

### Big Enough to Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race

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#### Recommended Citation

McAfee, Ward M. (2008) "Big Enough to Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss4/25>

## Review

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Fall 2008

**Fredrickson, George M.** *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race*. Harvard University Press, \$19.95 hardcover ISBN 9780674027749

### Lincoln and Race

*Big Enough to Be Inconsistent* results from George M. Fredrickson's Du Bois lectures at Harvard University in November 2006. This widely recognized historian of race and racism died in February 2008. His principal work, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History* (1981), discerned how white supremacy played out in diverse historical contexts. His challenge in writing a book solely about Abraham Lincoln was somewhat different as it involved changing political contexts within only one national story.

Lincoln saw slavery as equivalent to a cancer eating at the nation's vitals, yet he defended discriminatory racial laws. In the 1850s, his rival Stephen A. Douglas regularly badgered him about this inconsistency. Facing Douglas before a large audience at Charleston, Illinois, in 1858, Lincoln vehemently swore his pledge of allegiance to white supremacy. Professor Fredrickson suggests that no other course was available for an ambitious politician in a state that was then among "the most negrophobic" in the nation. Yet in that speech, after paying his due to white racism, Lincoln abruptly changed course and reiterated his strong belief that black people had certain basic natural rights that could not be denied. He deflected attention from his own inconsistency with humor by stating that if Douglas was so worried about an erosion of Illinois' discriminatory black laws, he should run for the state legislature (instead of for the U.S. Senate) in order to guard those laws against possible repeal.

Fredrickson distinguishes between different kinds of racism. He carefully shows that while Lincoln conformed to the practices of his time and place, he

revealed no genocidal hatred of "the other." Similarly, Fredrickson should have distinguished between different types of inconsistency. Lincoln's inconsistencies did not reveal any personal confusion but were often calculated to confuse his opponents.

Fredrickson portrays Lincoln as a political moderate, modeling himself after his early Whig model Henry Clay. He repeatedly quotes Lincoln himself to underscore this apparent truth. But the record is more ambiguous than this judgment. Lincoln broke with Clay in 1848 and became an early supporter of Zachary Taylor for the Whig nomination, rather than support Clay, the perennial Whig presidential candidate. In the sectional rift demonstrated by the Wilmot Proviso during the Mexican War, Lincoln permanently moved away from Clay's compromiser mentality. Simultaneously, his local archrival Stephen A. Douglas came to work closely with Clay in producing the Compromise of 1850. While the compromise was being debated, Clay called for public meetings to be held around the nation to generate support for his own and Douglas's handiwork. Lincoln did not participate in Springfield's meeting. Similar to other public statements made by Lincoln, his habitual adulation of Clay was done to attract the support of true fence sitters who never ceased to admire the Great Compromiser's efforts to maintain sectional peace.

We are so conditioned by Lincoln's association with honesty, that we too often take him at his word. Best known in this regard is his highly theatrical written reply to Horace Greeley in August of 1862, after the latter castigated him for not leading the cause of emancipation. In apparent justification of his conservative course from his inauguration up to that point, Lincoln wrote: "I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution.... If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it.... What I do about Slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save this Union." Most historians, Fredrickson included, know that this presidential response to a grandstanding newspaper celebrity was designed as political propaganda. At that moment, Lincoln needed to minimize a predictable backlash against an emancipation proclamation that he was intending to announce as soon as he had a significant military victory in the field. Unfortunately, many school children have learned about this letter outside of its historical context as evidence of Lincoln's seeming blindness regarding the injustice of slavery.

All modern historians who have written about Lincoln know the negative talking points:

--Lincoln's supposed willingness on the eve of war to agree to a constitutional amendment promising to protect slavery permanently in the states where it already existed;

--Lincoln's constitutional conservatism used to keep the Northern war effort bound tightly to saving the Union as opposed to destroying slavery;

--Lincoln's reprimanding of abolitionist military officers who sought to usurp his role as president;

--Lincoln's involvements with colonization schemes;

--Lincoln's overly generous Reconstruction policy, and so on.

Fredrickson reiterates these "negatives." Their familiarity makes hagiography in the coverage of Lincoln virtually impossible. Carl Sandburg is in his grave and will not be resurrected any time soon. If there is any flaw in modern historical treatments of Lincoln it is in glossing over the specific contexts that framed Lincoln's inconsistencies. In some cases, Fredrickson provides the context. In others, he does not. It is on this score that Fredrickson's review occasionally falls short.

Fredrickson notes Lincoln's emphasis of the most idealistic interpretation of the Declaration of Independence possible during the interregnum before his first inauguration. And he emphasizes Lincoln's pronounced constitutional conservatism after taking the oath of office. But he doesn't explain why the radical shift in Lincoln's tone occurred.

Lincoln's pre-war offer to agree to a constitutional amendment protecting slavery in the states where it existed was made in a context of refusing to budge on his party's position regarding slavery in the territories. He knew in advance that Southern secessionists would reject it. As a minority president who had received only 39 percent of the popular vote, Lincoln did not have much political capital at his disposal. Even the northern majorities that had supported him in the election were likely to melt away as he demanded that they sacrifice in blood to uphold the full significance of antislavery's victory in that election. He had to appear as willing to compromise, while in fact he was not willing to do so. Likewise, Lincoln's supposed soft Reconstruction policy was really never that.

Instead it was designed to persuade southerners still in the field to lose the will to fight. There could be no real Reconstruction until after the Confederacy surrendered.

On page 99, Fredrickson writes: "Lincoln's behavior has been viewed by some historians as evidence of his close-to-the-vest political shrewdness or deviousness in a good cause." This evaluation is close to the mark, but it is not Fredrickson's own view. He vacillates between an appreciation of Lincoln and a literalist inclination to take Lincoln's words at face value independent of their political contexts.

Fredrickson adequately reviews Lincoln's inconsistencies as president. But, in the opinion of this reviewer, Harriet Beecher Stowe was much closer to the mark in her own interpretation of Lincoln's vacillation:

Lincoln is a strong man, but his strength is of a peculiar kind.... It is strength swaying to every influence, yielding on this side and on that to popular needs, yet tenaciously and inflexibly bound to carry its great end; and probably by no other kind of strength could our national ship have been drawn safely this far during the tossings and tempests which beset her way.

By being cautious when that was needed, by being dictatorial when that was necessary, by articulating an idealistic purpose for national existence and standing by it resolutely to the end, Lincoln brought the nation through the raging storm and in the process destroyed formal slavery. He did not solve what Gunnar Myrdal later termed the "American dilemma" of race obsession. But on his watch, he performed well. After reviewing Lincoln's multiple inconsistencies, George M. Fredrickson's evaluation is not that much different.

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