

A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Lincoln and Slavery

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Feature Essay

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Magness, Phillip W. and Sebastian N. Page and McKirdy, Charles R.. *A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Lincoln and Slavery*. University of Missouri Press and University Press of Mississippi, \$34.95 and \$40.00 ISBN 978-0-8262-1909-1 and 978-1-60473-985-5

The year was 1862. The Reverend J. Mitchell, the newly appointed Commissioner of Emigration escorted five African Americans into the White House at the president's request. Abraham Lincoln wanted to hear their views on colonization.

On that August afternoon, Lincoln told the men seated before him that Congress had recently appropriated a sum of money to colonize freed slaves. Lincoln knew that African Americans might resist colonization but one wonders whether he realized the vehement opposition to the idea. "Why should they leave this country?" the president asked rhetorically. He continued to provide them with an answer:

You and we are different races. We have between us a broader difference than exists between almost any other two races. Whether it is right or wrong I need not discuss, but 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. In a word we suffer on each side. If this is admitted, it affords a reason at least why we should be separated. You here are free men I suppose. (5 *Collected Works* 371).

A voice among them replied "Yes, sir" to the President's rhetorical question. Lincoln told them "Your race are suffering, in my judgment, the greatest wrong inflicted on any people." (Ibid. 371-72). Nevertheless, he asked them to consider whether removing their classification as slaves would really place them on equal

grounds with the white race. In Lincoln's estimation, it would not.

Lincoln urged the men to consider supporting colonization.

We look to our condition, owing to the existence of the two races on this continent. I need not recount to you the effects upon white men, growing out of the institution of Slavery. I believe in its general evil effects on the white race. See our present condition---the country engaged in war!---our white men cutting one another's throats, none knowing how far it will extend; and then consider what we know to be the truth. But for your race among us there could not be war, although many men engaged on either side do not care for you one way or the other. Nevertheless, I repeat, without the institution of Slavery and the colored race as a basis, the war could not have an existence. It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated. I know that there are free men among you, who even if they could better their condition are not as much inclined to go out of the country as those, who being slaves could obtain their freedom on this condition. I suppose one of the principal difficulties in the way of colonization is that the free colored man cannot see that his comfort would be advanced by it. You may believe you can live in Washington or elsewhere in the United States the remainder of your life [as easily], perhaps more so than you can in any foreign country, and hence you may come to the conclusion that you have nothing to do with the idea of going to a foreign country. This is (I speak in no unkind sense) an extremely selfish view of the case. (*5 Collected Works* 372).

Lincoln pointed, by example, to the successes in the colony of Liberia, with a population of 300,000 – 400,000, including some 12,000 American slaves who had settled there upon being freed. Recognizing that African Americans might not want to settle as far away as Africa, Lincoln offered an alternative:

The place I am thinking about having for a colony is in Central America. It is nearer to us than Liberia---not much more than one-fourth as far as Liberia, and within seven days' run by steamers. Unlike Liberia it is on a great line of travel---it is a highway. The country is a very excellent one for any people, and with great natural resources and advantages, and especially because of the similarity of climate with your native land---thus being suited to your physical condition. The particular place I have in view is to be a great highway from the Atlantic or Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean, and this particular place has all the advantages for a colony. On both sides there are harbors among the finest in the world. Again, there is evidence of very rich coal mines. A certain amount of

coal is valuable in any country, and there may be more than enough for the wants of the country. Why I attach so much importance to coal is, it will afford an opportunity to the inhabitants for immediate employment till they get ready to settle permanently in their homes. (5 *Collected Works* 373-74).

Lincoln asked the men to consider the idea and to help him get “a number of able-bodied men, with their wives and children, who are willing to go” and join the government’s colonization efforts. Lincoln expressed that his plan would work so long as he could find “twenty-five able-bodied men, with a mixture of women and children...” who were willing to go. (5 *Collected Works* 375).

The president’s remarks, which were recorded by a reporter present, were printed in the *New York Tribune* the next day and, not surprisingly, were criticized by the newspaper as it was widely believed that colonization was cost-prohibitive.

To many scholars, Lincoln’s interest in African colonization of former slaves seemed unrealistic and also inconsistent with the sixteenth president’s strong belief that slavery was morally wrong. But Brazil, a country along with Cuba practicing slavery, also had an interest in sending former slaves to Africa. Perhaps, then, Lincoln’s idea may seem less surprising. So I wonder if there is any evidence that Lincoln looked to Brazil’s policies of colonization/repatriation for his interest in sending the freed men to Africa, prior to the Emancipation Proclamation. Neither the *Collected Works* nor the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection at the Library of Congress contain anything that suggests that Lincoln looked to Brazil. Nevertheless, the two countries followed a similar course.

In America, however, only weeks after Lincoln had interviewed the five African Americans at the White House, he took a step that perhaps purposefully foiled his colonization plans. On September 22, 1862, he raised the hopes of the African American as they had never been raised before: he issued a preliminary emancipation proclamation, warning the rebellious states that if they did not lay down their arms by January 1, 1863, he would declare their slaves free.

The failure of colonization in America may have been one of Lincoln’s own purposeful self-doing. It is possible that Lincoln’s public actions were a way to prepare the white population for his emancipation policy, which would abolish slavery altogether. That is, by advocating colonization in his annual messages and publicly, it would make his Emancipation Proclamation more acceptable to

those who resisted it in the North.

Historian Don E. Fehrenbacher has suggested “that Lincoln's support of colonization . . . Became during his presidential years a calculated, dissimulative strategy aimed primarily at the white mind rather than the black population — in other words, that he hoped for nothing more than a token emigration of blacks to relieve some of the racial fears engendered by the thought of emancipation.” (Fehrenbacher, *Civil War Book Review* 221)

By the time the Emancipation Proclamation had been issued, colonization was no longer supported. An editorial in the *New York Tribune* read:

No one who has not thoughtfully and carefully and earnestly considered President Lincoln's proclamation will be likely to realize how admirable and comprehensive are its suggestions, and how surely their adoption will conduce to national integrity and internal peace. Look for a moment at the question of negro expatriation, which is one of the chief difficulties of our position. There are many worthy and good men, and ten times more of the other sort, who hold, that whenever slavery is abolished the negro should be sent out of the country. We have much charity for this opinion, for we once held it, but we are now convinced that it is an error. That the negro race, wherever free, will gradually migrate southward, colonizing the less populous West Indies, Central America, and the adjacent portions of South America, we believe. Climate, soil, natural products, ease of obtaining a rude yet ample subsistence, and the ready fraternisation of blacks with the Indian and mongrel races who now exist in those regions, and who are nowise above our Southern negroes in the social scale, not even in their own opinion, will all attract them that way. But if slavery were ended tomorrow, we are confident that even South Carolina would be in no hurry to expel from her soil the most industrious and productive half of her people; that portion amongst whom drunkards and profligates are scarce, while its office-seekers, bar-room loungers, and pot-house brawlers have yet to be developed. A State can spare its idlers far better than its workers, and it is only from dread of their influence on the slaves that a slave-holding people ever desire the expulsion of their free blacks. Were slavery dead this day, even the Carolina aristocracy would prefer, as labourers on the plantations, the negroes to whom they are accustomed, and whose manners are respectful and submissive, to any immigrants by whom they could be promptly replaced. It is quite likely that in time white labour would demonstrate its superior energy and intelligence by driving out the black. But for the present the Carolina planters would

generally hire their ex-slaves more satisfactorily to themselves than they could replace them from any quarter. (Mitgang/Dacey, 80-81.)

Ultimately, the end of slavery in America had a global impact, leading to a change in beliefs in other countries and the destruction of the institution in Brazil and Cuba, the only other places in the Western Hemisphere where it still existed.

As one abolitionist in Brazil remarked after the Brazilian government's first steps toward abolition of slavery in 1871, he was glad "to see Brazil receive so quickly the moral of the Civil War in the United States." (Degler, 42).

In an interchange discussion which took place online over the course of several months in 2009 for the *Journal of American History*, Professor Nicola Miller opined:

In Cuba . . . The impact of Lincoln was probably greatest and had the greatest social depth. There, as in Brazil, the questions of abolition and emancipation were salient, and images of Lincoln figured in debates about slavery and abolition in a variety of (not always positive) ways.

In their book *Colonization After Emancipation*, authors Phillip W. Magness and Sebastian N. Page likewise recognize the global affect of Lincoln's policies, pointing to the British archives which includes an order authorizing a British agent to begin recruiting freed slaves to be sent to the Caribbean in June 1863. As Magness and Page note, that scheme failed in early 1864, likely due to American polices, as British officials worried about the legality of the Emancipation Proclamation and the risk that the South could still win the war. (Magness, 123). The authors deserve great credit for their research in a neglected British archive. Their book strongly suggests President Lincoln continued to support colonization after he issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 through secret diplomacy with the British for the creation of a colony in British Honduras – now Belize. But there is a distinction between official U. S. government policy of supporting colonization with funding and contracts with private individuals and Lincoln's personal view of voluntary colonization by free blacks. It is important to remember that the President's annual message to Congress in 1862 – less than a month before the final Emancipation Proclamation continued to promote colonization as well as compensated emancipation as alternatives for dealing with African Americans. While the authors mention White House secretary John Hay's diary entry of July 1, 1864

that Lincoln had, “sloughed off the idea of colonization,” they give it little credibility as Hay was not in the loop over the President’s continued efforts to promote colonization (Hay, 203). Yet, we need to take Hay at his word that Lincoln had genuinely given up colonization as his government’s policy without surrendering the idea as an option or alternative for free blacks. If this is so, then the documents uncovered by the authors make sense and the evidence is consistent with the view that Lincoln consistently supported colonization but only if free blacks gave their consent. It became obvious that most blacks opposed removing themselves from America, providing another reason Lincoln that retreated from colonization. Magness and Page also cite Benjamin F. Butler who, in his *Autobiography and Personal Reminiscences . . . : Butler’s Book* (Boston: A. M. Thayer, 1892), represents that Lincoln discussed his wish to export “the negroes” especially those “whom we have armed and disciplined” to avoid “a race war.”(Butler, 903). But as Mark E. Neely, Jr. has proven, the story is doubtful as Butler was not present in Washington when he claimed that the interview with the President took place.

This book attracted much attention when published over if, when, and how Lincoln treated this racist policy. But one thing is certain. Once the President allowed African-American enlistment in the army on January 1, 1863, he insured a biracial country because no one can ask a man to fight for his country and then tell him it is not his country.

Ultimately, the flawed and disfavored concept of colonization never took hold in the United States, and by the time Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, the word “colonization” was forgotten.

Charles R. McKirdy’s *Lincoln Apostate: The Matson Slave Case* demonstrates the complex ad mixture of Abraham Lincoln’s anti-slavery beliefs, his commitment to the law while representing a slave owner and the fact that he was no abolitionist. Why would this anti-slavery lawyer represent a slave owner seeking the return of his “property” – a runaway slave woman and her four children? The author places Abraham Lincoln’s representation of Robert Matson, a Kentucky slave owner, in the context of 1847 – thirteen years before Lincoln became President.

Eric Foner and others successfully argue that Lincoln changed and evolved. During his time as a successful attorney and politician, President-elect Lincoln was no threat to slavery since he believed it was a local decision and for most of

his life believed in colonization and, then as President, compensated emancipation. This book does accurately point out Lincoln's great faith in colonization which he, in part, learned from his mentor Henry Clay, his "beau ideal" of a statesman, despite disagreement from members of his cabinet and only ceasing to advocate it publicly after issuing the Emancipation Proclamation.

It is not uncommon for lawyers, then and now, to take cases when their personal feelings differ from their clients. That is what lawyers do. Even one of Lincoln's opposing counsel noted Lincoln's aggressive advocacy:

. . . His trenchant blows and cold logic and subtle knitting together and presentation of facts favorable to his side of the case, soon dissipated all hope that any advantage was likely to be gained by Lincoln's liberal concession, but rather that he had gained from the court a more patient and favorable hearing and consideration of the facts on which he relied for success.

But the issue remains, why did Lincoln represent Matson in the case?

The author explores one theory wherein Lincoln, as a Whig, espoused keeping one's passion and feelings under control and the law, with its judicial system, maintained the order necessary to avoid mob rule. As to slavery, Whigs accepted, if not embraced, it as protected by the Constitution and to deny it would lead to a breakup of the Union.

Another theory is that at that point in his career, slavery had not reached the level of understanding by Lincoln of the power of this "peculiar institution" (Stampf, 3). Lincoln was not yet sensitive enough to those held in bondage. To McKirdy, this argument fails to properly evaluate "the insights of a very insightful man," as in 1864 Lincoln wrote, "I am naturally anti-slavery. As slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think, and feel." (McKirdy, 92), *7 Collected Works*, 281). What the author fails to realize is that these comments came seventeen years after the Matson case.

The author looks at Lincoln's ego as the reason he took the case. This high profile case would raise Lincoln's stature – if not for abolitionists, at least for potential clients, the bench and bar. The author does recognize Lincoln's, "continued torment" (McKirdy, 95; *1 Collected Works* 1953:260) and conflict as something that would never be attempted again on this issue.

But that does not mean that Abraham Lincoln did not have misgivings about representing Matson, especially when, after being retained by him, he had a chance to represent the slave family but he had already committed himself to the slave owner. Lincoln lost the case when the judges, hearing it, ruled that since slavery was illegal in Illinois, the slaves were free when they entered the state.

Jane Bryant and her four children belonged to Robert Matson who brought slaves to farm his land in Coles County, Illinois, every year, returning them to Kentucky after harvest. Despite the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and the Illinois state constitution which made slaves free by residence on free soil, Lincoln argued that it was a long established custom that Jane Bryant was a seasonal worker and thus could not be considered a “resident” of Illinois. The judges disagreed.

What has been considered a paradox involving the “Great Emancipator” on the side of a slaveholder has continued to fascinate many over the years. But as McKirdy points out, this ignores the jurisprudence as a slave’s “domicile” or residence and “sojourn” in a free state was a generally accepted distinction in American law. At the time, as this book points out, Abraham Lincoln and his co-counsel, Usher F. Linder, had the law on their side but not the judges – even though in 1843 the Illinois Supreme Court had ruled that “sojourn” in Illinois by the owner and his slaves did not make the slaves free. The judges, Samuel H. Treat and William Wilson, followed a new tradition in the North by ruling that slaves became free once they touched free soil, thus outraging the South.

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