H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

George M. Fredrickson. *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008. xi + 156 pp. $19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02774-9.

Reviewed by Brian Dirck

Published on H-CivWar (December, 2008)

Commissioned by Matthew E. Mason

Moderate Enough

When George M. Fredrickson passed away in March 2008, academe lost a brilliant and influential scholar and activist, whose works on the history of race relations are seminal. His 1971 *The Black Image in the White Mind* is a must-read for anyone who wishes to understand the social, cultural, and psychological underpinnings of white supremacy. His 1981 study *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study of American and South African History* is justly considered not only a landmark book on race in those countries, but also a model for how to write effective comparative history. Fredrickson also produced numerous other books and essay collections–all related in some way or another to the problems of race and ethnic tensions–and he co-founded the Research Institute of Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity.

Amid this astonishing array of topics, Fredrickson also maintained an ongoing side interest in Abraham Lincoln. In 1975 he published "A Man but Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality," in the *Journal of Southern History*. It was a calm voice in an area of Lincoln studies that is all too often overwrought and strident. Pro- and anti-Lincoln partisans have for years produced warring studies that tend either towards hagiographical praise or unrelenting condemnation. While Fredrickson's essay was one of the more critical voices of Lincoln in this debate–as the title suggests–it was not unreasonably or unfairly so.

An essential argument of "A Man But Not a Brother" was Fredrickson's contention that Lincoln's racial views underwent almost no change during his life. In *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent*, Frederickson revisited this argument and turned it on its head. The central feature of Lincoln's racial thought was the fact that it underwent substantial change during the Civil War. "Lincoln's attitude toward blacks and his belief about race may have changed significantly during the war years," he argued (p. 28).

Before 1860, Fredrickson pointed out, Lincoln was a "racial separationist" who supported colonization of freed blacks to Africa because he "was clearly one of those who could not readily envision a society in which blacks and whites could live together in harmony as legal and political equals" (pp. 28, 54). While personally "cordial" towards African-Americans, Lincoln was severely limited by his concerns over the power of white racial prejudice, and by what Fredrickson termed his "conservative constitutionalism," which led him to doubt that the government could really enforce social or political justice between whites and blacks–or, at least before the war, end slavery–and which likewise led him to consistently avoid the company of abolitionists. Lincoln hated slavery, it was true, but according to Frederickson he had no concrete vision for the institution's ultimate extinction. " 'Ultimate Extinction' was something one might hope for in the distant and almost unforeseeable future," Fredrickson observed, "not a plan of action that went beyond keeping slavery out of the territories" (p. 68).

As president, however, Lincoln's racial views evolved into something considerably more admirable. The process actually began in the mid-1850s, with Lincoln's crusade against the Kansas-Nebraska Act and Stephen Douglas. "Lincoln deserves a great deal of credit for keeping the Republican Party focused on the immorality of slavery," Fredrickson argued (p. 79). He also deserves credit

for recognizing, during the war, that emancipation was a necessary legal, political, and moral act. The catalyst, according to Fredrickson, was the heroic service of black soldiers in combat. "A well-established tradition in republican thought was that bearing arms and citizenship went together," he wrote, and "although he made no public admission of his change of heart, Lincoln, it appears, was one of the converts (p. 114)."

Fredrickson gave Lincoln considerable credit for this wartime transformation. Unlike some critics who see Lincoln as at best a reluctant emancipationist, pressured into emancipation by the exigencies of the war and the actions of runaway slaves themselves, Fredrickson saw in Lincoln an example of genuine moral and political leadership. The outside pressures on Lincoln to act against slavery have been exaggerated, Fredrickson argued; indeed, the truth may have been completely the opposite, as "official emancipation would encourage more runaways, both weakening the Southern economy and augmenting the manpower for service to the Union" (p. 103).

In the end, Fredrickson's Lincoln emerges as a man who was both progressive and conservative, limited and expansive, admirably free of bigotry and yet maddeningly willing to cater to the bigotry around him. He is, in other words, inconsistent–more so, perhaps than his more unrestrained admirers would like to admit, but certainly far from the unapologetic racist others have made him out to be.

One could take issue with some of Fredrickson's points. His disparagement of Lincoln's "conservative constitutionalism" seems a bit overdrawn, given that the constitutional framework of Civil War-era America, while "conservative" to modern Americans, was the only one in which Lincoln could operate, both as a politician and as a president. Fredrickson was also a bit too reluctant to credit the more expansive vision inherent in Lincoln's reading of the Declaration of Independence; Lincoln's reading of that document did indeed suggest a vision of racial harmony. It may not have been terribly "concrete," but it was, in the context of the times, quite progressive.

But these are not so much flaws in the book as they are launching points for future debates. More to the point, Fredrickson was careful not to press his arguments too far, punctuating his conclusions about Lincoln's racial mores with a liberal (and appropriate) number of "maybes" and "possiblys," and the like. He rightly suggested that there are many gray areas in the historical record, and he was sensitive to both Lincoln's shortcomings and his accomplishments. His goal, he wrote, was to "probe the hesitations, inconsistencies, and ambiguities in Lincoln's dealings with slavery and blacks without denying the greatness shown by his ultimate success in ridding the nation of the curse of slavery" (p. 3).

He has largely succeeded. *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent* is a slim volume, it is certainly not the last word on the subject, and it is far from exhaustive in its treatment of Lincoln or his times. But it is valuable in that it sets a good tone–one of moderation and caution–offering a nuanced, critical appraisal of a complex man and a complex subject. It points the way for future studies, and in doing so does credit to Professor Fredrickson's remarkable career.

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

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

Citation: Brian Dirck. Review of Fredrickson, George M., *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. December, 2008.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23058

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.