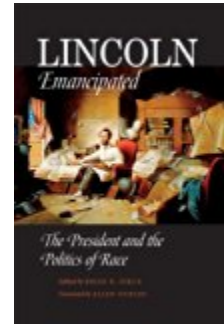


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brian R. Dirck, ed. *Lincoln Emancipated: The President and the Politics of Race*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007. xiv + 189 pp. \$32.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87580-359-3.

Reviewed by Craig Buettinger (Department of History, Jacksonville University)
Published on H-CivWar (August, 2007)



Lincoln's Politics of Race

Since the 1960s, Lincoln scholarship has particularly focused on his thoughts and policies about emancipation and race. Lincoln was no alabaster Great Emancipator. Indeed, some scholars argue he was a white supremacist, faintly committed to black freedom, barely distinguishable from the likes of Stephen A. Douglas. Lincoln's defenders argue he was a progressive on racial matters who proceeded cautiously given the racism of the electorate, often cloaking his goals in conservative, nationalist, or pragmatic garb.[1] The foreword and seven essays in this volume address this debate.

In the foreword, Allen C. Guelzo offers parameters for determining whether a person is a racist. He identifies dishonor and enmity as the fundamental components of the racist mind, and personal, social, and institutional racism as the forms it can take. Briefly reviewing Lincoln's career, Guelzo argues Lincoln was not a racist on the grounds that he harbored no personal hostility toward blacks, disbelieved in innate inferiority, and, by 1864, albeit hesitantly, struck at social and institutional racism by setting aside the goal of colonization and advocating broadened voting rights and education in his reconstruction plan.

As Kenneth J. Winkle's study of the pre-presidential years makes clear, Lincoln's beliefs that slavery was morally wrong and that all men are entitled to basic "natural rights" set him apart from mainstream attitudes in Illinois. Winkle presents a wealth of new details on race relations in Springfield, observing that "Lincoln rose above the deepest prejudices he encountered" (p. 10), al-

though his views shared or yielded to the racism in part. Lincoln did not advocate full equality for blacks and saw benefits to colonization. Winkle concludes that Lincoln's perception of the nation as a "House Divided" drew not only on great public events but also what he had seen of race relations at home in Springfield.

Phillip S. Paludan's essay analyzes several documents from 1862—Lincoln's public letter to Horace Greeley, his colonization proposals, and his colonization plea to a delegation of black leaders—that critics use to depict Lincoln as no true emancipator at all, but acting solely from base, racist motives. Paludan argues that each position was more complex than that. Paludan has no patience for works he considers reductionist, blind to context and timing. Lincoln's statement to Greeley, that his priority was to save the Union whether it required freeing none, some, or all the slaves, was a stroke to prepare public opinion for the emancipation step he had already decided upon but not yet announced. Lincoln proposed voluntary colonization only, never deportation, and his growing interest in black troops would provide blacks a way to ensure their right to stay. The essay by Kevin R. C. Gutzman amounts to a reply to Paludan. In "Abraham Lincoln, Jeffersonian: The Colonization Chimera," Gutzman compares Jefferson's and Lincoln's mutual advocacy of colonization. Neither envisioned emancipation of the slaves without planning for colonization too. As Gutzman articulates, both men reasoned that intractable white prejudice foreclosed the possibility of equality for the freedmen; both had doubts about the ability of ex-slaves to improve themselves. So, as Lincoln said to the delega-

tion of black leaders in 1862, the races had best be separated. Gutzman challenges the prevalent thesis among Lincoln scholars that the president used colonization as a ploy to prepare the public for his emancipation measures. He demands that Lincoln, like Jefferson, be taken at his word, without divining unstated stratagems. Gutzman also questions the accepted argument that Lincoln in his final two years abandoned his belief in colonization. Lincoln did cease to advocate colonization to the public, but Gutzman figures colonization was a moot point during the war and that Lincoln would have come back to it afterwards, and really was, like Jefferson, a lifelong colonizationist.

Lincoln's belief in natural rights to which all are entitled is the subject of James N. Leiker's essay. The concept of natural rights inherent at birth went back to John Locke. To Lincoln, the Declaration of Independence enumerated these rights—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In the nineteenth century, this Enlightenment outlook faced the rise of systemic racism that denied blacks humanity. As Leiker states, "Racial dialogue in Lincoln's time boiled down to a debate as to whether nonwhites met the criteria for natural rights laid out by the Enlightenment" (p. 90). Leiker tracks Lincoln's route through the crosscurrents of the race and color issues of the day to Lincoln's conclusion that the promises of the Declaration transcended ancestry. In the end, Leiker finds Lincoln open to criticism for respecting slavery where it existed; protected, said Lincoln, by the Constitution. In natural rights theory, political structures exist to defend natural rights. Logically, Lincoln should have concluded that natural rights trumped constitutional protections.

In "Abraham Lincoln, Emancipation, and the Supreme Court," Brian R. Dirck convincingly explicates Lincoln's mix of emancipation proposals in 1862 as the unified strategy of a trial lawyer. Lincoln approached emancipation along two tracks in 1862. He pressured Congress and the border states to enact programs of gradual, compensated emancipation. He declared slaves free in the Emancipation Proclamation, but excluded those in the border states and occupied areas of the Confederacy. To critics, these policies struck no direct moral blow against the evil of slavery and basically freed no one. In defense of these less than resounding blows to slavery, historians have previously argued that Lincoln had to take politics into account, doing what he could for freedom without driving voters to the Democrats. Dirck adds another context: the threat of the Taney court. Lincoln could count on proslavery Taney to exalt property

rights, as he did in *Dred Scott*, and deny executive powers, as he ruled in *Merryman*. Readily envisioning a test case making its way before the Court, Lincoln constructed his policies accordingly. His insistence on compensation and the exemption of areas not in rebellion were legal maneuvers to thwart any antiemancipation decision that would revitalize slavery. As Allen C. Guelzo aptly comments in the foreword to this volume, Lincoln was determined to make emancipation "Taney-proof" (p. x).

Michael Vorenberg calls attention to the emphasis Lincoln placed on education for the freedmen. After he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln came to view colonization as untenable, but the concern that underlay his colonization convictions remained. Former slaves would become "a laboring, landless, and homeless class" (p. 120), a drag on society. Replacing colonization, education became Lincoln's vision for the freedmen. Inspired by David Herbert Donald's classic essay, "Abraham Lincoln: A Whig in the White House," Vorenberg theorizes that Lincoln focused on education because of his Whig world view, in which schools were as important as internal improvements and presidential restraint.[2] Lincoln, surmises Vorenberg, would agree with reparations advocates today who seek federal funding of educational opportunities for African Americans, robbed of education during centuries of bondage.

"All Politics are Local: Emancipation in Missouri," Dennis K. Boman's case study of emancipation politics in Missouri, explains Lincoln's lack of success in getting border states to act on his proposals. An intensely divided polity, Missouri was a border state where Lincoln's proposals went to linger or die, proving Lincoln's own observation that "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me" (p. 154). The essay moves the focus off Lincoln, creating an instructive counterpoint to the other essays in this volume.

With Gutzman in dissent, this volume takes the side that Lincoln was a progressive thinker who necessarily trimmed his policies to get by the societal racism, the Chief Justice, and the proslavery, border-state Unionists. In a secondary way, the book evaluates Jefferson, too. Whereas Gutzman aligns Lincoln with Jefferson, several authors distance Lincoln from Jefferson. Paludan concludes that Lincoln differed from Jefferson by advocating voluntary, not forced, colonization. Vorenberg concludes that Lincoln differed by thinking blacks capable of self-improvement. It's interesting to reflect that the value of

Lincoln's stock as a racial egalitarian depends on his distance from Jefferson, whose stock is flat.

Notes

[1]. For a current point and counterpoint of this debate, see Lerone Bennett, *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lin-*

coln's White Dream (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1999), and James M. McPherson's review, "Lincoln the Devil," *New York Times* (August 27, 2000).

[2]. David Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era*, second ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 187-208.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Craig Buettinger. Review of Dirck, Brian R., ed., *Lincoln Emancipated: The President and the Politics of Race*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. August, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13499>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.