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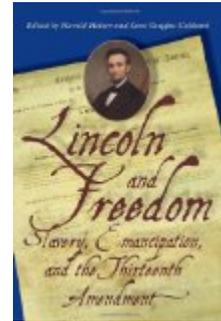
Joseph R. Fornieri, Sara Vaughn Gabbard, eds. *Lincoln's America: 1809-1865*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008. xii + 242 pp. \$32.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-2878-9.

Harold Holzer, Sara Vaughn Gabbard, eds. *Lincoln and Freedom: Slavery, Emancipation, and the Thirteenth Amendment*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007. 280 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-2764-5.

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## Lincoln, His Era, and the Issue of Slavery

As we note the bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth in 2009, there seems to have been an explosion of interest in America's sixteenth president. The current American president is an acknowledged Lincoln admirer, and a plethora of new books on the Great Emancipator fill the shelves of book stores and libraries. The two books reviewed here, *Lincoln's America* and *Lincoln and Freedom*, are part of a resurgent interest in the man who was, arguably, the nation's greatest chief executive, and each consists of a series of essays by Lincoln historians. *Lincoln's America* provides a wide-ranging group of essays on America during Lincoln's lifetime and how its culture, religion, law, and politics influenced him. Meanwhile, the essays in *Lincoln and Freedom* take a variety of approaches in examining Lincoln's views on slavery and his role in its eventual destruction.

In the preface to *Lincoln's America*, one of the editors, Sara Vaughn Gabbard, states that the book is "dedicated to the concept that Abraham Lincoln must be studied in the context of his times" (p. xi). To achieve that objective, the editors enlisted the services of ten historians, including such noted authorities as Harold Holzer, Allen Guelzo, and James Oakes. Their essays examine several disparate topics, including education and religion in early nineteenth-century America, Lincoln as a nineteenth-century philosopher, and the Lincoln marriage as com-

pared with what was typical at the time.

Two essays are especially noteworthy. The first is Guelzo's comparison of Alexis de Tocqueville and Lincoln's views on religion and democracy in America. Given the historical importance of Tocqueville's unique perspectives of America in the early nineteenth century and Lincoln's role in determining that nation's future, it is instructive to see how these two men viewed the relationship of religion and democracy in the United States. Further, since one was an educated French aristocrat, while the other was an American raised on the frontier in relative poverty without much in the way of formal education, we would expect marked differences in their views. However, Guelzo ably demonstrates that their opinions coincided in many ways. According to the author, Tocqueville saw the influence of religion on human freedom in America as radically different from what he had seen in France. There, religion and autocracy had often worked hand in hand to deny freedom and human dignity. However, in America, Tocqueville was amazed to discover that the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom were "united intimately with one another" (p. 28). As Guelzo demonstrates repeatedly, this relationship can be seen in Lincoln's approach to politics, which had a strong foundation built on America's religious culture and, in particular, Christian morality.

For example, Tocqueville saw Puritanism as both a political theory and religious doctrine, and one that influenced America far beyond the boundaries of New England. In particular, Guelzo notes the influence of the Puritan legacy in America's "perennial self-understanding as a chosen people" (p. 33). This influence, he points out, can clearly be seen in Lincoln's statement that Americans were God's "almost chosen people" and his determination to define the Civil War as a struggle to preserve democracy for the benefit of all humanity (p. 33). What stands out even stronger in Guelzo's essay is Lincoln's innate sense of right and wrong, and how that sense seemed to be an extension of the Christian faith. The author shows, for instance, that unlike other politicians both then and now, Lincoln would not stoop to demonize his opponents because he believed we are all equally flawed. Further, Guelzo states that Lincoln's compassion and the absence of any self-righteousness on his part extended from his "Christian insight into human nature: we are equal not only in our dignity but in our depravity" (p. 36).

Even more interesting is Guelzo's argument that both Tocqueville and Lincoln saw slavery as an evil that might destroy American democracy. Tocqueville viewed the southern aristocracy as an extension of the corrupt feudal societies of Europe and believed that slavery was "antithetical to the moral foundations of a liberal democracy" (p. 40). Unless it could be eliminated, he believed a calamity was unavoidable. Lincoln, meanwhile, saw slavery and, in particular, its extension to the western territories as a violation of the political faith enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, which he saw as based directly on "truth, and justice, and mercy, and all the humane and Christian virtues" (p. 44). Not surprisingly, as Guelzo notes, Lincoln also vigorously countered the southern clergy's use of scripture to defend slavery, in one case comparing their manipulation of the Bible to "Satan's exploitation of scripture to tempt Jesus Christ" (p. 45).

Perhaps the most telling point of Guelzo's essay comes when the author asks what lessons Tocqueville and Lincoln offer to our time. As he skillfully argues, the views of these two men on the compatibility of religion and democracy in America challenges both those who would drive religion out of public life as well as the forces that would impose their religious beliefs on all of us. On the one hand, freedom and pluralism pose a danger to religion in that it can become corrupted by "the materialistic values of the regime," a phenomenon Tocqueville saw repeated over and over again in Europe

(p. 49). On the other hand, at the same time, Guelzo comments on the danger posed by a brand of religious extremism that seeks to destroy liberalism and thereby abandon the very Christian civilization that created it. The author concludes by stating that both Tocqueville and Lincoln provide voices that are still timely and relevant in that they demonstrate the positive contributions religion has made to American democracy, so long as it acts within the strict context of separation of church and state.

Even more compelling is Oakes's essay on Lincoln's rejection of the right to hold property when that property is a human being. As Oakes points out, this rejection and its supporting arguments were at the very core of Lincoln's views on slavery and their importance cannot be underestimated. Oakes demonstrates that Lincoln's opposition to the right to hold property in slaves was twofold. First, Lincoln's dissection of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney's opinion in the *Dred Scott* decision (1857) showed that the court erred in stating that the right to own property in slaves was implied because the Constitution did not make a distinction between property in slaves and any other property. Lincoln countered that the Constitution did not expressly affirm the right of property in a slave. Further, he pointed out that there could be no such implication of the right as defined by Taney because not only are the words "slave" and "slavery" not found anywhere in the Constitution, but also the word "property" is never mentioned in connection to slavery. Even more damning was Lincoln's argument that, wherever a slave is alluded to in the Constitution, he is called a "person."

However, Oakes also points out that Lincoln's rejection of slaves as property had deep roots in his sense of Whig-based morality. As a Whig, Lincoln believed in an enlightened restraint of capitalism. On the one hand, this included a belief in public funding for internal improvements that the market might not provide if left to its own devices. On the other hand, and in a deeper sense, it also meant that the rights of property must not be allowed to supersede the rights of humanity. To him, some things should simply not be bought and sold as the market determined, especially not human beings.

Oakes's essay provides a wonderful transition to the focus on slavery and emancipation in *Lincoln and Freedom*. This volume contains fifteen essays, and, in addition to Holzer and Guelzo, who once again contribute their knowledge, the authors include such historians as Herman Belz, James Oliver Horton, John Marszalek, and

Frank Williams. These essays explore various aspects of Lincoln's evolving public views on slavery and emancipation, as well as the evolutionary path he took to both emancipation and, finally, the total eradication of slavery in the United States. Several essays demonstrate that rather than being the lukewarm opponent of slavery portrayed by Lincoln's detractors both then and now, Lincoln long harbored a strong, personal abhorrence of the institution. His measured, evolutionary public responses were, therefore, not based on any indifference, but rather grew from his pragmatic nature and the rational manner he employed when approaching any important issue.

To Lincoln, slavery was a great evil, one that dehumanized both slave owner and slave alike, and more so, one that threatened American democracy. However, his pragmatism and rational, logical nature led him to an evolving series of public positions that were constrained by the law in the form of the Constitution, the nation's political climate, and, eventually, the secession crisis and resulting Civil War. At first, he adhered to a view that slavery would die on its own if it was contained, and, as a result, he vigorously opposed its extension into the new western territories. However, this view was not only strengthened by the *Dred Scott* decision, but it also took on entirely new and far deeper dimensions, as described in what is perhaps the best essay in the book.

In "Lincoln's Critique of *Dred Scott* as a Vindication of the Founding," historian Joseph R. Fornieri offers a detailed, insightful study of Lincoln's analysis and rebuttal to Taney's majority opinion. Here, Fornieri goes further than Oakes's essay in showing what a watershed the *Dred Scott* case became for Lincoln and his public position on slavery. Beyond his contention that the right of property in a slave was expressly affirmed by the Constitution, Taney also asserted that the African race was "so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect" (p. 20). If true, then the founding principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence were null and void and, further, as Taney and the majority opinion stated, the black race had no natural rights, even those conferred on man by God.

Lincoln assaulted Taney's opinion from numerous angles, among them the definition of property. But, as Fornieri shows, he attacked Taney with particular energy on the fact that the ruling was based on "assumed historical facts which were not really true" (p. 23). According to Fornieri's analysis, in Lincoln's mind, Taney totally misunderstood the founders' intent in writing the Declaration of Independence. Taney saw it merely as a document

confined to the time in which it was written, its purpose narrow and finite. It was not meant as a normative standard. In addition, because slavery existed at the time it was written, there was no actual equality for all mankind, and, therefore, it followed that the founders really were referring to an equality that applied exclusively to whites and their descendants. In Lincoln's view, nothing could be further from the truth.

For Lincoln, the Declaration of Independence was, indeed, a normative standard, and a guide for all generations to come. Its aspirations might never be achieved in any perfection, but he saw it as stating a universal truth that each generation of Americans must seek to achieve as best they could. To Lincoln, these guiding aspirations had found their way into the Constitution itself and were thus affirmed by the law of the land. As Fornieri points out, Lincoln's view of the Declaration of Independence also was based on what he saw as a direct connection between the law and morality. Fornieri states that, while Lincoln did not equate the two, he always asserted that "there was a coincidence between the two in fundamental matters relating to human dignity, liberty, and the public good" (p. 28). Thus, in Lincoln's mind, Taney not only was erroneously affirming a constitutional right to property in a slave, he was doing far worse. To Lincoln, the chief justice and the majority of the court were attempting to forever mute the Declaration of Independence and discard what Lincoln referred to as the "ancient faith" it embodied.

However, as several essays reveal, even as president, Lincoln was constrained by law—slavery was protected where it existed under state law. Despite the secession of the southern states and the resulting civil insurrection, he still maintained that he lacked either the legal authority or the public support to immediately end slavery. Rather, in response, he employed a gradual approach using the rights granted him as commander in chief. Using his "war powers," he would first emancipate those slaves still in the rebellious states, and following his reelection in 1864, provide his unequivocal support to the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, which forever ended slavery.

While the focus of these two books may vary, they make excellent companion volumes. *Lincoln's America* provides a foundation by describing the cultural forces surrounding Lincoln, thus supplying important context for the essays on slavery and emancipation found in *Lincoln and Freedom*. Together, these essays show us a Lincoln dedicated to the cause of freedom, while employing

a prudent, deliberate approach to its eventual realization. As quoted in one of the essays, Frederick Douglass said of Lincoln, “From the genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent, but, measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined” (p. 125).

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