

## Abraham Lincoln and Human Freedom

**E**ngaged in a fierce political battle for the presidency, a relatively unknown and untested politician said:

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

These were Lincoln's words from his fourth debate with Stephen A. Douglas in Charleston, Illinois on September 18<sup>th</sup> 1858.

## DRED SCOTT'S REVENGE

As we have seen, these were not the words of George Wallace, America's symbol for bigotry during its ugly segregation period, nor the words of David Duke, one-time Louisiana State representative and former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Oddly enough, they were the racist, ugly, un-American words of the so-called Great Emancipator. Lincoln has long been regarded as a champion for freedom and equal rights for blacks, but his esteemed legacy is a pretense based on myth, lies, deception, and incomplete historical accounts. Aside from a history of misleading facts, Lincoln's actions and words reveal his mainstream racist values. He actively counteracted proposals to achieve equality for blacks; in many political debates and speeches, he argued both sides of the slavery issue, and often chose to defend openly the institution of slavery, limiting his discontent only to the effect its expansion would have on the Union. A look into Lincoln's two-faced approach will reveal his inconsistencies and true aversion to social equality and freedom.

### RACIST ROOTS

Abraham Lincoln first began supporting slavery in public during his time as a lawyer in Illinois. He was known to be a skilled litigator and practiced law for twenty-three years, from 1837 to 1860. Not once did he ever defend a slave, but he did represent a slave owner. In 1847, Robert Matson, a wealthy farmer who owned land in Kentucky (a slave state) and Illinois (a free state), brought his slaves from the former to the latter to be seasonal workers each spring. Controversy arose when Matson's mistress in Illinois threatened to sell the slaves. The slaves managed to escape from the plantation, but were apprehended soon after and confined to a county jail.

Matson claimed the slaves as his property and brought a law-

suit for their return. Lincoln argued on his behalf. His argument claimed that the slaves rightfully belonged to Matson because, though they temporarily worked in Illinois, they primarily resided in the slave State of Kentucky. The Illinois Supreme Court disagreed and Lincoln lost his first battle regarding the issue of slavery. Historians who present an idealized version of Lincoln's legacy emphasize that the Matson case does not suggest that he harbored pro-slavery sentiments; rather it exemplifies his unwavering commitment to the law. However, the case was the beginning of Lincoln's habit of arguing both sides of the issue.<sup>1</sup> To make matters worse, where Lincoln failed to uphold the institution of slavery, the federal government stepped in.

By enacting the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the federal government limited the court's power to emancipate slaves. The act declared that all runaway slaves were to be brought back to their masters. It also denied slaves any legal protection. They could not be represented in court, like the Matson slaves, nor were they entitled to a trial or hearing. Local authorities were also given financial incentives to enforce the law, receiving \$10 for each slave's return to his or her master. Ten dollars in the nineteenth century was enough for any man to go above and beyond to ensure the institution of slavery remained intact. Further, local authorities who did not abide by the law would face \$1,000 fines. On these terms, authorities aggressively captured suspected runaways. As a result, many free black Americans were arrested and sold back into slavery. Not having the right to defend themselves against the allegations, these free blacks had no other choice but to deal with injustice.<sup>2</sup>

Abraham Lincoln adhered to the common perception that the Constitution of the United States protected slave owners. He publicly announced it in the 1854 speech that launched his senatorial campaign in Illinois.

When the [slave owners] remind us of their constitutional rights, I acknowledge them . . . and I would give them any legislation for the reclaiming of their fugitives, which should not, in its stringency, be more likely to carry a free man into slavery, than our ordinary criminal laws are to hang an innocent one.<sup>3</sup>

The injustices of the Fugitive Slave Act were well known, but ignored. The United States Supreme Court upheld it and it had Lincoln's full support.

Lincoln's swift rise in the political arena gave him a national audience. Without clearly defining his position on slavery, he was able to attract wide support. Proving to be a shrewd and calculating politician, Lincoln cleverly used narrow arguments that were filled with misleading distinctions and blatant contradictions. His debates with Stephen A. Douglas for the U.S. Senate seat focused on the *expansion* of slavery as a danger to the Union, but never mentioned any opposition to the *existence* of slavery: "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so."<sup>4</sup> He reinforced this promise in his first inaugural address, when he repeated this very same line to the nation and reassured the nation that "those who nominated and elected me did so with full knowledge that I had made this and many similar declarations and had never recanted them."<sup>5</sup> In reality, Abraham Lincoln's ambiguous view on slavery was best deciphered by biographer Robert W. Johannsen when he described it as "opposition to slavery in principle, toleration of its practice, and a vigorous hostility toward the abolition movement."<sup>6</sup>

LINCOLN'S FIRST THIRTEENTH AMENDMENT

Lincoln strategically used the United States Constitution as a tool to resist interference with the institution of slavery. Before he was elected president, he proposed an amendment which stated in part:

No Amendment shall be made to the Constitution which will authorize or give Congress the power to abolish or interfere, within any State, with the domestic institutions thereof, including that of persons held to labor or service by the laws of the State.<sup>7</sup>

The reference to domestic institutions served as a euphemism for slavery. After Lincoln was inaugurated, he instructed his Secretary of State, William H. Seward, to usher the proposed amendment through Congress. The amendment passed both the House and the Senate, but failed to gain momentum toward state ratification.

Even Lincoln's opposition to the expansion of slavery is clearly racist in origin, as it guaranteed that new territories in the West would be used exclusively by whites. His position symbolized a compromise between the small contingency of northern abolitionists, who hoped that preventing the spread of slavery would eventually lead to its demise, and white settlers, who wanted the West all to themselves. Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune* and an avid abolitionist, explained this reasoning, "All the unoccupied territory . . . shall be preserved for the benefit of the white Caucasian race—a thing which cannot be except by the exclusion of slavery."<sup>8</sup> The justification to end slavery in America's new territories was not based on any moral duty to uphold the natural law or need to right

inherent wrongs; it came from a desire to keep blacks out of the West. The future president said as much when, in 1857, he explained why he opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which would have admitted Kansas into the Union as a slave state:

There is a natural disgust in the minds of nearly all white people to the idea of indiscriminate amalgamation of the white and black races. . . . A separation of the races is the only perfect preventive of amalgamation, but as an immediate separation is impossible, the next best thing is to keep them apart where they are not already together. If white and black people never get together in Kansas, they will never mix blood in Kansas.<sup>9</sup>

The concern for congressional balance of power was another key argument against the expansion of slavery. As a Republican, Lincoln wanted to ensure that Northern Republican interests were at the forefront of government policy and represented a majority in Congress. This goal could not be achieved if Southern Democrats outnumbered Republicans in Congress. According to the Three-Fifths Compromise, every five slaves were to be counted only as three persons. As a result, Democrats wielded greater political power, given their additional seats in the House of Representatives, which are calculated according to the population. As long as the Democrats controlled Congress, slavery would continue to persist without federal government interference. By keeping blacks out of the West, Lincoln kept congressional seats away from Democrats.

In reality, the Great Emancipator sought to alleviate the racial problems that plagued our country by sending the black population to settlements in either Africa or Central America. Deportation was his answer:

Racial separation must be effected by colonization of the country's blacks to foreign land. The enterprise is a difficult one, but where there is a will there is a way. . . . Let us be brought to believe it is morally right and, at the same time, favorable to, or, at least, not against, our interests, to transfer the African to his native clime, and we shall find a way to do it, however great the task may be.<sup>10</sup>

This statement suggests President Lincoln's willingness to rid himself and his country of its blacks, regardless of their natural rights and regardless of whether or not it was in the country's best interest. To accomplish this, he had to affirm the humanity of blacks. Only by acknowledging the fact that blacks were entitled to their natural rights would public sentiment for colonization strengthen. By crushing all sympathy for them, hatred and disgust would reign and colonization would fail. Lincoln argued that by denying the black person's humanity, supporters of slavery were laying the groundwork for "the indefinite outspreading of his bondage." The Republican program of restricting slavery to where it presently existed, he said, had the long-range benefit of denying to slaveholders an opportunity to sell their slaves in new slave territories and thus encouraged the support of gradual resettlement of blacks outside of America.

### "WE SHOULD BE SEPARATED"

Colonization has always been associated with emancipation. The American Colonization Society was created in 1816 with a mission to formulate a program of black resettlement to reduce the escalating black population. The organization was able to attract each living former U.S. president, several Supreme Court justices, and many

prominent politicians, including Abraham Lincoln. Because of its members, the society was able to garner federal support for its goal. In 1819, Congress approved spending \$100,000 in federal funds to purchase the country known as Liberia on the west coast of Africa. Three years later, the Colonization Society began freeing slaves so they could ship them to Liberia. In short, the federal government raided Africa, robbed her of her sons and daughters, dragged them to a foreign land, denied them humanity by chaining, working, beating, brutalizing, and murdering them, then sought to send them back where they were found, as if nothing at all had happened.

As president, Abraham Lincoln attempted to implement this policy, first in May 1861, just two months into his presidency. He contemplated transporting black Americans to Panama to establish a colony that would mine the abundance of coal there for the Chiriqui Improvement Company. The plan, known as the Chiriqui Project, would have allowed the federal government to acquire discounted coal that could have been used to fuel the transcontinental railroad. It was American slavery outside of America. Lincoln ordered a secret investigation to determine if the project could be successful. The first opportunity to test the Chiriqui Project came in 1862, when Congress ended slavery in the District of Columbia and appropriated \$600,000 toward the president's plan. During this time, Lincoln had already entered negotiations for colonization in Africa, Haiti, and Central America.

In order for his plan to be a success, Lincoln also needed to gain support among the free blacks. Lincoln wanted them to embrace the idea of their own deportation! To effect this, Lincoln invited five leaders in the black community to the White House to discuss the possibility of resettlement. It was the first time a black delegation ever received an invitation to the White House to discuss matters of public policy. In spite of, or maybe because of, this fact, the

president made no effort to engage in conversation with his visitors, who were bluntly informed that they were there only to listen. Lincoln did not mince words:

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 suffers very greatly, many of them, by living among us, while ours suffers 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.<sup>11</sup>

Lincoln went on to tell his guests that their people would never find equality in his country, that their best bet would be to leave the continent and go where they would be treated the best. His plea was hardly persuasive. Free blacks who were sent to Liberia as part of Lincoln's test run had died shortly thereafter. Coal mines didn't provide the healthiest environments, and malaria often occurred in epidemic proportions. Still, Lincoln continued to promote colonization, despite the lack of support by the black community. His chief emigration officer, James Mitchell, placed advertisements in Northern newspapers calling for correspondence with free blacks favorable to Central American, Liberian, or Haitian emigration. Mitchell also sent a memo to black ministers in which he accused black Americans of being "half responsible" for the Civil War. He claimed that only a black exodus from America could avoid more bloodshed.<sup>12</sup>

Despite these efforts, black Americans were unwilling to accept deportation, and the colonization effort was further disrupted in 1862 when Central American countries learned of the idea and

vehemently opposed the plan. They denounced the idea as a U.S. invasion of their territory and a brazen attempt to pass off its race problems to Central America.

President Lincoln made one last effort for black resettlement when he tried to deport black Americans to the island of Ile a Vache, off the coast of Haiti. He handed over \$250,000 in federal funds to a profiteering businessman, Bernard Kock, who agreed to settle five thousand blacks on the island and provide them with housing, food, hospitals, churches, schools, and employment. Fraught with disorganization and corruption, this project also failed. Haiti's government was opposed to it, and several of the first black settlers died of starvation and disease. As a result, Lincoln was forced to transport the survivors off the island and back to the United States. He would have to find some other way to deal with the mounting racial hostility in his country.

## LINCOLN'S SECOND THIRTEENTH AMENDMENT

Much of President Lincoln's actions regarding emancipation were dictated by timing. He understood the limits of the Emancipation Proclamation. "Mr. Lincoln believed that as soon as the war was over, the proclamation would become void," wrote Lincoln biographer Ida M. Tarbell. "Voters would have to then decide what slaves it freed—whether only those who had under it made an effort for their freedom and had come into the Union lines or all of those in the States and parts of States in rebellion at the time it was issued."<sup>13</sup> Only a constitutional amendment would provide certainty that slavery was prohibited across the United States. Not surprisingly, President Lincoln had little to do with its formation.

A bill to support an amendment to abolish slavery throughout the United States was first introduced by Representative James

Mitchell Ashley of Ohio on December 14<sup>th</sup> 1863. A similar proposal soon followed from Representative James Falconer Wilson of Iowa. Both these proposals preceded Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Eventually Congress took notice. Senator John Brooks Henderson of Missouri submitted a joint resolution for a constitutional amendment abolishing slavery on January 11<sup>th</sup> 1864. Though the abolition of slavery had been primarily associated with Republicans, Henderson was a War Democrat. In February of the same year, the emphatic Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner submitted an amendment to abolish slavery and guarantee equality: "Everywhere within the limits of the United States and of each State or Territory thereof, all persons are equal before the law, so that no person can hold another as slave."<sup>14</sup> As the number of proposals and the extent of their scope began to grow, on February 10<sup>th</sup> 1864, the Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois, presented the Senate with an amendment proposal combining the drafts. Numbered as Article XIII of the Amendments to the United States Constitution, it read:

Section 1. Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

Section 2. Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.<sup>15</sup>

Radical Republicans—northern Republican officeholders who advocated harsh penalties against the former Confederacy—had hoped to abolish slavery with simple congressional action and were not happy with Trumbull, but they lined up behind his amendment.

Still, the amendment was evidently thought to be in an experimental stage, for more than six weeks elapsed before the Senate took it up for action again. On March 28<sup>th</sup> 1864, Chairman Trumbull formally opened debate on the amendment in an elaborate speech. Debate continued until April 8<sup>th</sup>. Speeches that attracted the most attention were those given by senators representing slave states: Senator Reverdy Johnson of Maryland and Missouri's Senator John Henderson. Senator Sumner pleaded earnestly for his phrase "all persons are equal before the law," copied from the Constitution of revolutionary France. But Senator Jacob M. Howard of Michigan, one of the soundest lawyers and clearest thinkers of the Senate, pointed out how far blacks really were from being equal before the law.<sup>16</sup>

The resolution passed the Senate easily on April 8<sup>th</sup> by a vote of thirty-eight to six. The battle in the House of Representatives in the spring of 1864 was much more difficult. Though President Lincoln let it be known that he favored the amendment when it entered the House, there was such formidable party strength arrayed against it that failure was a foregone conclusion. The party classification of the House stood at one hundred two Republicans, seventy-five Democrats, and nine votes from the border states. This left little chance of obtaining the required two-thirds vote in favor of the measure.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, there was still enough Republican strength to secure its discussion. Congressman Thaddeus Stevens, one of President Lincoln's strongest critics, proved to be one of the strongest supporters of the Thirteenth Amendment:

Those who believe that a righteous Providence punishes nations for national sins believe that this terrible plague is brought upon us as a punishment for our oppression of a harmless race of men inflicted without cause and without excuse for ages. I accept this belief; for I remember that an

ancient despot, not so cruel as this Republic, held a people in bondage—a bondage much lighter than American slavery; that the Lord ordered him to liberate them. He refused. His whole people were punished. Plague after plague was sent upon the land until the seventh slew the firstborn of every household; nor did they cease until the tyrant “let the people go.” We have suffered more than all the plagues of Egypt; more than the first-born of every household has been taken. We still harden our hearts and refuse to let the people go. The scourge still continues, nor do I expect it to cease until we obey the high behest of the Father of men.<sup>18</sup>

The Amendment failed by just one vote. However, it wouldn't fail twice.

In order to amend the Constitution, the proposed amendment must first be approved by two-thirds of each house of Congress and then needs to be approved by three-fourths of the states. Here, the issue was so close that only one state more was necessary. Thus the State of Nevada was organized and admitted into the Union to answer that purpose.

Another sign of encouragement followed when the State of Maryland, by popular vote, amended its constitution and abolished slavery. By this point the people had already spoken. All Abraham Lincoln had to do was give Congress a second chance. After his reelection, in his last message to Congress in December 1864, he did just that:

I venture to recommend the reconsideration and passage of the measure [Thirteenth Amendment] at the present session . . . an intervening election shows, almost certainly, that the next Congress will pass the measure if this does

not . . . It is not claimed that the election has imposed a duty on members to change their views or their votes, any further than, as an additional element to be considered, their judgment may be affected by it. It is the voice of the people now, for the first time, heard upon the question. In a great national crisis, like ours, unanimity of action among those seeking a common end is very desirable—almost indispensable. And yet no approach to such unanimity is attainable, unless some deference shall be paid to the will of the majority, simply because it is the will of the majority. In this case the common end is the maintenance of the Union.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite the numerous voices across the nation and in Congress that spoke to the equality of men and the institution of slavery as an absolute evil, the only goal for Abraham Lincoln was the “maintenance of the Union.” On January 31<sup>st</sup> 1865, the House of Representatives passed the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution by a vote of 119 to 56. President Abraham Lincoln signed the Joint Resolution on February 1<sup>st</sup> 1865, and submitted the proposed amendment to the states for ratification. Secretary of State William H. Seward issued a statement verifying ratification on December 18<sup>th</sup> 1865.

Abraham Lincoln was politically manipulative and truly Machiavellian. He and his cabinet believed that they could “ride into power on the two horses of Liberty and Slavery.”<sup>20</sup> Because of the crippling attitudes that conquered the time, attitudes that were unfortunately fostered by our forefathers, they were able to do just that. The eminent black activist Frederick Douglass best illustrated Abraham Lincoln’s character:

In his interest, in his association, in his habits of thought, and in his prejudices, he was a white man. He was preemi-

nently the white man's President, entirely devoted to the welfare of the white man. He was ready and willing at any time during the first years of his administration to deny, postpone, and sacrifice the rights of humanity in the colored people, to promote the welfare of the white people of this country.<sup>21</sup>

It's safe to say Lincoln wasn't the first, and certainly not the last, president to put the interests of whites in front of those of blacks.

Anyone who attempts to deviate from the common perception of Abraham Lincoln is subjected to ridicule. It is considered blasphemous to be anti-Lincoln. Lincoln has been portrayed as a saint. His defenders are so sanctimonious that they consider themselves to be self-appointed "Gatekeepers of the Truth."<sup>22</sup> They do whatever is necessary to keep unflattering information about Lincoln from the public discourse. As a rule, they ignore the unpleasant facts about Lincoln, like his support of a constitutional amendment prohibiting the federal government from ever interfering with Southern slavery, his repeated attempts to deport the entire black community, and his constant white supremacist rhetoric. There have been heated debates over the legacies of every other American president, but no such debate is politically acceptable regarding Lincoln.

This is yet another reason why legitimate discussions about race are taboo in our culture. Only by facing the truth, accepting the flaws of our forefathers, and learning from our past can we achieve cross-racial, cross-historical, and cross-cultural understanding. And only with this understanding can we move forward together and foster the environment that is so essential to the American way, an environment where one can earnestly say with a straight face that all men are created equal. And facing the truth about race necessarily begins with facing the truth about Abraham Lincoln.