

# Abraham Lincoln's Attitudes on Slavery and Race

by Jörg Nagler

**The life of Abraham Lincoln coincided with dramatic societal transformations that shaped the future of the United States. In the center of these developments stood the question whether that nation could continue to grow with the system of slavery or not. Inherently linked to an issue that almost dissolved the nation was the problem of racism and the future of race relations after emancipation. To examine Lincoln's attitudes on slavery and race opens a window for us to look at his own struggles concerning these issues, but at the same time at the political and cultural contentions at large of a nation that he helped to save as President during the American Civil War. His legacy as the Great Emancipator, liberating over four million slaves, has generated a controversial debate on Lincoln's position towards race and racism.**

The life of Abraham Lincoln coincided with dramatic societal transformations that shaped the future of the United States. In the center of these developments stood the question whether that nation could continue to grow with the system of slavery or not. Inherently linked to an issue that almost dissolved the nation was the problem of racism and the future of race relations after emancipation. To examine Lincoln's attitudes on slavery and race opens a window for us to look at his own struggles concerning these issues, but at the same time at the political and cultural contentions at large of a nation that he helped to save as President during the American Civil War. His legacy as the Great Emancipator, liberating over four million slaves, has generated a controversial debate on Lincoln's position towards race and racism. A hundred years after Civil War President Abraham Lincoln had initiated the collapse of slavery with his Emancipation Proclamation, Martin Luther King delivered his most famous speech, "I Have a Dream," in front of the temple-like Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. In August 1963, within the context of the civil rights movement, he directly referred to Lincoln in front of 250,000 people: "Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity." But King decisively pointed to the fact that color bars still existed, and soon after he asked President Kennedy to issue a "second Emancipation Proclamation," that would finally demolish the barriers between blacks and whites in the United States. In his classical 1944 study on this subject, the Swedish economist, politician, and Nobel laureate Gunnar Myrdal once called the deeply-rooted racism, which has hitherto prevented harmonious race relations, "an American dilemma." A phenomenon which Lincoln knew only too well, especially since he had unreservedly admitted not to be entirely without such sentiments.

Where exactly can we locate Abraham Lincoln's position on the question of slavery and—closely connected to this subject—his opinion on race and his attitudes towards the future of race relations in the United States? In general, it is not an easy undertaking to differentiate between personal attitudes and public political agitation, especially in the case of an enigmatic personality such as Abraham Lincoln. This problem leads directly to questions of historical sources. Whereas we have much more evidence on Lincoln's attitudes on slavery through his numerous speeches and commentaries on this subject, the sources reflecting his attitudes towards African Americans and race relations are much less numerous. In other words, we might never be able to pin-point Lincoln's exact genuine beliefs and convictions on this subject. Lincoln was indeed a full-blooded politician adapting to political necessities, always ready for compromises in order to reach his final agenda. He was permanently aware that he spoke to a white—often racist—audience and he had a keen sense of "the public sentiment" as he called it. He embodied a type of politician who practiced an "ethics of responsibility," a term that was coined later by the German sociologist Max Weber. In other words, Lincoln was not an adherent of an "ethics of conviction," that many politicians and intellectuals around him supported.

Especially during the last years, we have seen very controversial, politicized and sometimes highly emotional historiographical and public debates on Lincoln's attitude on slavery and especially race. The Lincoln

Bicentennial and its accompanying discourses on the legacy of America's greatest president have in large parts concentrated on that issue. This comes as no surprise, since the still unresolved question of the future of race relations in the United States is of a central political and cultural significance.

When Abraham Lincoln was born in a one-room log-cabin in the western parts of the slave state Kentucky on February 12, 1809, the United States was still a young nation. At the time of his birth into these humble circumstances, the nation's third president Thomas Jefferson—a slave holder—was still in office for another few weeks, and the population amounted to approximately seven million people, out of which every sixth was indeed enslaved. This precarious stigma of bondage weighed heavily on the republican heritage of the Founding Fathers as an irreconcilable contradiction, as these men had postulated in the Declaration of Independence in 1776 that “all men are created equal.” From 1808 on, the “import” of slaves was in fact officially prohibited, but reality appeared differently as time and again illegal transports of people from Africa occurred and the business at the Southern slave markets boomed. The agriculturally oriented South even based its entire social system together with its economic wealth on the institution of slavery. As a matter of fact, the Northern states had gradually abolished slavery after the American Revolution, though they were not at all free from racism.

Lincoln had politically and morally detested the system of slavery throughout his life. In one of his most famous statements on this subject he emphasized that fact outright in front of a group of slavery advocates in the White House: “I am naturally anti-slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I can not remember when I did not so think, and feel.” Though, he declared only a moment later that the power granted to him through his office would not allow breaking the Constitution by abusing his powers in order to selfishly enforce his personal opinion. He continued: “And yet I have never understood that the Presidency conferred upon me an unrestricted right to act officially upon this judgment and feeling. It was in the oath I took that I would, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. I could not take the office without taking the oath. Nor was it my view that I might take an oath to get power, and break the oath in using the power.” And indeed, the Constitution explicitly protected property, and slaveholders regarded their slaves as just that—and so did the Founding Fathers in their time. The Constitution was almost sacred to Lincoln. On the other hand, Lincoln repeatedly referred to the Declaration of Independence, calling it in a biblical allusion the “golden apple,” which was surrounded by a “silver frame”—the Constitution.

Lincoln's deeply manifested rejection of the system of slavery was indeed quite complex and could not always convince completely. As many other opponents of slavery in his time, Lincoln was of the opinion that this system of unfree labor would morally corrupt the nation and would be diametrically opposed to the basic principles of republican freedom. However, other than the abolitionists, the radical opponents of slavery (and practitioners of the “ethics of conviction”) with their demand of immediate emancipation, Lincoln opted for a compromise: let slavery exist where it was granted by the Constitution, but contain the system and prevent its further expansion. Lincoln and many others believed that the containment of slavery would lead, as he phrased it to its “ultimate extinction.”

During his youth, Lincoln had experienced only little contact and personal encounters with slaves and free African Americans. Kentucky was indeed a slave state, but his family had moved to the free state of Indiana only a few years later. His deeply religious parents were members of a Baptist church community which had openly opposed slavery. As reasons for the migration, Lincoln's father is said to have named, alongside problems with land registry of his farm in Kentucky, also slavery. For him, as for many other whites in his situation, slaves presented competition at the labor market as well.

Not until the two over 1000 mile-long private trade trips on “Flatboats” to New Orleans in 1828 and 1830 did Lincoln gather his own impressions concerning slavery; which contributed to the formation of his opinion and aversion towards that system of human bondage, as these travels ultimately lead to confrontations with local slave markets and different encounters on plantations on the way.



“Sale of Estates, Pictures, and Slaves in the Rotunda, New Orleans,” 1842.  
Library of Congress.

He was already an opponent of long-lasting dependent labor, which was certainly also a reaction to the tense relation with his father, who had forced Lincoln to hard work from his early years on, and had also lent him to other neighbors as a temporary farm hand. Lincoln, meanwhile, wanted nothing more than to read and educate himself, a desire that was backed up by his strict self-discipline and rigid autodidactic studies. Altogether Lincoln possessed not more than one year of a frontier school education.

An initial public criticism of the system of slavery is recorded from the year 1837, when Lincoln as a young representative in the Illinois legislature remarked: “. . . The institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy,” but, he continued with reference to the abolitionists: “. . . The promulgation of abolition doctrines tends rather to increase than to abate its evils.” Lincoln reiterated his firm belief in the constitutional provisions, that prohibited the interference of Congress concerning slavery in the different states. But in the next sentence, Lincoln then demanded the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, in other words in the national capitol of Washington, D.C. Here, Lincoln was rightly convinced that “the Congress of the United States has the power, under the constitution, to abolish slavery,” but he added, only with the consent of the population there.

Lincoln was a man of the law. This firm belief was deeply entrenched into his personality and character and deepest sentiments. This was already apparent in his first major keynote address he delivered in 1838 in Springfield entitled “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions.” Here he virtually conjured that the legal process and lawmaking should become the “political religion” of the nation. This also meant that neither abolitionists nor other groups were granted the power to eradicate existing institutions—such as slavery—without legal basis.

A well-known episode in Lincoln’s life sheds light on his attitudes on slavery and partially as well as on race. But as other instances, it is the reflection at one moment of time in his life. His attitudes were constantly developing and it is hence important to look precisely at each respective circumstance in his biography that formed his attitudes. In September 1841 on his way back home from his friend Joshua Speed in Kentucky, he observed a group of twelve slaves chained together that were to be sold in the Deep South by their master; a fate that was met by hundreds of thousands of slaves. In his letter to the half-sister of Speed, a slaveholder, he described his impressions:

They [the slaves] were chained six and six together. A small iron clevis was around the left wrist of each, and this fastened to the main chain by a shorter one at a convenient distance from the others; so that the negroes were

strung together precisely like so many fish upon a trot-line. In this condition they were being separated forever from the scenes of their childhood, their friends, their fathers and mothers, and brothers and sisters, and many of them, from their wives and children, and going into perpetual slavery where the lash of the master is proverbially more ruthless and unrelenting than any elsewhere.

Lincoln then emphasized that he was impressed that these slaves were still able to sing and dance, and even were able to joke with one another, despite their miserable fate:

. . . And yet amid all these distressing circumstances, as we would think them, they were the most cheerful and apparently happy creatures on board. One, whose offence for which he had been sold was an over-fondness for his wife, played the fiddle almost continually; and the others danced, sung, cracked jokes, and played various games with cards from day to day. How true it is that 'God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb,' or in other words, that He renders the worst of human conditions tolerable, while He permits the best, to be nothing better than tolerable.

Lincoln wrote these lines to the daughter of a slave-holding Southern planter in whose mansion he had spent a few weeks (and was served by a slave); hence the tone may have been relatively more moderate. However, at this juncture of his life his own personal concerns about his unresolved problems dominated his perception. Fourteen years later, however, in light of his personal and political development and growth of maturity, he arrived at a new interpretation of this scene of deprivation. The slavery question had gained a new dramatic significance in the national discourse, and now for Lincoln this episode served him as an authentic personal experience of the damnability and ruthlessness of the system of slavery that needed to be contained by all means.

Until the founding of the Republican Party in 1854, Lincoln was a committed Whig politician. This party of national conservative modernizers opted for a strong federal state and for the improvement of infrastructure in order to improve trade. The Whigs were predominately Protestants and represented the interests of small and big entrepreneurs and called for protectionism. They emphasized the central value of self-education as a means of individual and moral progress. The Northern wing of this party became more and more critical of the system of slavery, and eventually this question led to its dissolution in the 1850s.

From early on, his great role model had been the influential Senator Henry Clay from Kentucky (1777–1852), founding and leading member of the Whig Party and Lincoln's "beau ideal of a statesman," as he called him. Clay was indeed the great political mediator between the Northern and Southern states, and was among other things, the architect of the so-called Missouri Compromise of 1820, through which a—supposedly permanent—demarcation line was established between slave states and free states along a line of 36°30' North. In addition, he was an early and formative advocate of the idea of repatriation of African Americans, which Lincoln supported as well. The "Colonization Society," already founded in 1816 by Clay and others, was a way through which free blacks were to be relocated to Africa on a voluntary basis. For this project, land was purchased there and the colony of "Liberia" was founded. Some Southerners supported the project because free Afro-Americans were considered as a challenge to their order of society; some Northerners endorsed it as they viewed blacks as cheap competition at the labor market. Even fractions of the opponents of slavery in the North approved of the idea, since they were either absolutely opposed to a full social integration of freed slaves, or viewed integration at least quite skeptically. Within this latter group this opposition was not necessarily combined with racist attitudes but rather with the fear that after all the sufferings of enslaved African Americans a harmonious life between black and white would be unthinkable.

Lincoln, in fact, belonged to the latter group. Through much of his first term as Civil War President, Lincoln, as an admirer of Clay, had believed to be able to solve this aggravating problem of how to socially and culturally integrate free and freed African Americans by the idea of colonization. Was it a realistic option to think of their integration in light of a still racist-oriented society after centuries of suffering and misery within the system of slavery? When Lincoln spoke of gradual emancipation, he constantly combined it with an offer of financial compensation to the slaveholders; as he did for example as a member of Congress in Washington (1847–1849) when he introduced (the later failed) legislation to abolish slavery in the nation's capital. Just like Clay, Lincoln understood the concept of colonization of blacks on the one hand as a chance to rid oneself of the problem of



slavery and an interracial society with all its sociopolitical and moral issues. On the other hand, the colonization concept politically offered the opportunity to gain more acceptance for the abolition of slavery in North and South. After all, the main argument against the complete abolition of slavery or equality in both regions of the nation had repeatedly been that emancipated African Americans could not be integrated into a white society. Lincoln's nationalism, as that of Clay, was defined by a moderate stance on the issue of slavery. "Re-colonization" meant a compromise between the further expansion of slavery and its immediate abolition, and Lincoln proved himself a worthy student of Clay regarding his ability to reach compromises and his skill of staunch negotiating.

In his eulogy on Clay, delivered in Springfield, Illinois, in June 1852, Lincoln used Old Testament references, just as he generally connected slavery once and again with the human sin that God would punish one day:

Pharaoh's country was cursed with plagues, and his hosts were drowned in the Red Sea for striving to retain a captive people who had already served them more than four hundred years. May like disasters never befall us! If as the friends of colonization hope, the present and coming generations of our countrymen shall by any means, succeed in freeing our land from the dangerous presence of slavery; and, at the same time, in restoring a captive people to their long-lost father-land, with bright prospects for the future; and this too, so gradually, that neither races nor individuals shall have suffered by the change, it will indeed be a glorious consummation.

With such utterances, he could hardly be distinguished from the abolitionists, who often were inspired by Old Testament references of sin and perdition. "Re-colonization" of African Americans as a "glorious consummation" would also have a "civilizing effect" on Africa, according to Clay, whom Lincoln cited in his eulogy with the words: "There is a moral fitness in the idea of returning to Africa her children, whose ancestors have been torn from her by the ruthless hand of fraud and violence. Transplanted in a foreign land, they will carry back to their native soil the rich fruits of religion, civilization, law and liberty." This Clay quote quite revealingly demonstrated a paternalistic spirit, common among members and supporters of the colonization concept.

In 1854 the Kansas-Nebraska Act had replaced the "eternal" demarcation line of 1820 with the principle of "popular sovereignty" which made a further expansion of slavery into the territories feasible. The Republican Party was founded subsequently, and Lincoln as a loyal supporter of the Whigs waited two years, but then joined that party in 1856 and shaped the organization in Illinois from its beginnings. The end of the containment of slavery constituted a radical caesura for him. As other moderate opponents of slavery, Lincoln had assumed that the system of slavery would ultimately vanish because of its clear-cut boundaries. Now fears arose that it might spread and thereby contaminate the nation with the principle of bondage like a bacillus. From now on Lincoln's tone grew more aggressive and a distinctly moral conviction and tone was added to his political argumentation, particularly in public appearances; as apparent in his famous speech in Peoria in October 1854:

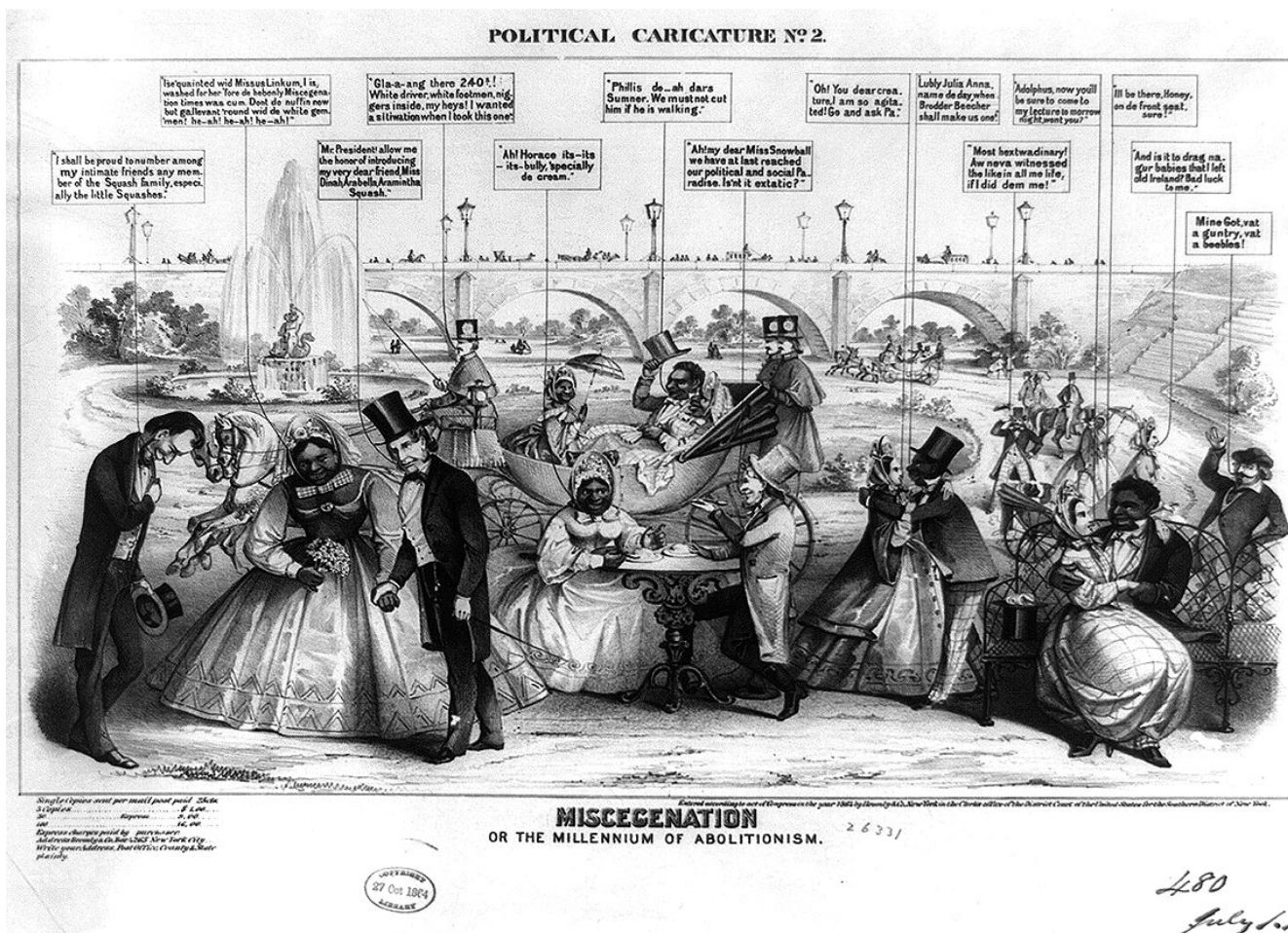
And yet again; there are in the United States and territories, including the District of Columbia, 433,643 free blacks. At \$500 per head they are worth over two hundred millions of dollars. How comes this vast amount of property to be running about without owners? We do not see free horses or free cattle running at large. How is this? All these free blacks are the descendants of slaves, or have been slaves themselves, and they would be slaves now, but for something which has operated on their white owners, inducing them, at vast pecuniary sacrifices, to liberate them. What is that SOMETHING? Is there any mistaking it? In all these cases it is your sense of justice, and human sympathy, continually telling you, that the poor negro has some natural right to himself—that those who deny it, and make mere merchandise of him, deserve kickings, contempt and death. And now, why will you ask us to deny the humanity of the slave? and estimate him only as the equal of the hog? Why ask us to do what you will not do yourselves? Why ask us to do for nothing, what two hundred million of dollars could not induce you to do?

In this important speech, Lincoln constantly referred to his longtime political opponent in Illinois, the Democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas who was the architect of popular sovereignty and thus the promoter of a possible expansion of slavery into the new territories. Another caesura in Lincoln's political thinking occurred with the Dred Scott decision of the Supreme Court in 1857, when this court not only decided that African Americans were not citizens of the United States and hence could not sue in Federal courts, but also that Congress possessed no authority to prohibit slavery on federal territories. Lincoln now publicly spoke of a "Southern conspiracy" that wanted to expand their system of slavery and thereby endangering the ideals of the Founding Fathers.

In the course of the approaching Congressional Senate Elections in Illinois in the fall of 1858, a series of seven famous debates between Douglas and Lincoln took place at various locations in that state. Events with sometimes up to ten thousand mesmerized listeners of the unequal couple: Lincoln as the “tall sucker” (six feet and four inches), and Douglas as the “little giant” due to his great rhetorical skills (while measuring only five feet and four inches in height). Lincoln had opened this verbal exchange—precedent of the modern Presidential Debates—with one of his most famous speeches, the House Divided Speech from June 1858, which signaled a radicalization in his thinking concerning the future of slavery in the United States:

If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do, and how to do it. We are now far into the fifth year since a policy was initiated with the avowed object, and confident promise, of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only not ceased, but has constantly augmented. In my opinion, it will not cease, until a crisis shall have been reached and passed. ‘A house divided against itself cannot stand.’ I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new—North as well as South.

The focus of the debates (which the entire nation was able to follow via telegraphic transmission) was once and again the central question of the further expansion of slavery, but implicitly also that of the general relation between black and white, and the future of race relations. In all his statements Douglas attempted to pull the “race card” and reproached Lincoln, since he as a supposedly “black Republican” would promote “racial amalgamation.”





In contrast to Lincoln, he denied that the authors of the Declaration of Independence had included people of black skin color into their central statement that “all men are created equal.” Lincoln, however, did grant them human dignity and natural rights, while he remained hesitant in conceding them equal rights. Undoubtedly he granted African Americans those natural rights outlined in the Declaration of Independence, which to him inferred that whites had no right to make slaves out of black people. His anti-slavery attitude though did not automatically imply the belief in full racial equality. But, as overt inequality existed, Lincoln demanded that whites had the responsibility to assist blacks. With this Lincoln took a clearly paternalistic position. Furthermore, in some locations where listeners had moved to Illinois from predominately Southern states, he also allowed political concessions in speaking against an “amalgamation of races.” Though Lincoln lost the Congressional Senate Elections, he did, however, gain national recognition due to his eloquence and speech contents, which benefited him in the 1860 nomination as presidential candidate in his own party. After Lincoln had been elected into the presidential office in 1860, most Southern states successively seceded from the Union because of Lincoln’s anti-slavery position and initiated the Civil War with the bombardment of the U.S. Army garrison at Fort Sumter in Charleston harbour on April 12, 1861.

“Monkey Uncommon Up, Massa!” *Punch*,  
December 1, 1860, 119.

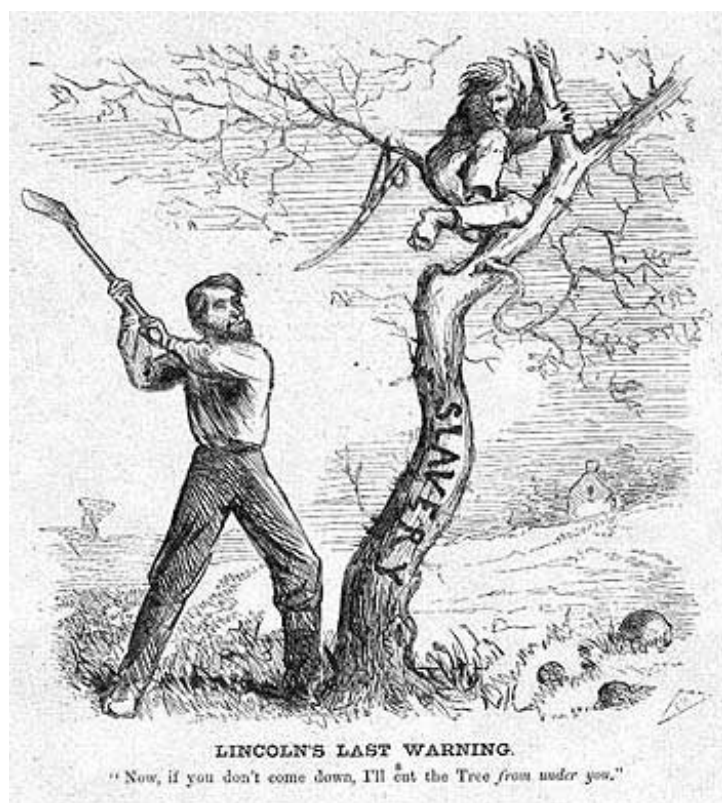
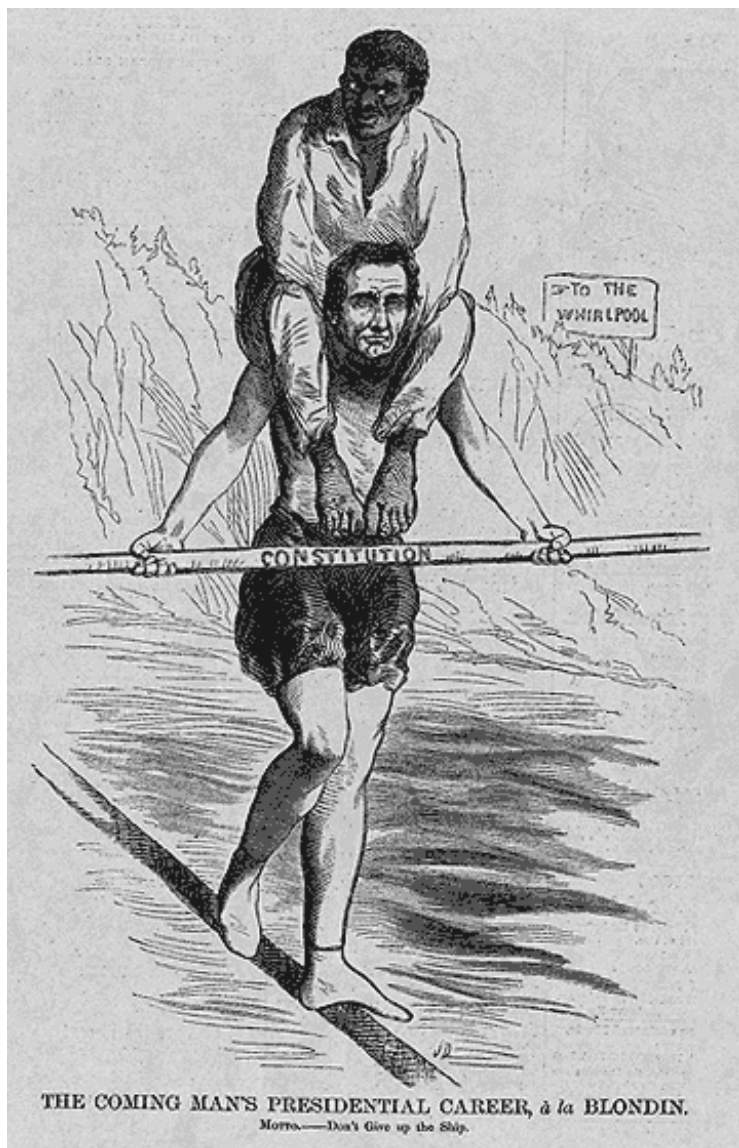
“The Coming Man’s Presidential Career, à la  
Blondin. Motto.— Don’t Give up the Ship,”  
wood engraving, 1860. Library of Congress, LC-  
USZ62-79477.

At this point, Lincoln unmistakably regarded the union of the nation as the predominant war objective; with respect to the problem of slavery, he again stressed in his Inaugural Address that he only sought to prevent its further expansion. With this point of view, Lincoln found himself constantly in the crossfire of criticism from the radical faction of his party—the Radical Republicans—who wanted to proclaim this war promptly as a fight for slave emancipation. Both of the two Emancipation Proclamations, which Lincoln issued in September 1862 and in January 1863, were initially war-related decrees.

“Lincoln’s Last warning: ‘Now, if you don’t come down, I’ll cut the tree from under you.’” *Harper’s Weekly*, October 11, 1862. Library of Congress, LC-  
USZ62-48218.



**MONKEY UNCOMMON UP, MASSA!**







DOCTOR LINCOLN'S NEW ELIXIR OF LIFE—FOR THE SOUTHERN STATES.

“Doctor Lincoln’s New Elixir of Life” by Thomas Nast. *New York Illustrated News*, April 12, 1862, 368. Courtesy of the New York State Library.



THE EMANCIPATION OF THE NEGROES, JANUARY, 1863—THE PAST AND THE FUTURE.—Drawn by Mr. Thomas Nast.—(See opposite Page)

“Emancipation,” wood engraving by Thomas Nast. The German-American Thomas Nast, one of the most celebrated political cartoonists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, attempted to evoke sympathy for the liberated slaves with this widely circulated wood engraving.

*Harper’s Weekly*, January 24, 1863, 56–57.



The conflict was about to dissolve the common boundaries of warfare. It had developed into a bloody and exhausting fight between North and South, and Lincoln wanted to strike at the main resource of the South, its main pillar of society, slavery. As a consequence of the final Emancipation Proclamation, slave emancipation was initiated from January 1863 onwards. Eventually 184,000 black soldiers fought for the Union army and contributed significantly to the victory of the North. This, furthermore, resulted in an additional change in Lincoln's reasoning regarding race relations, as he was profoundly impressed by their commitment and courage.



“President Lincoln, Writing the Proclamation of Freedom, January 1st, 1863,” painted by David Gilmour Blythe, 1863. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

By the President of the United States of America:

A Proclamation.

Whereas, on the twenty-second day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-two, a proclamation was issued by the President of the United States, containing, among other things, the following, to wit:



“That on the first day of January, in the  
“year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred  
“and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within  
“any State or designated part of a State, the people  
“whereof shall then be in rebellion against the  
“United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and  
“forever free; and the Executive Government of the  
“United States, including the military and naval  
“authority thereof, will recognize and maintain  
“the freedom of such persons, and will do no act  
“or acts to repress such persons, or any of them,  
“in any efforts they may make for their actual  
“freedom.  
“That the Executive will, on the first day

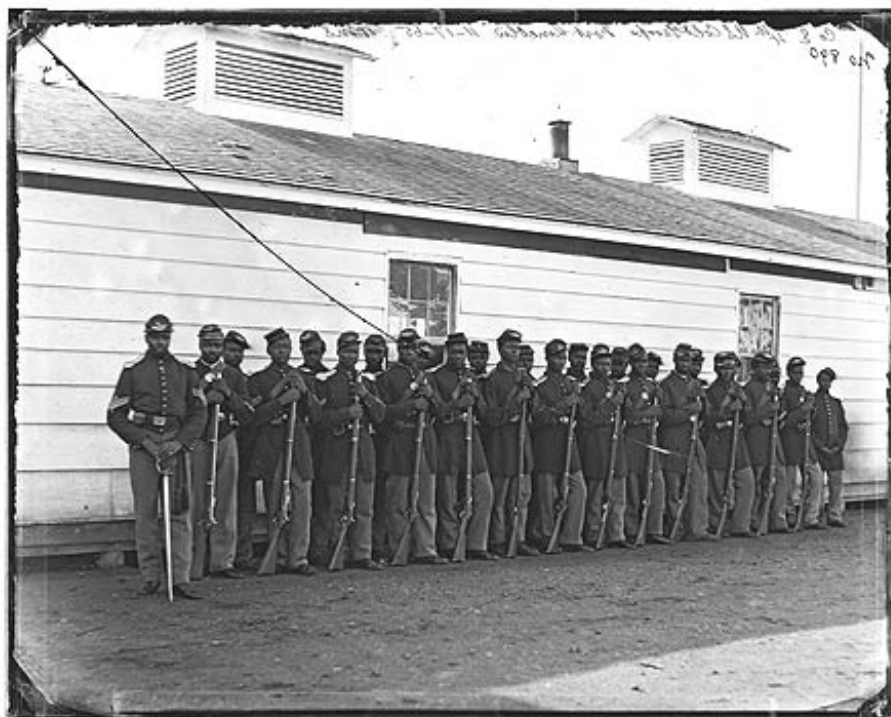
Emancipation Proclamation issued on January 1, 1863; handwritten version by Abraham Lincoln (page 1).

National Archives and Records

Administration. [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured\\_documents/emancipation\\_proclamation/](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/emancipation_proclamation/).



“One Good Turn Deserves Another. Why, I du declare, it’s my dear old friend Sambo. Lend us a hand, old hoss, du,” cartoon by Tenniel. *London Punch*, August 9, 1862.



African American Soldiers in the Civil War; Company E, 4th U.S. Colored Infantry, at Fort Lincoln, 29th Regiment from Connecticut at Beaufort, SC, 1864. Library of Congress.

In May 1863, the Confederate Congress decided that white Union officers of black units should be tried and punished by military courts, while the former slaves be tried in state courts. Reports of atrocities among black Union soldiers had shocked Lincoln, and he subsequently issued the General Order No. 252 on July 30, 1863 as an Order of Retaliation that clearly reflected his stance towards the status of African American soldiers:

It is the duty of every Government to give protection to its citizens, of whatever class, color or condition, and especially to those who are duly organized as soldiers in the public service. The law of nations, and the usages and customs of war, as carried on by civilized powers, permit no distinction as to color in the treatment of prisoners of war as public enemies. To sell or enslave any captured person on account of his color, and for no offense against the laws of war, is a relapse into barbarism, and a crime against the civilization of the age.

“The President’s Order No. 252. Mr. Lincoln. ‘Look here, Jeff. Davis! if you lay a finger on that boy, to hurt him, I’ll lick the Ugly Cub of yours within an inch of his life!’” The illustration is commented as follows:

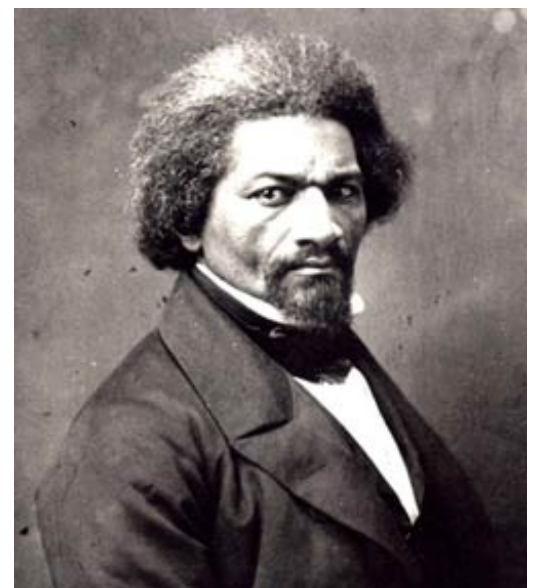
“This cartoon depicts President Abraham Lincoln’s response to the Confederate practice of treating captured black Union servicemen more harshly than their white comrades, even to the extent of enslaving them . . . . Lincoln threatens to beat the Confederate sailor he holds by the collar if Jefferson Davis, the Confederate president, harms the black boy he is chasing with a cat-o-nine-tails.”

Harper’s Weekly, August 15, 1863, 528.

In August 1862, he had welcomed a delegation of African Americans in the White House—until then merely the second time in American history that a president had issued such an invitation. The most famous African American of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Frederick Douglass, was also invited—a run-away slave, rigorous abolitionist and, like Lincoln, a self-educated and self-made man.

Frederick Douglass, ca. 1866. Collection of the New York Historical Society.

His sons fought in the Union army and he personally endorsed and demanded equal service pay for black soldiers. Douglass had applauded Lincoln’s Order No. 252 and was curious to meet the president. Their first meeting took place on August 10, 1863, and afterwards Douglass even attributed him personal impartiality and sheer “color blindness,” even though he had previously been a Lincoln critic because of his long hesitation and negotiations in the question of emancipation. As Douglass remarked in his diary, he had felt at eye level with a white man for the first time. Lincoln was apparently equally impressed by Douglass. Almost simultaneously, Lincoln’s self-confidence was on the rise along with the trust of others in his leadership qualities. Only a few days after the meeting with Douglass, Lincoln sat down and drafted one of his most important statements on the implementation of the Emancipation Proclamation, especially the service of African American troops. He was aware that he needed more work of public persuasion in this respect, specially after the draft riots in New York City in July 1863, where white racist mobs had lynched several African Americans. A few weeks later, Lincoln saw an opportunity to communicate with the populace on this matter. His public letter to James Cook Conkling, his old political friend



from Springfield, is a clear and outspoken statement on the abolition of slavery, not as means of warfare anymore, but as an integral war aim. From here to the final ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment by which slavery was abolished, one can trace Lincoln's determined policy in this respect. Conkling had invited Lincoln to a mass rally of "unconditional unionists" in Springfield for September 3. Lincoln had to decline the offer to deliver a speech in Springfield, but he used the opportunity to define his stance towards emancipation and African Americans in a public letter. He more and more used this means as the central vehicle for public communication to influence public opinion. In his letter Lincoln directly addressed his critics who were strictly opposed against emancipation and the deployment of African American troops:

You desire peace; and you blame me that we do not have it. But how can we attain it? There are but three conceivable ways. First, to suppress the rebellion by force of arms. This I am trying to do. Are you for it? If you are, so far we are agreed. If you are not for it, a second way is to give up the Union. I am against this. Are you for it? If you are, you should say so plainly. If you are not for force, nor yet for dissolution, there only remains some imaginable compromise. I do not believe any compromise, embracing the maintenance of the Union, is now possible. All I learn, leads to a directly opposite belief. The strength of the rebellion, is its military—its army. But to be plain, you are dissatisfied with me about the negro. Quite likely there is a difference of opinion between you and myself upon that subject. I certainly wish that all men could be free, while I suppose you do not. Yet I have neither adopted, nor proposed any measure, which is not consistent with even your view, provided you are for the Union. I suggested compensated emancipation; to which you replied you wished not to be taxed to buy negroes. But I had not asked you to be taxed to buy negroes, except in such way, as to save you from greater taxation to save the Union exclusively by other means. You dislike the emancipation proclamation; and, perhaps, would have it retracted. You say it is unconstitutional—I think differently. I think the constitution invests its Commander-in-chief, with the law of war, in time of war. The most that can be said, if so much, is, that slaves are property. Is there—has there ever been—any question that by the law of war, property, both of enemies and friends, may be taken when needed? And is it not needed whenever taking it, helps us, or hurts the enemy? Armies, the world over, destroy enemies' property when they can not use it; and even destroy their own to keep it from the enemy. Civilized belligerents do all in their power to help themselves, or hurt the enemy, except a few things regarded as barbarous or cruel. Among the exceptions are the massacre of vanquished foes, and non-combatants, male and female. But the proclamation, as law, either is valid, or is not valid. If it is not valid, it needs no retraction. If it is valid, it can not be retracted, any more than the dead can be brought to life. Some of you profess to think its retraction would operate favorably for the Union. Why better after the retraction, than before the issue? There was more than a year and a half of trial to suppress the rebellion before the proclamation issued, the last one hundred days of which passed under an explicit notice that it was coming, unless averted by those in revolt, returning to their allegiance.

These lines clearly indicate how far Lincoln had moved in his attitudes towards African Americans and their future stance in society. For him the black troops in combat were indeed American patriots; with this attitude he charged his racist critics who claimed to be the true American patriots. But then again he cleverly emphasized the military gains that were made possible by the Emancipation Proclamation:

The war has certainly progressed as favorably for us, since the issue of proclamation as before. I know, as fully as one can know the opinions of others, that some of the commanders of our armies in the field who have given us our most important successes believe the emancipation policy and the use of the colored troops constitute the heaviest blow yet dealt to the Rebellion, and that at least one of these important successes could not have been achieved when it was but for the aid of black soldiers. Among the commanders holding these views are some who have never had any affinity with what is called abolitionism or with the Republican party policies but who held them purely as military opinions. I submit these opinions as being entitled to some weight against the objections often urged that emancipation and arming the blacks are unwise as military measures and were not adopted as such in good faith." But Lincoln reached the climax of his statements when he charged his critics indirectly as hedgers and cowards who obviously preferred not to fight for the Union, while black troops fought for them to save it: 'You say you will not fight to free negroes'. Some of them seem willing to fight for you; but, no matter. Fight you, then exclusively to save the Union. I issued the proclamation on purpose to aid you in saving the Union. Whenever you shall have conquered all resistance to the Union, if I shall urge you to continue fighting, it will be an apt time, then, for you to declare you will not fight to free negroes. I thought that in your



struggle for the Union, to whatever extent the negroes should cease helping the enemy, to that extent it weakened the enemy in his resistance to you. Do you think differently? I thought that whatever negroes can be got to do as soldiers, leaves just so much less for white soldiers to do, in saving the Union. Does it appear otherwise to you? But negroes, like other people, act upon motives. Why should they do any thing for us, if we will do nothing for them? If they stake their lives for us, they must be prompted by the strongest motive—even the promise of freedom. And the promise being made, must be kept. Peace does not appear so distant as it did. I hope it will come soon, and come to stay; and so come as to be worth the keeping in all future time. It will then have been proved that, among free men, there can be no successful appeal from the ballot to the bullet; and that they who take such appeal are sure to lose their case, and pay the cost. And then, there will be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue, and clenched teeth, and steady eye, and well-poised bayonet, they have helped mankind on to this great consummation; while, I fear, there will be some white ones, unable to forget that, with malignant heart, and deceitful speech, they strove to hinder it.

With these unequivocal statements it became evident that Lincoln not only had the preservation of the Union in mind, but that he also aimed at preparing the American people to the liberation of four million African Americans and inherently connected with this the change of race relations after the war. On the same day the letter was read to the audience in Springfield, it was transmitted via telegraph to all major Northern newspapers. The *New York Times* for example enthusiastically praised Lincoln's words as they aim at the "heart of the matter" in a clear and unequivocal language. According to the *New York Times*, the president had argued beyond the party lines and had appealed to the "loyalty of all Americans." And indeed, the general public reactions on Lincoln's unequivocal statements on emancipation and African Americans proved to be overwhelmingly positive in the Union. Together with some of other Lincoln's public letters, the Conkling letter was printed in mass circulation. Lincoln later very often referred to this letter when he intended to clarify the principles of emancipation and their implementation.

Almost exactly one year later, Lincoln invited Frederick Douglass to a second meeting at the White House since he was concerned about the fact that still too few slaves sought their way into freedom. A few days before Lincoln had written a public letter to a Democratic newspaper reiterating his thoughts about emancipation and African American soldiers:

Why should they [black soldiers] give their lives for us, with full notice of our purpose to betray them. Drive back to the support of the rebellion the physical force which the colored people now give, and promise us, and neither the present, nor any coming administration, can save the Union. Take from us, and give to the enemy, the hundred and thirty, forty, or fifty thousand colored persons now serving us as soldiers, seamen, and laborers, and we can not longer maintain the contest.

Lincoln had become more and more concerned about the fate of enslaved African Americans in the South, since in the summer of 1864 his chances for re-election were very low. The candidate of the Democratic Party, General George McClellan, talked about peace even by keeping slavery intact in the South. Hence Lincoln intended to liberate as many slaves as possible, before a Democrat would move into the White House. With his contacts, Douglass appeared as the perfect person to Lincoln to implement his idea of establishing a secret organization in the South that would spread the content of the Emancipation Proclamation among the slaves, and encourage them to escape behind Union lines. Douglass promised to take actions and to report back to the President after outweighing the chances of such an endeavor. In his autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass commented on the issue:

The increasing opposition to the war, in the North, and the mad cry against it, because it was being made an abolition war, alarmed Mr. Lincoln, and made him apprehensive that a peace might be forced upon him which would leave still in slavery all who had not come within our lines. What he wanted was to make his Proclamation as effective as possible in the event of such a peace. He said in a regretful tone, 'The slaves are not coming so rapidly and so numerously to us as I had hoped.' I replied that the slaveholders knew how to keep such things from their slaves, and probably very few knew of his Proclamation. 'Well,' he said, 'I want you to set about devising some means of making them acquainted with it, and for bringing them into our lines.' He spoke with great earnestness and much solicitude, and seemed troubled . . . by the growing impatience there was being manifested through the North at the war. . . . He saw the danger of premature peace, and, like a thoughtful and

sagacious man as he was, he wished to provide means of rendering such consummation as harmless as possible. I was the more impressed by his benevolent consideration because he before said, in answer to the peace clamor, that his object was to save the Union, and to do so with or without slavery. What he said on this day showed a deeper moral conviction against slavery than I had even seen before in anything spoken or written by him.

Even though Douglass was still of the opinion that Lincoln needed to act more decisively against the Southern states, he was indeed even more taken with the President after this second meeting. This was quite mutual as Lincoln remarked after the meeting that he considered Douglass to be “one of the most meritorious men in America.” Douglass later called Lincoln the “king of self-made men.” The invitation to the White House must certainly be evaluated as a political move as well, since Lincoln knew that Douglass was very much appreciated by the radical faction of the Republican Party, whose votes he needed for his re-election but also for the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in Congress which constituting the ultimate abolition of slavery. Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamations simply weighed too little on legal grounds in order to outlast the war. A few days later, Douglass wrote to the President concerning his idea of a secret organization in the South: “All with whom I have thus far spoken on the subject, concur in the wisdom and benevolence of the idea, and some of them think it is practicable. That every slave who escapes from the Rebel States is a loss to the Rebellion and a gain to the Loyal Cause I need not stop to argue; the proposition is self evident. The negro is the stomach of the rebellion.”

After his re-election in November 1864—made possible by the military successes in the South—and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment by a narrow margin in Congress on January 31, 1865, Lincoln concentrated more and more on the post-war period, in which the reintegration of the South—the so-called Reconstruction—would be the main focus. The key questions were how the emancipation of four million slaves could be implemented during Reconstruction, and whether Blacks should obtain suffrage and civil rights. Lincoln had indeed changed his mind on this issue: Though he still remained rather skeptical after the Emancipation Proclamation, he more and more revised his stance after many positive encounters with black troops and many African Americans. There was no more talk of colonization. In his second Inaugural speech on March 4, 1865 (as opposed to his first) he directly named the cause of the war—slavery:

One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union, even by war, while the government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it.

Among his listeners were African American soldiers, the living examples of the drastic changes that had occurred within the four years of the war. For the first time in American history they had marched in the inaugural parade on Pennsylvania Avenue. At the end of his speech Lincoln directly addressed the horrors of slavery with biblical overtones, a passage that is often overlooked when the address is quoted:

Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.

These almost apocalyptic lines were followed by the more well known words with which he asked for reconciliation and national unity: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.” Some Lincoln scholars have remarked that this leniency towards the South may have opened the way for the then following decades of racial discrimination of the infamous Jim Crow laws in the South.

During the inauguration ball in the White House Lincoln welcomed Fredrick Douglass as his guest with the words: “Here comes my friend Douglass.” It was the first time ever an African American participated in these festivities (though Douglass first was prevented to join the guests by a white doorkeeper). Lincoln took Douglass aside and asked him directly how he had liked the inaugural address, adding that “there is no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours.” Douglass answered Lincoln with the words: “Mr. Lincoln, that was a sacred effort.”

President Lincoln entering Richmond, VA, on April 4, 1865. Lincoln entered Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy, one day after its fall with his son Tad on April 4, 1865. He then was enthusiastically greeted by liberated African Americans on the streets, praising him as the “great Messiah” and shouting “God bless you.” The sketch of this event is indeed a fairly realistic depiction. When it appeared in *Harper’s Weekly*, the editors rightly claimed that Lincoln would be venerated by African Americans as the “Great Emancipator” for some time to come.  
*Harper’s Weekly*, February 24, 1866.



[http://dls.virginia.gov/GROUPS/MLK/Lincoln\\_/Lincoln2.htm](http://dls.virginia.gov/GROUPS/MLK/Lincoln_/Lincoln2.htm).

Shortly before his death, Lincoln was explicitly of the opinion that black veterans of the Union army and the particularly intelligent and educated African Americans should be allowed to vote, and thus gain political participation within the post-war society. By publicly announcing this opinion shortly after the surrender of the South in his last speech on April 11, 1865, he had spoken his own death warrant. Among the audience was his assassin, the fanatic Southerner and racist John Wilkes Booth, who commented on Lincoln’s words with fury: “That means nigger citizenship. Now by God I’ll put him through!” Only a few days later, on April 14, 1865, Good Friday, the actor Booth successfully carried out the first presidential assassination in American history by murdering Lincoln in a theater in Washington.

Lincoln lived in a historic period of severe social transformations the United States experienced between 1800 and 1865, which had shaped Lincoln, but which Lincoln himself influenced decisively as well. The central question that finally tore the nation apart was the institution of slavery with its ramification in politics, economy and culture. The private person and the political Lincoln went through changes regarding the position towards the question of slavery and race, a development that might seem difficult to dismantle at times. What can be accounted for as sheer political maneuvers and what would be his personal opinions; and where do these intersect? Privately, Lincoln felt deeply connected to some African Americans—already in Springfield to his long-time hairdresser William Florville whom he kept in touch with. In Washington, it was the closest intimate of his wife Mary, her black seamstress Elizabeth Keckley, a former slave, whom Lincoln called “Madam Elizabeth.”



Politically, his actions were dependent on careful maneuvering, which often enough embittered both the Radical Republicans and abolitionists, but in the end Lincoln's patience, his political insights and intuition for the right timing of political action were able to achieve the final abolition of slavery. He always, though, had sought proximity to the abolitionists. His long-time law partner William Herndon belonged to this group as well as several members of his cabinet and his first Vice President. In contrast to the abolitionists, especially Frederick Douglass, Lincoln had long distinguished between the fight against slavery and the one against racism. His political vision about the American nation and its territorial expansion into the West had always been accompanied by the notion of a predominately white society. While the Civil War developed its own dynamics, a political and mental alteration in Lincoln's attitude occurred, so that he could only accept a united nation in freedom. In his *Gettysburg Address* of November 1863 he proclaimed a "new birth of freedom."

Towards the end of the war, he realized that African Americans could become an integral and equal part of this, after he had hesitantly begun to grant them civil rights as well. His definition of democracy was extremely simple and he usually connected it with the question of slavery: "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy." In addition, as President he was able to nominate five Supreme Court Justices, among those was his former Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase, an abolitionist, that Lincoln appointed as Chief Justice.

And still it would be historically incorrect to call Lincoln the father of the Civil Rights movement, though through his actions as war president the abolition of slavery was made possible. He thus paved the way. One of the most prominent African Americans of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, W. E. B. Du Bois, once remarked that Lincoln—despite all his contradictions—was "big enough to be inconsistent." His tendency to take cover under the idea of "colonization" in order not to confront the young republic with the severe test of full racial equality and integration might be one of those inconsistencies.

The century after the Civil War is proof that Lincoln had not been able to solve the American Dilemma of racism. However, he had set the course for a long process that lead his country into a new era marked by the election of the first black President of the United States in the year of Lincoln's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday. In Barack Obama's office, a picture of Lincoln is hanging on the wall. As Senator of Illinois this portrait caused him to write an article entitled: "What I see in Lincoln's eyes." One paragraph deals explicitly with Lincoln's image as the Great Emancipator and how African Americans perceive this legacy:

Still, as I look at his picture, it is the man and not the icon that speaks to me. I cannot swallow whole the view of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator. As a law professor and civil rights lawyer and as an African American, I am fully aware of his limited views on race. Anyone who actually reads the Emancipation Proclamation knows it was more a military document than a clarion call for justice. Scholars tell us too that Lincoln wasn't immune from political considerations and that his temperament could be indecisive and morose. But it is precisely those imperfections—and the painful self-awareness of those failings etched in every crease of his face and reflected in those haunted eyes—that make him so compelling. For when the time came to confront the greatest moral challenge this nation has ever faced, this all too human man did not pass the challenge on to future generations.

During his inauguration, three and a half years after these remarks on the importance of Lincoln for Blacks in America, Barack Obama was looking at the Lincoln Memorial where Martin Luther King had once demanded the irreversible removal of all racial barriers. As he swore the oath of office, Obama layed his hand on the bible used at Lincoln's first inauguration, which took place when four million African Americans were slaves.

## Select Bibliography

Dirck, Brian R., ed. *Lincoln Emancipated: The President and the Politics of Race*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007.

Fredrickson, George M. *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.

- . "A Man but Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality." *Journal of Southern History* 41 (1975): 39–58.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., ed. *Lincoln on Race & Slavery*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Good, Timothy S. *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates and the Making of a President*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007.
- Guelzo, Allen C. *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008.
- Guerty, Phillip M., ed. "Lincoln, Race, and Slavery." *OAH Magazine of History* 21 (2007).
- Kolchin, Peter. "Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America." *The Journal of American History* 89 (2002): 154–73. <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/gjay/www/Whiteness/kolchinreviewessay.htm> (accessed September 8, 2010).
- Nagler, Jörg. *Abraham Lincoln, Amerikas großer Präsident: Eine Biographie*. München: Beck, 2009.
- Oakes, James. *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics*. New York: Norton, 2007.
- Obama, Barack. "What I See in Lincoln's Eyes." *Time Magazine*, 26 June 2005. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1077287,00.html> (accessed September 14, 2009).
- Paludan, Phillip Shaw. "Lincoln and Negro Slavery: I Haven't Got Time for the Pain." *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 25 (2004): 57 pars. <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jala/27.2/paludan.html> (accessed September 8, 2010).
- . "Lincoln and Colonization: Policy or Propaganda?" *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 25.1 (2004): 36 pars. <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jala/25.1/paludan.html> (accessed September 8, 2010).
- Peck, Graham Alexander. "Abraham Lincoln and the Triumph of an Antislavery Nationalism." *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 28.2 (2007): 38 pars. <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jala/28.2/peck.html> (accessed September 8, 2010).
- Senechal de la Roche, Roberta. *In Lincoln's Shadow: The 1908 Race Riot in Springfield*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008.
- Schwartz, Barry. "Collective Memory and History: How Abraham Lincoln Became a Symbol of Racial Equality." *The Sociological Quarterly* 38 (1997): 469–96.
- Striner, Richard. *Father Abraham: Lincoln's Relentless Struggle to End Slavery*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Wilentz, Sean, ed. *The Best American History Essays on Lincoln*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Zilversmit, Arthur. "Lincoln and the Problem of Race: A Decade of Interpretations." *Papers of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 2 (1980): 37 pars. <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jala/2/zilversmit.html> (accessed September 8, 2010).

---

**Jörg Nagler** is Professor of American History at Friedrich Schiller University Jena. He received his Ph.D. in history in 1984 and his Habilitation in 1997 at the University of Kiel. He worked for the Public Affairs division at the American Embassy in Bonn, was a research associate at the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C. and served as director of the Kennedy Haus in Kiel. Jörg Nagler held guest professorships at the University of Maryland and at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC. His research focuses on nineteenth-century U.S. history, immigration history, African American history, and the Civil War. He is the author of *Abraham Lincoln: Amerikas großer Präsident—Eine Biographie*, München 2009. Among his other publications are *Nationale und*



*Internationale Perspektiven amerikanischer Geschichte: Eine Festschrift für Peter Schäfer*, Frankfurt am Main 2002 (editor); *Nationale Minoritäten im Krieg: "Feindliche Ausländer" und die amerikanische Heimatfront während des Ersten Weltkrieges*, Hamburg 2000; *On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861–1871*, New York 1997 (coedited with Stig Förster); *People in Transit: German Migrations in Comparative Perspective, 1820–1930*, New York 1995 (coedited with Dirk Hoerder). He is currently working on a project analyzing the shifting collective memory of Abraham Lincoln in the Civil Rights movement.