

Lincoln as Realist and Revolutionist

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IN AN ORATION on the career and proper fame of Abraham Lincoln, delivered on 14 April 1876 at the unveiling of the Freedmen's Monument in Washington, DC, Frederick Douglass offered this summing-up:

His great mission was to accomplish two things: first, to save his country from dismemberment and ruin; and, second, to free his country from the great crime of slavery. To do one or the other, or both, he must have the earnest sympathy and the powerful cooperation of his loyal fellow-countrymen. . . . Viewed 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.

Of all the reports by contemporary witnesses, these words offer the most balanced judgment of Lincoln's motives and predicament; and the pages that follow will interpret some of the evidence that supports Douglass's view. The particulars are chosen because they lie on the path that leads from 16 October 1854 to 1 January 1863. The first of these dates marks the moment when, as Lincoln would later say, the repeal of the Missouri Compromise roused him from a prospering legal practice to return to politics. The second date marks the beginning of the enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation.

The quantity of the evidence showing the steadiness of his commitment against slavery is weightier than is now commonly understood, and more conclusive than is generally conceded in recent scholarship on emancipation and the Civil War. But it is not only quantity that matters. We know a good deal about Lincoln's habits of thought and his political calculations, from reports by persons who had a clear enough view to be relied on; and we can make inferences from the circumstantial evidence, tactical evasions or strategic

silences, and avowals that initially sound ambiguous but are pulled into sharper focus the better one comes to know the mind of Lincoln.

Why draw attention again to this evidence today? None of it is new. And yet I think the reminder is necessary. There has been an unmistakable falling away from the view that prevailed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, according to which Lincoln was the most radical and determined of presidents. Both the scholarly consensus and the informed popular imagination now tend to regard him as a mostly moderate and prudential leader who used expedient methods in his attempt to hold the North and South together. In the middle of the war and under exigent pressure—so it is argued—he abolished slavery from expedient motives. There are important dissenters from this view, including the most widely respected historian of the Civil War, James M. McPherson, and, among Lincoln's recent biographers, Eric Foner and Allen Guelzo; but clever people who pride themselves on their "realism" or (a word for the same thing in politics) their "pragmatism" have warmed to the idea that Lincoln was a moderate, a realist, an effective manager of crosscurrents who entered the Civil War reluctantly, arrived at emancipation late, and held a limited hope for its efficacy as a device to end the war.

I would exempt from the strictures that follow John Burt's subtle and provocative study *Lincoln's Tragic Pragmatism*, where the word *pragmatism* is taken chiefly to imply a political resourcefulness informed by historical knowledge. Rather, the most considerable support for this interpretation has come from the writings of David Herbert Donald. A Whig in his earlier years, Lincoln, as Donald reads him, remained a Whig at heart long after the dissolution of the party in 1856–57. And a Whig of that time would be bound by an overriding concern with industrial advance and internal improvements—preferences not necessarily hostile to slavery in principle—and would be committed above all to the preservation of the Union: a broad and ecumenical loyalty, in comparison to which abolitionism could seem a ponderous distraction promoted by zealots. This interpretation was carried over by Donald from a book of essays, *Lincoln Reconsidered* (1956), to his full-length biography *Lincoln* (1995). It is

agreed by commentators of this school that Lincoln was never an idealist and that he rightly kept his distance from the abolitionists. They have two favorite texts, which I will be exploring in some detail, but their essence can be conveyed briefly. The first comes from the letter to Horace Greeley of 22 August 1862, in which, in answer to some pointed interrogatories, Lincoln wrote: “My paramount object in this struggle *is* to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that.” On the face of it, those sentences defend alike the abolition and the perpetuation of slavery as purely instrumental courses of action to achieve a nonmoral end, namely the preservation of the Union. The other leading exhibit for the moderate school, Lincoln’s letter to Albert G. Hodges of 4 April 1864, shows him apparently resigned to passive cooperation with the impersonal forces driving the war: “I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.”

Now, if the sentences I have quoted from those two letters meant what they seem to say, it would hardly be worth arguing, as I mean to do, that Lincoln began as a realist but ended as a revolutionist. But the truth is that as early as 1854, Lincoln saw distinctly that the abridgment of general freedom required by the slave system—abridgment of the freedom of white as well as black laborers—was an impediment to the realization of the political rights promised by the Declaration of Independence. He also recognized that the unyielding temper of the slaveholding interest might require a war in order to achieve abolition; and in the mid-1850s, he resolved to test the alternative of accommodation or war by contributing to shape a Republican platform centered on a principle: *no extension of slavery*. He employed the medium of a party and a party platform, then, but he suspected all along that a second American revolution might be necessary to vindicate the premises of the first.

The reputation of Lincoln as an espouser of moderation in politics can be traced to the emphasis of his earliest speeches. His 1842 Address to the Temperance Society of Springfield, for example, praised the utility of a temperate approach to persuasion by teetotalers who aim to convert ordinary drinkers to their cause:

When the conduct of men is designed to be influenced, *persuasion*, kind, unassuming persuasion, should ever be adopted. It is an old and a true maxim, that “a drop of honey catches more flies than a gallon of gall.” So with men. If you would win a man to your cause, *first* convince him that you are his sincere friend.

One finds a similar ameliorative insistence in the Lyceum address of 27 January 1838, which deals with the perpetuation of American political institutions. The habit of abiding by the law, along with a conscious commitment to maintain the habit, emerges there as the central requirement for the avoidance of mob rule which could usher in a national demagogue. Lincoln in that early address, of course, does acknowledge that bad laws exist; and the means for changing them must always be available in a government worthy of our respect; but so long as the bad law is in force, no citizen ought to indulge in a single deviation from it. This will be the basis of what he here calls the American “political religion”; obedience to existing laws becomes a compulsory expression of piety toward the constitutional founding fathers:

Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well wisher to his posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others. As the patriots of seventy-six did to the support of the Declaration of Independence, so to the support of the Constitution and Laws, let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor;—let every man remember that to violate the law, is to trample on the blood of his father, and to tear the character of his own, and his children’s liberty. Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap—let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; let it

be written in Primers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;—let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice.

The imperative of showing a decent respect to all law-abiding persons, so long as they do not seek the *extension* of slavery, appears again in a passage that temporarily reverses the rhetorical forward motion of Lincoln's Speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The people of the South, he says,

are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist amongst them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us, we should not instantly give it up. This I believe of the masses north and south. Doubtless there are individuals, on both sides, who would not hold slaves under any circumstances; and others who would gladly introduce slavery anew, if it were out of existence. We know that some southern men do free their slaves, go north, and become tip-top abolitionists; while some northern ones go south, and become most cruel slave-masters.

There is something emollient in this stance of sociological impartiality on a question of moral principle which of all others ought to rule out a show of evenhanded sympathy. But Lincoln's apparent equivocation follows from his belief that vicious habits, inborn in the small proportion of human beings who are outlaws in spirit, can be purged among the rest if only we use a drop of honey rather than a gallon of gall. But then, rather surprisingly, Lincoln in the Kansas-Nebraska speech goes a step further toward concession: "Much as I hate slavery, I would consent to the extension of it rather than see the Union dissolved, just as I would consent to any GREAT evil, to avoid a GREATER one." There speaks the Lincoln prized by the realists; but the truth is that he seldom spoke like this. The promise offered in this egregious sentence is one that he never kept, and his stature would differ little from that of Stephen Douglas if he had turned such passing moments of concession into policy.

The practical directive of the Kansas-Nebraska speech, however, picks up the same conciliatory shading, and to that extent it departs

from the moral condemnation of slavery and the protest against the greed of the Nebraska men that drew Lincoln back to politics. In a trimming passage near the end, he seems bent on fashioning a national consensus out of materials he has already shown to be unharmonizing:

Stand WITH the abolitionist in restoring the Missouri Compromise; and stand AGAINST him when he attempts to repeal the fugitive slave law. In the latter case you stand with the southern disunionist. What of that? you are still right. In both cases you are right. In both cases you oppose the dangerous extremes. In both you stand on middle ground and hold the ship level and steady. In both you are national and nothing less than national. This is good old Whig ground.

With the return to old Whig ground, we seem to see once more a confirmation of the image of Lincoln the moderate, the politician of “nothing less than national” interest.

The Kansas-Nebraska speech, as a whole, is argued in convincing detail, with tight connections among its complex parts and a powerful insight informing its excursus on self-government; but Lincoln’s Speech on the Mexican War, six years earlier, had been far less tactical when it declared to a candid public the full scope of the dangers he believed the war had opened. By contrast, I do not see how the Kansas-Nebraska speech can withstand the reproach of Thoreau’s warning in “Civil Disobedience”:

If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth—certainly the machine will wear out. If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine.

When Lincoln delivered the Kansas-Nebraska speech, he was emerging from a half-decade of legal practice during which he could well have supposed the necessary friction of the machine of government

was a thing outside his reach. Maybe it had a secret spring or pulley which would remedy the evil of slavery without the greater evil (if it is greater) of war. But as Lincoln went forward to engage in a national debate on national questions—as a state leader in the Republican Party, a candidate for the senate in 1858, a candidate for president in 1860, and the nation’s leader in a civil war precipitated by slavery—he came to see his own life as part of the counter-friction to stop the machine.

Before we notice the change of temper in Lincoln in the years 1857 and 1858, a danger of anachronism ought to be addressed. Prompted by his words and by the way that popular history lends itself to diagrams, we might suppose that “the abolitionist” and “the southern disunionist” represent the extremes of the period. Someone who emphasized the errors of both as Lincoln did might therefore appear to be a kind of centrist. But this picture is historically false. The commonest northern attitude toward slavery was to treat it as an awkward subject, best avoided in conversation and, in politics, best approached by delicate legalisms and a polite deference to developments in the future. Nineteenth-century American society was deeply racist—this was one reason why the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments granted freedmen nothing beyond formal equality before the law—and when Lincoln in the Kansas-Nebraska speech said that he hated slavery and thought the long process of abolition ought to begin, he was adopting a stance that differed from the abolitionists only in point of urgency. A tiny minority in the north took seriously the principle by which the end of slavery should properly lead to political equality between the races. It was a fortunate accident—by no means predictable from the most widely accepted thoughts and feelings of the time—that one of their number became president.

Lincoln’s Speech on the Dred Scott Decision of 26 June 1857 is the turning point. It is his angriest speech, and yet, as one notices on a second or third reading, the anger is only partly on behalf of slaves forcibly returned to slavery. What troubled Lincoln as much was the distortion of constitutional law and history that showed so

conspicuously in Chief Justice Taney's opinion. For Taney asserted that it had been the intention of the American founders to perpetuate the institution of slavery, to defend the right of slaveholders to hunt down and reclaim their human property, and to prevent Negroes from ever being granted the rights of citizenship. The opinion aimed, in short, to sever any possible connection between the survival of American democracy and the hope of liberty for "all people of all colors everywhere." In view of the intended influence of this opinion, as Lincoln saw it, Stephen Douglas's endorsement of the Dred Scott decision as a crucial help in resolving the sectional conflict amounted to a second act of catastrophic opportunism—a fitting sequel to Douglas's earlier push for the repeal of the Missouri Compromise.

From his speech on Dred Scott of mid-1857 to his 1858 senate campaign against Douglas to his final formulation of the Republican platform on slavery at Cooper Union on 27 February 1860, Lincoln was stirred to continuous denunciation of the decision. Still, there are indications of a readiness for compromise at two significant later moments. In the closing paragraph of the First Inaugural, he would address the people of the South beseechingly: "We are not enemies, but friends. . . . Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection." And again, in his Address on Colonization to a Committee of Colored Men, on 14 August 1862, when he had already pretty well decided to issue the preliminary emancipation proclamation, Lincoln took extraordinary pains to guard his flank. He conveyed a peculiarly dry sentiment of regret to the Negro delegation he had invited to the White House, saying that the war would never have happened but for the presence of Negroes in the United States. In the same meeting, he disclaimed any hope that white and black people could live together in a condition of social equality.

Here is a moment when the warmest partisan of Lincoln must feel admiration sinking into something smaller; for here, he almost retracts everything he has previously said about the "monstrous injustice of slavery itself." It is as if the slaves themselves were to blame for slavery; as if the peace of the Union were the unwitting casualty of their missteps. It seems an interlude of sickly prudence, or perhaps of

panic, very uncharacteristic of Lincoln, though not unknown to persons on the verge of declaring a momentous commitment they feel they might somehow have escaped from. Frederick Douglass, in the address I began by quoting, singled out for rebuke this temporary indication of backsliding. The faith of black people in Lincoln's goodwill and strength of purpose, said Douglass, was "strained and taxed to the uttermost. . .when he strangely told us that we were the cause of the war." What is worse, the admonishment was delivered in the course of a plea for emigration as the happiest likely result of the war for black Americans. Lincoln had never made this suggestion before, and he would not do so again. It is a puzzle and can be explained only as an aberration, or a misjudged political calculation delivered *in extremis*. Why should he have spoken loudest for colonization when emancipation was lodged in his mind as an almost settled fact?



Go back, however, and try to make out that Lincoln was always a prudential moderate—preference for colonization being a test of that political character—and you discover a frequent strident overtone that is by no means congenial to the avoidance of conflict. In the Kansas-Nebraska speech, for example, he spoke of the "*declared* indifference" but what he believed to be "the covert and *real* zeal for the spread of slavery" that had produced the opening of Kansas and Nebraska to slaveholders. In the same speech of 1854, he laid down as a moral law that allowed no exceptions, "Slavery is founded in the selfishness of man's nature—opposition to it, in his love of justice. These principles are in eternal antagonism; and when brought into collision, as slavery extension brings them, shocks, and throes, and convulsions must ceaselessly follow."

Less than a year after he uttered those words, Lincoln wrote a private letter to Joshua Speed, dated 24 August 1855, which seems to me far and away the most revealing such document that has survived. Speed and Lincoln were close friends, going back to their twenties, and had roomed together in an apartment above Speed's dry goods store. The scion of a slaveholding family in Kentucky, Speed, in a

letter to Lincoln, had questioned the motives of antislavery agitators. Lincoln's reply contains one of his few unguarded statements on the subject; indeed, his career affords no evidence of another occasion when he felt impelled to go to this length. He did it, we have to assume, because he was addressing a trusted friend about a difference between them that cut deep:

In 1841 you and I had together a tedious low-water trip, on a Steam Boat from Louisville to St. Louis. You may remember, as I well do, that from Louisville to the mouth of the Ohio, there were, on board, ten or a dozen slaves, shackled together with irons. That sight was a continued torment to me; and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio, or any other slave-border. It is hardly fair for you to assume, that I have no interest in a thing which has, and continually exercises, the power of making me miserable. You ought rather to appreciate how much the great body of the Northern people do crucify their feelings, in order to maintain their loyalty to the Constitution and the Union.

I do oppose the extension of slavery, because my judgment and feelings so prompt me; and I am under no obligation to the contrary. If for this you and I must differ, differ we must.

The letter to Speed goes on to speak of the illegitimacy of the political forces that combined to repeal the Missouri Compromise by a late supplement to the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This may already have seemed to Lincoln part of a national effort to relegitimate slavery itself:

In your assumption that there may be a *fair* decision of the slavery question in Kansas, I plainly see you and I would differ about the Nebraska-law. I look upon that enactment not as a *law*, but as *violence* from the beginning. It was conceived in violence, passed in violence, is maintained in violence, and is being executed in violence. I say it was *conceived* in violence, because the destruction of the Missouri Compromise, under the circumstances, was nothing less than violence. It was *passed* in violence, because it could not have passed at all but for the votes of many members in violent disregard of the known will of their constituents. It is *maintained* in violence because the elections since, clearly demand its repeal, and this demand is openly disregarded.

This preponderance of violent means for attaining the national extension of slavery would enter Lincoln's thoughts on slavery again in the Second Inaugural: "Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would *make* war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would *accept* war rather than let it perish." The violence that Lincoln deprecated in his letter to Speed was a violence preparatory to war, and distinguishable from war only in degree.

Of course, defenders of the slaveholding interest could reply that this was a necessary violence, carried out to enforce existing laws such as the Fugitive Slave Law. And had not Lincoln himself affirmed that bad laws must be obeyed? The same apologists might go on to observe that all resistance to slavery was violence against the property rights of slaveholders. The counterargument available to someone of Lincoln's views was that the original violence came not from resistance to slavery but from slavery itself. This was an argument—one can say it on the strength of his letter to Speed—which Lincoln must have believed since the early 1840s; but he would never invoke it publicly until the Second Inaugural. Turn once more to the Dred Scott decision, but informed now by a previous understanding of Lincoln's tacit and privately avowed judgment on the violence of slavery, and you can see how the sweep of Taney's opinion must have hardened Lincoln's resolve not to wait for another such retrograde step.



No more waiting and (an almost certain corollary) no more compromises. This double injunction would make for the central emphasis of the House Divided speech of 16 June 1858. Among the peculiar features of this utterance are its blend of first-person assertion and impersonal analysis. You hear the double force of the attack in the march of propositional sentences, a paragraph to each sentence, with which Lincoln delivers his opening challenge:

If we could first know *where* we are, and *whither* we are tending, we could then better know *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*.

Have we no *tendency* to the latter condition?

As he speaks these words, Lincoln recognizes that a civil war fought on the issue of slavery has become a distinct possibility; and he presses his listeners to recognize that there is a thing that could happen to the Union that would be even worse than war.

The slaveholding South heard in the sequence and pressure of his statements an incendiary provocation. Did they hear him wrong? Or is it modern historians who are more obtuse when they see the House Divided speech, delivered at the Republican Party Convention in Springfield, as a mere convention speech summoning a new political association to obey the imperative of party unity? Stephen Douglas held a direr view of Lincoln’s intentions; and throughout their early debates, to the best of his ability, he made their contest a referendum on the peril of Lincoln’s radicalism, with the House Divided speech as his prime exhibit. If you had to supply a descriptive subtitle for the early debates, it would surely be “The House Divided Speech Under Siege.” Lincoln’s best energies of rebuttal go toward showing that his argument is more carefully worked out and supported by sounder evidence than Douglas acknowledges.

The largest provocation of the speech, and the point Douglas worked hardest to get Lincoln to retract, was the charge that in

preparing the public mind for the Dred Scott decision and then endorsing the decision itself, Douglas had been a participant in a conspiracy to nationalize slavery. Lincoln thought he could perceive a coherent design in four recent events taken together: first, the promise by the outgoing president, Franklin Pierce, that a decision was pending from the Supreme Court that would prove a settler of the sectional troubles; second, the statement by the incoming president, James Buchanan, that all Americans ought to respect and abide by the authority of that decision, whatever it turned out to be; third, the theoretical comprehensiveness and practical scope of Taney's reading of slavery as a permanent commitment of the founders; and fourth, Douglas's endorsement of the decision.

Here is the way that Lincoln, in the House Divided speech, traced the connection among events which to the innocent eye might look discrete from each other and unconnected:

Why was the amendment, expressly declaring the right of the people to exclude slavery, voted down? Plainly enough *now*, the adoption of it would have spoiled the niche for the Dred Scott decision.

Why was the court decision held up? Why even a Senator's individual opinion withheld, till *after* the presidential election? Plainly enough *now*, the speaking out *then* would have damaged the "*perfectly free*" argument upon which the election was to be carried.

Why the *outgoing* President's felicitation on the indorsement? Why the delay of argument? Why the incoming President's *advance* exhortation in favor of the decision?

These things *look* like the cautious *patting* and *petting* a spirited horse, preparatory to mounting him, when it is dreaded that he may give the rider a fall.

And why the hasty after indorsements of the decision by the President and others?

We can not absolutely *know* that all these exact adaptations are the result of preconcert. But when we see a lot of framed timbers, different portions of which we know have been gotten out at different times and places and by different workmen—Stephen,

Franklin, Roger, and James, for instance—and when we see these timbers joined together, and see they exactly make the frame of a house or a mill, all the tenons and mortices exactly fitting, and all the lengths and proportions of the different pieces exactly adapted to their respective places, and not a piece too many or too few—not omitting even scaffolding—or, if a single piece be lacking, we can see the place in the frame exactly fitted and prepared to yet bring such piece in—in *such* a case, we find it impossible not to believe that Stephen and Franklin and Roger and James all understood one another from the beginning, and all worked upon a common *plan* or *draft* drawn up before the first lick was struck.

This narrative montage of circumstantial evidence, and the inference Lincoln draws concerning the aligned motives and the cooperative purpose of the four principals, together make one of the most forcible acts of persuasion in all his speeches and writings.

The reflex of a well-trained American academic or journalist today is to reject any assumption of conspiracy as a deliberate exaggeration, an aberrant appeal by a sane politician to cranks and hotheads in the audience. But we in America suffer from a self-induced innocence about the meaning of conspiracy. Lincoln was not deploying the idea here and repeating it in the debates against Douglas with a view to indict on criminal charges the men whom he accused. A form of political collaboration, however, which rightly warrants the name of conspiracy, does occur whenever powerful political actors work on tacit motives that they can discern in one another, while publicly avowing motives of an altogether different character. “In the setting of 1858,” wrote Lincoln’s canniest interpreter, Don Fehrenbacher, in *Prelude to Greatness*,

the charge [of a conspiracy to nationalize slavery] carried conviction. . . . Lincoln, to be sure, was exercising the politician’s privilege of overstating his case. In later speeches he admitted that the existence of a plot could only be inferred, and he conceded that Douglas might have been playing the role of dupe instead of conspirator. But the effects were what mattered, he argued,

not the motives. A trend toward the nationalization of slavery had become manifest; it was more than mere accident; and the advocates of popular sovereignty, whether intentionally or not, were contributing to it.

This seems the most accurate overall judgment we are likely to get. Lincoln, in truth, feared the opening of a legal path for the nationalization of slavery; and in his view, this was not merely a political design with limited political consequences. It would bring a debasement of the manners and a corruption of the moral character of the American people.

Nine months after the House Divided speech, he said as much in a speech in Chicago, delivered on 1 March 1859. “The Republican principle” he now identifies with “the profound central truth that slavery is wrong and ought to be dealt with as a wrong.” This understanding, he adds, “cannot advance at all upon Judge Douglas’s ground—that there is a portion of the country in which slavery must always exist; that he does not care whether it is voted up or voted down, as it is simply a question of dollars and cents.” Accordingly, when faced by any new compromise, “the proposition now in our minds that this thing is wrong being once driven out and surrendered, then the institution of slavery necessarily becomes national.” So the power of disproportionate wealth, gotten from property in persons, will drive out the law of self-government, which Lincoln in 1854 had called “the sheet anchor of American republicanism.” Self-government springs from a conviction that no man has the right to govern another without his consent. Therefore, the Negro being a man and all men being created equal, the Negro has a right to govern himself, and the white man has no right by virtue of race or privilege to govern anyone other than himself.

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Hearing Lincoln as the South heard him, one might say that the Civil War followed from an accurate reading of the House Divided speech. Similarly, the Proclamation of Emancipation was a predictable inference from the diagnosis in that speech of the likely causes

of civil war. Well, but suppose we admit that the South heard Lincoln right. Did a great many in the North hear him wrong when they fought a war, ostensibly to preserve the Union, which was really a war to eradicate slavery? I do not think so. Lincoln all along invited Republicans and their political allies to treat slaveholding as an instance of a broader political evil which they had plenty of practice in repudiating—namely despotism. His treatment of slavery before 1863 emerges, in this light, not as a tactical evasion of a comprehensive principle, but rather as the present illustration of an immemorial wrong. The right course of action was self-evident. As for his call in 1854 for patience and trust in the ultimate extinction of the wrong, by 1858 it had given way to the call for preparation in the face of an imminent threat.

Lincoln's rallying cry against despotism comes out strongest between the second and third debates with Douglas, in a speech given in Edwardsville on 11 September 1858. He speaks there, in an arresting phrase, of "the logic of history":

Now, when. . . you have succeeded in dehumanizing the negro; when you have put him down, and made it forever impossible for him to be but as the beasts of the field; when you have extinguished his soul, and placed him where the ray of hope is blown out in darkness like that which broods over the spirits of the damned; are you quite sure the demon which you have roused will not turn and rend you? What constitutes the bulwark of our own liberty and independence? It is not our frowning battlements, our bristling sea coasts, the guns of our war steamers, or the strength of our gallant and disciplined army. These are not our reliance against a resumption of tyranny in our fair land. . . . Our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in our bosoms. . . . Destroy this spirit, and you have planted the seeds of despotism around your own doors. Familiarize yourselves with the chains of bondage, and you are preparing your own limbs to wear them. Accustomed to trample on the rights of those around you, you have lost the genius of your own independence.

The mention of the means of enslavement as a force for "dehumanization" is remarkable—an early use of a word not yet naturalized in

English, and it indicates Lincoln's belief in a nonracial standard of human dignity.

The passage at the end of the Edwardsville speech also confirms the general argument against despotism by an echo of a famous defense of political resistance. Edmund Burke, in his 1775 Speech on Conciliation with America, had spoken of slavery as a blot on the constitution of Britain:

Slavery [the American colonists] can have any where. It is a weed that grows in every soil. They may have it from Spain, they may have it from Prussia. But until you become lost to all feeling of your true interest and your natural dignity, freedom, they can have from none but you. . . . Do not entertain so weak an imagination, as that your registers and your bonds, your affidavits and your sufferances, your cockets and your clearances, are what form the great securities of your commerce. Do not dream that your letters of office, and your instructions, and your suspending clauses, are the things that hold together the great contexture of this mysterious whole.

Lincoln's disparagement of the outsize respect paid to "our frowning battlements, our bristling sea coasts," and "our gallant and disciplined army," as sufficient guardians of liberty, remembers Burke's warning against trusting merely "your sufferances, your cockets and your clearances." In the absence of adherence to the spirit of the Constitution, the three branches of government will be reduced to cavalry, artillery, and infantry. This thought was still at the front of his mind when he wrote a neutral-sounding letter to Horace Greeley on 22 August 1862.

Greeley, in an editorial in the *New-York Tribune*, had accused Lincoln of using too light a hand against slavery and so betraying the cause of the Union. The key sentence of Lincoln's reply was (to repeat): "If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that." Differently tuned ears could interpret these words in different ways. As Eric Foner has pointed out, a letter from Wendell Phillips to a fellow abolitionist, the managing editor of the *New-York*

Tribune, Sydney Howard Gay, referred to Lincoln's formulation of apparent moral indifference as "the most disgraceful document that ever came from the head of a free people"; but Gay, for his part, read the letter as a coded hint that complete destruction of the slave system was now being contemplated. Would Lincoln have announced so drastic a possibility—"if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves"—unless he meant to carry it out?

A frank explanation of the necessary connection between the freeing of slaves and the entry of former slaves into the rights of citizenship was saved by Lincoln to be read out by the special messenger for the president in Congress, in his second annual message, on 1 December 1862. These words were spoken to Congress just seventy days after the preliminary emancipation announcement, and thirty days before its rejection by the seceded states would assure the passage of emancipation into law.

The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthral ourselves, and then we shall save our country.

Fellow-citizens, *we* cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration, will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance, or insignificance, can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. We *say* we are for the Union. The world will not forget that we say this. We know how to save the Union. The world knows we do know how to save it. We—even *we here*—hold the power, and bear the responsibility. In *giving* freedom to the *slave*, we *assure* freedom to the *free*—honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best, hope of earth. Other means may succeed; this could not fail. The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just—a way which, if followed, the world will forever applaud, and God must forever bless.

A trace of tactical caution is still present. The "occasion," after all, is a civil war and it is plain enough that people fighting a war must detach themselves from the habits of action that are appropriate in times

of peace. But the unusual word “disenthral,” as Lincoln employs it, has several coalescing meanings; rarely has a single word carried more weight, metaphorical and literal, psychological and moral at once. Actual chains are being broken and their removal will soon be a matter of law. Illusions of mastery and inborn privilege, the mental correlative of those chains, must now also be shed. One notices, too, in these words, a concern wholly characteristic of Lincoln: the relationship between what we hear ourselves say, what we mean, and what we end up doing. This helps to explain the significance, to him, of the words of the proclamation itself—not only the legal language that Richard Hofstadter deplored as having no more charm than “a bill of lading” but the binding language that was legal and something more. I have in mind the words “then, thenceforward, and forever free.” Lincoln said of his signing of the proclamation: “I never, in my life, felt more certain that I was doing right, than I do in signing this paper.”



How did Lincoln manage to square the radicalism of emancipation with his constant appeal to the different-sounding aim of merely acting to preserve the Union? The two, I believe, were connected for him by his definition of Union. This he took to be more than a name for an artificial geographical and political entity; it was also a quasi-moral principle centered on ideals of unity and integrity. The nation rules itself for the same reason that one person rules over one: no more than one can govern one, and one cannot govern more than one. To think otherwise would be to misunderstand the meaning of Union. It was just because a misunderstanding had been allowed to prevail that the nation now required “a new birth of freedom.” This special sense of Union was not hidden or esoteric, but nor was it articulated by a clear paraphrase, or spelled out in a coherent digest by Lincoln, in any single place. The closest he came was a passage in his special message to Congress on 4 July 1861—again, interestingly, a speech read out by a messenger and not spoken in his own voice. He said there that the aim of the Union was “to elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial weights from all shoulders—to clear the paths

of laudable pursuit for all—to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life.” Here again, as with the complex use of “disenthral,” one cannot help remarking how slavery is implicated in the words. The artificial weights are literal weights for some, and the fetters have been shackles. The repetition of the word “all,” three times in four clauses, shows how far the idea of emancipation was already present in Lincoln’s understanding of the meaning of Union.

Many local details were included in the order of emancipation on 1 January 1863, and it is natural for lawyers, academicians, and temperate readers to detect here a symptom of evasion and a further compromise. Why were the border states allowed to keep their slaves? What could be the meaning of emancipating slaves only in those parts of the Union that the Union army had not yet reached so as to enforce the order? But that was not how Frederick Douglass read the Emancipation Proclamation:

Can any colored man, or any white man friendly to the freedom of all men, ever forget the night which followed the first day of January, 1863, when the world was to see if Abraham Lincoln would prove to be as good as his word? I shall never forget that memorable night, when in a distant city I waited and watched at a public meeting, with three thousand others not less anxious than myself, for the word of deliverance. . . . Nor shall I ever forget the outburst of joy and thanksgiving that rent the air when the lightning brought to us the emancipation proclamation. In that happy hour we forgot all delay, and forgot all tardiness.

All the while, the Union army was moving south, liberating slaves as it went. They were not minutely attentive to the language of exceptions in the document, nor were they indifferent to the “word of deliverance”—often, they emancipated themselves ahead of the army and walked to their freedom behind Union lines. In fact, the proclamation went beyond its own letter and, in one stroke, illegitimated slavery forever. In doing so, it bore out the expectations planted by the House Divided speech. The Union, in order to avoid the fate of becoming “all slave” and enthraling itself to the idea as well as the practice of despotism, must become all free.

Let us return briefly to the second touchstone of the “pragmatic” interpreters of Lincoln, his apparent renunciation of credit and responsibility for the radicalism of his culminating stance of abolition. He wrote in his letter to Albert G. Hodges of 4 April 1864: “I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.” Among the contributing events that influenced Lincoln to issue the proclamation, Foner lists the need for more soldiers of any race to fight the war; the continued refusal by the border states to consent to Lincoln’s plan of gradual emancipation; the pressure by congressional radicals for such a proclamation; actions by slaves themselves who threw over the authority of masters and freed themselves wherever the Union army was present to offer protection; and finally the decision, lately acknowledged by Lincoln, to wage war against the society of the South and not only against its armed forces. When we hear him claim not to have controlled events—when we hear him confess that events controlled him—we ought perhaps to shift our usual focus from the word *control* and turn rather to the words *claim* and *confess*. Lincoln was admitting a sense of impotent regret at not having introduced emancipation sooner; and he was refusing to claim personal credit for an action whose timing, to a great extent, had been determined by events. But the responsibility was his—the responsibility of a leader for a decisive act—and it was far from his intention to deny this. In the Second Inaugural, he would speak of “American Slavery” as a stain on democracy, a national crime for which the only expiation might be collective sacrifice. The commitment that led him to order the freeing of the slaves remains utterly singular in the annals of nonmiraculous history.