diminish their achievement. However that may be, what was sought through public policy in the 1860s was more limited than the goals of the 1960s but as fundamental to the broader objectives of the Second Reconstruction as the destruction of slavery had been essential to the establishment of nationwide equality of legal status. To indict Republicans for betraying a promise of racial equality compares neither with logic nor with historic reality.

To recognize the indictment as faulty does not dispose of the charge that the seed of failure lay in the racial prejudice of Northern Republicans, a view widely held. Although it was their Democratic opponents who flagrantly exploited racial prejudice in the interest of party there is no gainsaying the fact that racism in one degree or another permeated the ranks of Republicans. Racial prejudice did not, however, prevent the growth of a majority consensus within the Republican party first for the recognition of black citizenship, that is of basic human rights and equality before the law, and more tardily for equality at the ballot box. If the commitments were not effectively enforced in the South during the 1870s and 1880s, the explanation does not lie primarily in Republican racism. It is true that opposition to what was viewed as an attempt to legislate social equality helped weaken Republican political power in the election of 1874 and that racist assumptions made some political equalitarians susceptible to



Southern white propaganda that attributed political corruption and chaos to the enfranchisement of blacks. However, Republican racism was only one of the many factors in the Northern retreat from enforcement of black civil and political rights in the South. No historian has established its effect as more than incidental.

Another explanation of Reconstruction's failure, so widely held as to have been identified in 1973 as the "New Orthodoxy in Reconstruction Historiography," is that Republicans had too tender a regard for property rights to confiscate plantation lands and redistribute them to the freedmen. The assumption behind the contention is that a land program would have provided the former slaves with power to safeguard their freedom and with insurance against poverty. The difficulty with this counterfactual projection is that small landownership in the South during the postwar decades could not protect blacks against either white violence or poverty, though it would have lightened their economic burden and immensely heightened their sense of personal freedom from white dominance. White terror struck black landowner and tenant alike. The cotton economy perpetuated poverty for both, alternative agrarian markets were scarce, and a nonmarket homestead offered little beyond subsistence. The escape hatch of industrial or commercial employment for blacks was narrow. Mid-nineteenth-century America with its optimistic assumption of economic opportunity for the individual and of prosperity for a transformed free labor South lacked awareness of impending economic realities as well as the skills requisite to meet them. A formerly dependent and deprived agrarian population is not readily lifted out of poverty. Indeed, as the present difficulties in third world nations (and the recent work of Jane Jacobs and others) remind us, no certain remedy has yet been found to assure escape from poverty. A prosperous New South, for whites as well as blacks, proved elusive; historians and cliometricians continue to pursue the reasons why.

A third major explanation for what had gone wrong was offered by constitutional historians in the 1960s: the constitutional conservatism of Republican lawmakers. A revolutionary destruction of state authority, it was argued, had been necessary. Deference to the traditional federal structure of the Union denied the national government sufficient power to protect the rights of blacks. Interestingly, this view has been substantially modified, if not abandoned, by some of the very authorities who set it forth. Others have made a strong

case that the Supreme Court could have developed an expansive construction of national power to protect blacks under the Reconstruction amendments and laws.

The indictment against Republican leaders of the 1860s rests upon a counterfactual assumption that is invalid. Republicans did not possess unlimited power and opportunity. Respect for Constitution and constitutionalism, the intractable nature of postwar poverty in the South, and racial prejudice in the North placed boundaries on the possible. In the postwar years, however, the most decisive barrier to realization of the limited but essential equalitarian goals established in law was no one of these but rather the pervasiveness of Southern white resistance. That the white South resisted Republican policy is no recent discovery, but historians who reexamined Reconstruction free of the racial bias of an older generation have only belatedly recognized the full force and significance of that opposition. It is now clear that Southern whites continued the North-South conflict by determined, persistent, guerrilla-type warfare that enjoyed the overwhelming support or acquiescence of their fellows. The objective was defeat of the Northern-imposed status for Southern blacks as equal citizens and as free laborers. Recent historical writings increasingly look to internal conditions in the South for explanation rather than to Northern policy, yet more often than not, the primary role of Southern white resistance in defeating the Republican attempt to reconstruct the South is muted.

Those who attribute the failure of Reconstruction to a lack of Northern will, and influential historians still do, assume that the North could force the white South to accept blacks as equal citizens. To the contrary, without a substantial degree of consent not only from Southern white political leaders but from their white constituencies, no amount of coercion could have achieved that goal. And once Southern armies had surrendered, it was not possible for the North as a society committed to government by consent and the rule of law to sustain the prolonged use of military force and military authority necessary even to make the attempt. A very considerable amount of force and hundreds of criminal prosecutions were in fact used, far more than during the civil rights revolution of the twentieth century. Despite the limits on the possible, presidential leadership might have made a significant difference. The historic challenge of the immediate postwar years was to induce white Southerners to accept a substantial measure

of freedom and equality for blacks and to institutionalize their acceptance in an effective, biracial political party. Captive to his heritage of section, class, and party, Lincoln's successor was incapable of perceiving, let alone meeting, that challenge.

Andrew Johnson identified himself as a man of the South. Until the pressures of war and politics forced him to embrace emancipation, loyalty to slavery was for Johnson a basic component of loyalty to section. As late as the spring of 1862 he assured fellow Tennesseans that he believed "slaves should be in subordination and will live and die so believing." He also assured them that Lincoln and his party had no intention of waging war to free slaves. Apparently Johnson never doubted but that, in his words, the Negro "is an inferior type of man," "not created equal in the very beginning." Unlike Lincoln, Johnson had no purpose to realize as nearly as possible the principle that all men are created equal. He held that Jefferson in writing the Declaration of Independence had meant "the white race, and not the African race." In his veto of the civil rights bill of March 1866, Johnson objected to conferring citizenship upon "the entire race designated as blacks, people of color, negroes, mulattoes, and persons of African blood."<sup>25</sup>

The direction indicated by Andrew Johnson's racial attitude was reinforced by his concern for state rights, his lack of loyalty to the Republican party with which he was aligned only as a Union Democrat, his desire for Southern approbation, and his ambition to be elected president in his own right. Johnson had no reason to use presidential power and persuasion, as Lincoln surely would have done, to build a Republican or predominantly Republican Union party in the South. Johnson looked with favor upon a reorganization of parties that would be a major realignment, with former Democrats at least equal partners. His break with the congressional majority in 1866 was followed by an unsuccessful attempt to create a new political party of conservative Republicans and cooperative Democrats, the former a distinct minority in their own party but the latter a powerful, perhaps predominant, influence in the Northern Democracy. For such a party, a substantial measure of equality for blacks was a condition to be avoided rather than a goal to be attained.

At war's end, party loyalties in the North were too intense to permit a major realignment, but in the South the situation was fluid. Elements existed for a broad coalition in opposition to the old planter-

dominated secessionist Democracy: Unionists of varying degrees, opponents of secession, critics of the Confederate leadership, old Whigs, urban dwellers including laborers, men with origins abroad or in the North, those whose class or intrasectional interests created hostility to planter domination—plus blacks to the extent that they might be enfranchised. Such a coalition at best would be an uneasy one. Conflicting economic interests and personal ambitions would require reconciliation. There would be the ever-present hazard of deeply embedded mores of black-white relations. These were exploitable by the opposition and within a biracial party would trigger division on issues viewed by whites as social. Despite the difficulties, in the spring of 1865 the task of building a stable Union-Republican party in the South was not beyond the limits of the possible. But it would require careful nurture and, if it were to function as an instrument of social change, a purposeful direction.

Presidential nurture and direction were precluded by Lincoln's assassination and Johnson's succession. When congressional leaders attempted the task, they were faced not only with its inherent difficulties but with added obstacles. Johnson's policies had encouraged the hope among white Southerners that they would be able to maintain control over race relations, thereby strengthening resistance to change. And warfare between president and Congress had created chaos in the process of Southern political reorganization. Some elements that would otherwise have entered a Union-Republican party remained attached to Johnson's political fortunes.

Since Republicans wished to avoid a break with the president, Johnson's policies had dammed up for a time the growing sentiment for black legal equality, citizenship, and enfranchisement. When the dam broke, the accompanying flood created its own havoc. Renewed military control, immediate universal enfranchisement of black men, and the disfranchisement of some whites, intensified the bitterness of defeat and the resolve to resist. Except within limited geographical areas, the Republican party in the South was viewed as an alien intruder. It could obtain neither the loyalty of a substantial number of white Southerners nor their acknowledgment of its legitimacy. The power that it briefly held could not be consolidated without both.

A stable two-party system in the South was not assured had Lincoln lived out his second term of office, but its successful establishment would have been much less unlikely. Bonds between Lincoln and his

party were strong, too strong to allow differences to escalate into open warfare. Moreover, unlike Johnson, Lincoln had the will to nurture an essentially Republican party in the South. And he possessed the skill to build one. He was experienced in consolidating a political coalition by dispensing "justice to all [factions]." He had demonstrated ability to retain the political loyalty of Southern proslavery Unionists who disliked his policy. Politically he deftly used others but did not allow others to use him. His compassion, his Southern ties, and his style of leadership admirably fitted the postwar need to minimize bitterness and undermine resistance to change. They appeared to set him apart from the hated Radical of "Black Republicanism." Yet it was Lincoln rather than the Radicals who had inaugurated a Southern policy that used "consent *and* force" to attain a political end. His insistence that General Banks return to Louisiana signaled that Lincoln would when necessary continue to supplement persuasion with coercion.

Lincoln would also bind up the nation's wounds. Too often the eloquent closing paragraph of his Second Inaugural has been read as concern only for white America. His words need not be so narrowly construed. He enjoined the nation "to finish the work we are in" "with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right." "The right" as God gave him to "see it" was for Lincoln color-blind. There is no reason to believe that he ever abandoned the goal of realizing "as nearly . . . as we can" the principle that all men (not whites alone) are created equal. The performance of blacks during the war and the outpouring of trust and gratitude from those freed of their bondage could only have deepened his commitment to that goal. How nearly it could have been reached in the lifetime of his generation Lincoln did not know, nor can we. To achieve a moral objective not universally held, it is necessary to make change "acceptable to those who must support it, tolerable to those who must put up with it."<sup>26</sup> If any man could have met that challenge in respect to the rights of blacks in freedom, the man was Lincoln. His untimely death changed the course, and perhaps the outcome, of the Republican effort to reconstruct Southern society in the interest of free labor and racial justice.

## NOTES

1. This essay is based upon my *Lincoln and Black Freedom: A Study in Presidential Leadership* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1981)

and my essay "From Emancipation to Segregation: National Policy and Southern Blacks," in *Interpreting Southern History: Essays on the Recent Historical Literature in Honor of S. W. Higginbotham*, ed. John B. Boles and Evelyn T. Nolen (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

2. For citations to the quotations from Randall, Hofstadter, Stamp, and Current, and their views generally, see "From Emancipation to Segregation," notes 42, 43, 44. The last quotation is from Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p. 236.

3. Benjamin P. Thomas, *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), p. 407.

4. Robert W. Johannsen, "In Search of the Real Lincoln, or Lincoln at the Crossroads," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 61 (1968): 237.

5. Richard N. Current, *The Lincoln Nobody Knows* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1958), p. 236.

6. Wendell Phillips to Ann Phillips, Mar. 31, 1862, Blagden Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, printed in part in Irving H. Bartlett, *Wendell and Ann Phillips: The Community of Reform, 1840-1880* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), pp. 52-53.

7. Roy P. Basler, ed., Marion Dolores Pratt and Lloyd A. Dunlap, asst. eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953-55), 5: 146. Any subsequent Lincoln quotation from the *Collected Works of Lincoln* that is readily located by date or occasion will not be noted.

8. Flanders to Lincoln, Jan. 16, 1864, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress, Microfilm edition, 1959.

9. Basler, *Collected Works of Lincoln* 6: 364-65.

10. Richard Nelson Current, *Speaking of Abraham Lincoln: The Man and His Meaning for Our Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), p. 164.

11. Basler, *Collected Works of Lincoln*, 8: 248.

12. *Ibid.*, 2: 501.

13. *Ibid.*, 2: 256.

14. *Ibid.*, 5: 537.

15. Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass Written by Himself* (reprint of 1892 rev. ed., New York: Crowell-Collier, 1962), pp. 360-61.

16. Basler, *Collected Works of Lincoln*, 5: 372.

17. *Ibid.*, 7: 483.

18. *Ibid.*, 7: 243; Hahn to W. D. Kelley, June 21, 1865, *New York Times*, June 23, 1865, reprinted from the *Washington Chronicle*.

19. Basler, *Collected Works of Lincoln*, 7: 486.

20. *New Orleans Tribune*, May 23, 1865.

21. Clipping of an address at Tremont Temple, Boston, in Nathaniel P. Banks Papers, Library of Congress.

22. *New Orleans Tribune*, Apr. 25, 1865.

23. Banks to Preston King, May 6, 1865, Andrew Johnson Papers, Library of Congress.

24. From a headline in the *Maryland Union*, Oct. 20, 1864, quoted in Charles Lewis Wagandt, *The Mighty Revolution: Negro Emancipation in Maryland, 1862-1864* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964), p. 260.

25. LeRoy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins, eds., *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, 7 vols. to date (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1967-), 1: 136; 2: 477; 3: 319-20, 328; 5: 231, 233, 328; for the veto message, see the documentary collection LaWanda Cox and John H. Cox, eds., *Reconstruction, the Negro, and the New South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1973), p. 59.

26. Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership from FDR to Carter* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1980), p. 135.

## A Momentous Decree: Commentary on "Lincoln and Black Freedom"

STEPHEN B. OATES

I applaud Professor Cox for her perceptive and persuasive analysis. She has done what the historian is supposed to do: she has examined Lincoln and black freedom in the context of his own era, not according to the needs and biases of the present. The time has indeed come to "disengage Lincoln from the present" and let his historical record speak for itself.<sup>1</sup>

And it was an impressive record. By war's end, Lincoln had come a long distance from the harried political candidate he had been in 1858, opposed to black political rights lest his political career be jeopardized, convinced that only the distant future could remove slavery from his troubled country, certain that only colonization could solve the ensuing problem of racial adjustment. By mid-April 1865 he had crushed slavery with his armies, had crushed an institution he had always hated—as much, he said, as any abolitionist. He had enlisted black fighting men in his armed forces, endorsed black political rights in conquered Dixie, and fought the war through to a total Union triumph, a triumph for popular government and a larger concept of inalienable human rights that now included the American black.

Still, as enlightening as her argument is, Professor Cox largely ignores the Emancipation Proclamation itself. As a consequence, she omits the central act in the story she is discussing. To appreciate the full significance of that story, we need to reexamine the proclamation in light of modern scholarship, taking care to identify popular misconceptions that still obscure its meaning.

We now know that Lincoln issued his proclamation for a combination of reasons: to clarify the status of the fugitive slaves, to solve

the Union's manpower woes, to keep Great Britain out of the conflict, to maim and cripple the Confederacy by destroying its labor force, to remove the very thing that had caused the war, and to break the chains of several million oppressed human beings and right America at last with her own ideals. As Professor Cox points out, Lincoln was no reluctant emancipator: he struck at slavery within a year after the war had begun, and he did so for moral as well as for political and military reasons. As much as possible in his time, he wanted America to realize the promise of equality made in the Declaration of Independence, which was the foundation of his politics. Lincoln himself was fully aware of the significance of his proclamation. "If my name ever goes into history," he said, "it will be for this act."<sup>2</sup>

The final proclamation of January 1, 1863, did temporarily exempt occupied Tennessee and certain occupied places in Louisiana and Virginia. But later, in reconstructing those states, Lincoln withdrew the exemptions and made emancipation a mandatory part of his reconstruction program. His proclamation also excluded the loyal slave states because they were not in rebellion, and he thought he lacked the legal authority to uproot slavery there. But he kept pressuring them to remove bondage themselves—and later pushed a constitutional amendment that liberated their slaves as well. With the exception of the loyal border and certain occupied areas, the final proclamation declared that of this day, all slaves in the rebellious states were "forever free." The document also asserted that black men—Southern and Northern alike—would now be enlisted in Union military forces.

Contrary to what many historians have said, Lincoln's proclamation went farther than anything Congress had done about slavery. True, Congress had recently enacted (and Lincoln had recently signed) the Second Confiscation Act, which provided for the seizure and liberation of all slaves of people who supported or participated in the rebellion. Under this measure, most slaves would be freed only after protracted case-by-case litigation in the federal courts. Another section of the act did liberate certain categories of slaves without court action, but the bill exempted loyal slaveowners in the rebel South, allowing them to keep their slaves and other property. Lincoln's proclamation, on the other hand, was a sweeping blow against bondage as an institution in the rebel states, a blow that would free all the slaves there—those of secessionists and Unionists alike. Thus Lincoln intended to

handle emancipation himself, avoid judicial red tape, and use the military to vanquish the cornerstone of the Confederacy. He justified this as a military necessity to save the Union—and with it America's cherished experiment in popular government, which guaranteed all the "right to rise."<sup>3</sup>

Lincoln's proclamation was not "of minor importance," as James G. Randall contended a generation ago. On the contrary, it was the most revolutionary measure ever to come from an American president up to that time. This "momentous decree," as Martin Luther King, Jr., rightly described it, was an unprecedented use of federal military power against a state institution. It was an unprecedented federal assault against the very foundation of the South's planter class and economic and social order. As Union armies drove into rebel territory, they would tear slavery out root and branch, automatically freeing all slaves in the areas and states they conquered. In this respect (as Lincoln said), the war brought on changes more fundamental and profound than either side had expected when the conflict began. Now slavery perished as the Confederacy perished, dying by degrees with every Union advance, every Union victory.

Moreover, word of the proclamation hummed across the slave grapevine in the Confederacy; and as Union armies drew near, more slaves than ever abandoned rebel farms and plantations and (as one said) "demonstrated with their feet" their desire for freedom. Slaves like these did not sit back and wait for their liberty: they went out and got it for themselves.

The proclamation was not some anemic document that in effect freed no slaves. By November 1864 the *Philadelphia North American* estimated that more than 1,300,000 blacks had been liberated by Lincoln's proclamation or "the events of the war." By war's end, all 3,500,000 slaves in the defeated Confederacy could claim freedom under Lincoln's proclamation and the victorious Union flag. In fact, the proclamation was their only claim to freedom until the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in December 1865.

What is more, the proclamation did something for Lincoln personally that has never been stressed enough. In truth, the story of emancipation could well be called the liberation of Abraham Lincoln. For in the process of granting freedom to the slaves, Lincoln also emancipated himself from a painful personal dilemma: his love for a political system that preserved an institution he hated. His procla-

mation now brought the private and the public Lincoln together: now the public statesman could vanquish a thing the private citizen had always detested, a thing that had long had "the power of making me miserable." Now the public statesman could destroy what he regarded as "a cruel wrong" that had always besmirched America's experiment in popular government, had always impeded her historic mission in the progress of human liberty in the world.

The proclamation also opened the army to black volunteers, and Northern free blacks and Southern ex-slaves enlisted as Union fighting men. As Lincoln said, "The colored population is the great *available* and yet unavailed of, force for restoring the Union." And he now availed himself of that force, on a scale unprecedented in America. In all, some 186,000 black troops—most of them emancipated slaves—served in Union forces on every major battle front, helping to liberate their brothers and sisters in bondage and to save the American experiment in popular government. As Lincoln observed, the blacks added enormous and indispensable strength to the Union war machine. Without them, it is doubtful that he could have won the war.

With blacks now fighting in his armies, Lincoln abandoned colonization as a solution to racial adjustment in Dixie. His colonization schemes had all foundered, and in any case black people adamantly refused to participate in the president's voluntary program. Across the North, free blacks denounced Lincoln's highly publicized colonization efforts—this was their country too—and they petitioned him to deport slaveholders instead. And Lincoln seemed in sympathy with that. Later, as the war drew to a close, he told his cabinet that he would like to frighten rebel leaders out of the country. He waved his arms as though he were shooing chickens.

After he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln never again urged colonization in public—an eloquent silence, indicating that he had concluded that Dixie's whites and liberated blacks must somehow learn to live together. Yet there is a persistent misconception that Lincoln to the end of his life was a champion of colonization. That view rests exclusively on the 1892 autobiography of Union political general Benjamin F. Butler. In it, Butler claimed that in April 1865 Lincoln feared a race war in the South and still wanted to ship the blacks abroad. Not only is Butler a highly dubious witness, but there is not a scintilla of corroborative evidence to support his story,

which Mark E. Neely, Jr., has recently exploded as "entirely a fantasy." There is not a single other source that quotes the president stating, in public or in private, that he still favored colonization.<sup>4</sup>

In any case, such a stance would have been glaringly inconsistent with Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, which called for a new birth of freedom in America for blacks and whites alike. (Here, in fact, is the eloquent defense of liberty that critics have found lacking in the proclamation itself.) And a colonization stance would have been inconsistent, too, with Lincoln's appreciation of the indispensable role his black soldiers played in subduing the rebellion. No one of Lincoln's honesty and sense of fair play would enlist 186,000 black troops to save the Union and then advocate throwing them out of the country. He simply did not advocate that. Still, he needed some device during the war, some program that would pacify white Northerners and convince them that Southern blacks would not flock into their communities, but would remain in the South instead. What Lincoln worked out was a refugee system, installed by his adjutant general in occupied Dixie, which utilized blacks there in a variety of civilian and military pursuits. Then Republican propaganda went to work selling Northern whites on the system and the Emancipation Proclamation. See, the argument went, liberated blacks will not invade the North, but will stay in Dixie as free wage earners, learning to help themselves and our Union cause.

Even so, emancipation remained the most explosive and unpopular act of Lincoln's embattled presidency. In the Confederacy, newspapers pronounced him a "fiend" who wanted to incite a race war in Dixie; Jefferson Davis considered the proclamation "the most execrable measure recorded in the history of guilty man," and rebels everywhere vowed to fight all the harder against the monster who had issued it. In the North, thousands of Democrats revolted against the administration in 1863, denouncing Lincoln as an abolitionist dictator who had surrendered to radicalism. In the Midwest, dissident Democrats launched a peace movement to throw "the shrieking abolitionist faction" out of office and negotiate a peace with the Confederacy that would somehow restore the Union with slavery intact. With Democrats up in arms, a storm of anti-black, anti-Lincoln protest rolled over the land, whipping up race and draft riots in several cities. And there was trouble in the army as well. Correspondents who

traveled with Union forces claimed that hardly one soldier in ten approved of emancipation; and some officers from the Midwest even resigned in protest.

Clearly Lincoln's generation did not regard the proclamation as a meaningless paper decree. The wonder, of course, is that Lincoln stuck by a measure that aroused such public indignation. But the president seemed intractable. He had made up his mind to smash the slave society of the rebel South and eliminate the moral wrong of black bondage, and no amount of public discontent, he indicated, was going to change his mind. With his sense of history, he was also concerned with the judgments of posterity. "In times like the present," he had warned Congress, "men should utter nothing for which they would not willingly be responsible through time and eternity."<sup>15</sup>

Still, he wavered once—in August 1864, a time of unrelenting gloom for Lincoln, when his popularity had sunk so low that it seemed he could not be reelected. He confessed that maybe the country would no longer sustain a war for slave liberation, that maybe he should not pull the nation down a road it did not want to travel. On August 24, he decided to offer Jefferson Davis peace terms that excluded emancipation as a condition, vaguely suggesting that slavery would be adjusted later "by peaceful means." But the next day Lincoln changed his mind. With awakened resolution, he vowed to fight the war through to unconditional surrender and to stand by emancipation come what may. He had made his promise of freedom to the slaves, and he meant to keep it as long as he was in office.

Here surely is one of the glories of the Lincoln story: a troubled, visionary president contending with an aroused Northern opposition, a determined Southern foe, and his own uncertainties and self-doubts, and yet somehow finding the inner strength to overcome them all. After he won reelection, thanks to timely Union victories and the folly of the Democrats in running a major general on a peace plank in the midst of civil war, Lincoln used all the powers and prestige of his office to get the present Thirteenth Amendment through a recalcitrant House of Representatives (the Senate had already passed it). Lincoln did so to protect his proclamation, for he worried that it might be nullified in the courts or thrown out by a later Congress or a subsequent administration. When the House adopted the amendment, by just three votes more than the required two-thirds majority, Lincoln pronounced it "a great moral victory" and "a King's cure"

for the evils of slavery. When ratified by the states, the amendment would end human bondage everywhere in America. Lincoln pointed across the Potomac: "If the people over the river had behaved themselves, I could not have done what I have."<sup>16</sup>

If we are to appreciate what Lincoln did about slavery, as Professor Cox argues, we must view him in the context of what was attainable in the 1860s, a white-supremacist era in which a vast number of Northern whites were hostile to black freedom. In this context, it was Frederick Douglass who perhaps best summed up Lincoln and emancipation. "From the genuine abolition view, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent, but measuring him by the sentiment of his country—a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult—he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined."<sup>17</sup>

## NOTES

1. Professor Cox's work, like my own, is part of a growing body of modern scholarship that has reassessed Lincoln's stance toward slavery, blacks, conquered Dixie, Congress, and the so-called Radical Republicans, and that has largely rejected the Randall interpretation. For a discussion of this scholarship, see Stephen B. Oates, *Abraham Lincoln: The Man behind the Myths* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), pp. 209-10.

2. Unless otherwise cited, documentation for facts and quotations in this essay can be found in Oates, *Abraham Lincoln*, and Oates, *With Malice toward None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, Harper and Row, 1977).

3. The expression is from G. S. Boritt, *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1978), passim.

4. Mark E. Neely, Jr., "Abraham Lincoln and Black Colonization: Benjamin Butler's Spurious Testimony," *Civil War History* 24 (Mar. 1978): 5-24.

5. Roy P. Basler, ed., Marion Dolores Pratt and Lloyd A. Dunlap, asst. eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953-55), 5: 535.

6. Charles M. Segal, ed., *Conversations with Lincoln* (New York: Putnam's, 1961), p. 489.

7. Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass Written by Himself* (reprint of 1892 rev. ed., London: Collier, 1962), p. 489.