

## Slavery, Race and Conquest in the Tropics : Lincoln, Douglas, and the Future of Latin America

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Most canonical interpretations of the American Civil War revolve around some facet of the great national contest over the status and future of slavery in the western territories. While the territorial question exhibited highly intertwined political, moral, and economic dimensions its most immediate implication appeared in its potential to turn the delicate balance between slave and free states in the Senate. A settlement that blocked slavery's expansion also presented a means of gradual institutional curtailment of a great moral blight, offering practical appeal to moderate antislavery voices who eschewed the radicalism of immediate abolition. In somewhat more abstract theorizing, the territories were also seen as a means of depriving the slave economy of its own internal means of replication and expansion, thus setting it on a course to containment and – so the argument went – eventual extinction.

While the intricacies of each variant of the territorial question are both deep and diverse, they tend to approach the ensuing war as a result of a national political breakdown on the dispensation of the western lands in the legal wake of the *Dred Scott* decision and the tumultuous statehood battle for Kansas. Spurred by a fracture in the Democratic Party and the election of a Republican president who staked a moderate but firm anti-slavery platform on halting its expansion into the territories, the southern states broke the national impasse by seceding and triggering the war.

There is much to attest to the prominence of the territorial question in the Civil War literature and there is little doubt as to the centrality of its issues in the late antebellum political discussion around slavery. Still, as an explanatory mechanism for the outbreak of the war it suffers from an intuitive defect. Secession when taken alone, and particularly that of the original seven 'deep south' states before the commencement of hostilities at Fort Sumter, entailed an implicit forfeiture of the western territories. Notwithstanding a handful of warring westward incursions during their brief-lived existence and perhaps aware of their own political incapacitation after the 1860 election, the Confederates in their hasty exit had also consciously weakened their own standing claims to a central object of the prior decade's agitation. Surely something more than the dispensation of the territories shaped in their political calculus around slavery's future.

In *Slavery, Race, and Conquest in the Tropics*, Robert May does not set out to challenge the territorial narrative of the war so much as to suggest a crucial oversight in its conventional telling. ‘[T]his narrative’, he notes, ‘obscures how much Caribbean issues were woven into the electioneering of 1858-60’ (p. 155). As he proceeds to document in this relatively slim yet detail-packed discussion, the road to secession can only be fully grasped by internationalizing the southern objectives of slave expansionism into the American tropics and better integrating the politics of a number of southward territorial ventures in the 1850s into a broader international understanding of the outbreak of the war.

Variations on this insight have been with us for many years. Indeed May builds upon a longstanding historical interest in the tropical diplomacy of the late antebellum, as well as a growing attentiveness to southern ambitions to build the so-called ‘Golden Circle’ of slavery from adjacent tropical possessions. Yet May’s contribution is much more than a fleshed out synthesis of these events – it is a re-contextualization of the coming of the Civil War to account for its participants’ own hemispheric cognizance and its meaning to the future of slavery.

Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas assume their familiar roles as foils in May’s account, though with an uncommon twist. Rather than reiterating the intricacies of their well-plowed differences over the Kansas-Nebraska Act, May turns explicitly outward in search of their respective visions for the United States in the American tropics. In some respects, Douglas makes for the more familiar figure of the two and May navigates through the intricacies of the Little Giant’s longstanding territorial interest in Cuba, his cautious nods to the filibustering antics of William Walker, and his attempted uses of tropical expansion to piece a Democratic coalition back together following his own defection from the southerners during the Lecompton debate. He resituates the question of tropical expansion in the 1860 election and extends it through the futile compromise schemes of the Secession Winter Congress, particularly as he develops the understudied implications of the Crittenden proposal’s provisions to sustain slavery in territory ‘hereafter acquired’ by the United States.

Thus we find our answer to the secessionist territorial conundrum. Facing resistance to a westward push for the institution and a northern unwillingness to entertain territorial expansion to maintain a slave-state balance, the Confederates cast their lot with an uncertain and perhaps quixotic expansion abroad, but also one premised in a familiar and favored groundwork of the prior decade that saw Cuba and Central America as natural extension points for the plantation economy. These southward pro-slavery objectives had provided a common ground for political coalition behind Douglas’ political maneuvering to acquire Cuba and expand American interests in the region as an intended buffer to Britain’s isthmian claims and Caribbean holdings. Yet they were ironically the unionist Douglas’ undoing as he struggled to navigate the impetuous Walker’s agitation and – later – a workable compromise with the secessionists, their territorial pressures having the practical effect of subordinating his hallmark cause of popular sovereignty to pro-slavery legislative predetermination.

Yet this work’s most significant contribution may derive from the process of internationalizing Lincoln, and specifically the Lincoln of the 1850s. Drawing upon Henry Clay’s attempted navigation through the annexation of Texas and the Mexican War, Lincoln actually developed an early interest in the international implications of territorial expansion, albeit one tied mostly to its propensity to irritate and instigate foreign powers by way of encroachment. The expansion of slavery hovered in the background though, and with it Lincoln came to pair elements of his early territorial trepidation with what became a competing territorial vision. From the Mexican War through his election to the presidency, Lincoln came to identify slavery’s expansion as the logical consequence of the very same territorial overtures that facilitated Douglas’ manifest destiny-cloaked coalition, even as the latter clung to popular sovereignty as an operative principle for slavery’s fate in any newly acquired territory from the tropics. Any territorial acquisition would ‘exacerbate the slavery question’ (p. 150) as had the Mexican War’s settlement with the entrenchment of slavery there being but fait accompli of the acquisition.

The old Clay program of black colonization takes a central place in May's telling of Lincoln's policy toward the tropics, and with it his crafting of an alternative vision to his Illinois rival that stood distinctly opposed to slave expansionism despite raising its own set of moral complications. In taking colonization seriously, May breaks with several troubling features of Civil War era historiography. The sheer impracticality of mass resettlement has long discouraged a wide range of historians from approaching the movement as much more than an obscure and racially-tinged oddity. While a historical interest in colonization has grown in recent years, both its reputation and assessments of its motives diverge widely between a struggle to situate colonization within the spectrum of pro- and anti-slavery views and a condemnation of its more glaring racist attributes. May brings more clarity to this discussion by exploring a particular strain of colonization in its tropical context, drawn upon Henry Clay's commonly shared belief that its implicit gradualism and managed execution 'offered Americans the most promising route to ending their country's curse of human bondage' (p. 79). While Clay personally favored and advanced the American Colonization Society's (ACS) Liberian project, the Civil War era witnessed a surge of sometimes-competing colonization and emigration schemes in closer locales including Haiti, Central and South America, and the West Indian holdings of the European powers.

May takes great strides to recover the complicated distinctions of a colonizationist shift in the 1850s wherein its supporters loosened their historical linkage with Liberia for new prospective sites in the Caribbean and Latin America, including some that overlapped with emigrationist interests in the black community. The strategic implications of this shift stemmed not only from proximity and a reduction of travel costs and time to carry out a large scale colonization venture, but also emerging economic interests in the development of a permanent isthmian crossing, itself caught up in the political instability of Central America and the restrictive implications of the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty of 1850. Politically, colonization thus provided an important policy position for the antislavery but also racially conservative factions within the nascent Republican Party, as typified by the Blair family and Wisconsin Sen. James R. Doolittle, and a less defined emergent strain of Republican internationalism that promised to plant a different sort of American footprint on the American tropics.

Though touched upon in the formative work of scholars including Paul Scheips and Thomas Schoonover, the international implications of mid-century colonization have long fallen under the shadow of the uniquely prodigious biographical interest around Abraham Lincoln. The illiberality of colonization's underlying racial premises – usually built around a mixture of prejudice and 19th-century pseudo-scientific 'zone' arguments that asserted blacks were evolutionarily suited for the tropics – poses a distinct challenge for Lincoln biographers given the 16th president's wartime support for the policy. Lincoln's own distinctive spin on colonization merged Clay's old Whig formula of anti-slavery gradualism with a voluntary safety valve to provide African-Americans an exit to the anticipated racial oppression of a post-slavery south. Colonization nonetheless remains a controversial subject for Lincoln specialists, to such an extent that, until very recently and perhaps still, the modern scholarly consensus has dwelt more on exculpating Lincoln from his connection to this racially-charged policy than exploring its particulars let alone its larger place in Lincoln's foreign policy vision. The primary driving research questions of the past 50 years thus exhibit a fixation with whether and when Lincoln 'evolved' beyond colonization, or if indeed he ever truly believed in it despite his public advocacy, much to the neglect of the question of what colonization actually meant to Lincoln.

May carefully acknowledges the historiographical weight of the Lincoln discussion, noting that 'few aspects of [his] public life leave more unresolved questions' (p. 84). Yet he proceeds to approach Lincoln as a serious if nuanced colonizationist and turns his attention outward to the geopolitical meaning of this now-controversial program. May's Lincoln followed Clay's Liberian interests on anti-slavery grounds from the formative years of his political life, though he emerges as a relatively late convert to Latin American colonization – perhaps occurring sometime following the Blairs' conversion, though his early advocacy 'seems to have been oblivious' to this nearby alternative (p. 81).

It is worth noting at this point that Lincoln had started to question the ACS's Liberian program as early as

his famous Peoria speech of 1854 when he cautioned against the impossibility of its 'sudden execution' and the unpreparedness of the colony to receive a mass migration. By 1859 Lincoln exhibited serious doubts as to the financial practicality of African resettlement, telling an audience in Leavenworth, Kansas that '[a]ll the rest of your property would not pay for sending them to Liberia'. Yet these and other early hints of doubt actually bolster May's larger thesis: Lincoln's later wartime colonization activities are better understood through a broader hemispheric lens, and in this instance they were directly complimentary to his broader vision of an American presence at the isthmus, and more generally in the American tropics.

This much is readily apparent in Lincoln's colonization address of August 14, 1862 – a speech that is regularly pilloried and dismissed in the biographical for its retrograde racial arguments, but which merits closer examination for what it reveals about Lincoln's hemispheric outlook. For all its talk of separation, the speech also conveyed Lincoln's early plans to construct 'a great highway from the Atlantic or Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean' at the site of a proposed colony in modern day Panama – a vision of an American-led isthmian canal. The intended freedmen's colony would, in this vision, serve its own dual purpose of black uplift and securing an American foothold of a very different kind than that which Lincoln assailed in Douglas' expansion aims. Lincoln's undoing on this count would be the program's execution, which succumbed to internal political intrigue, diplomatic complications, and the disastrous failure of an 1863 colonization attempt on the Ile a Vache, Haiti.

The broadening of our scholarly horizon in examining Civil War era colonization need not occur at the expense of a focus upon its highly problematic racial premises. As May demonstrates, both may be addressed with due care. Thus we find a lesser-known story of Lincoln's strategic positioning in Latin America and the Caribbean as an alternative to the slavery-driven expansionism that the southerners saw for the same region, but without losing sight of the overt racism of the Blairs, the conflicted motives of the colonization movement, or Lincoln's own 'lagging behind more enlightened northern public opinion when it came to incorporating blacks within American society.' Lincoln nonetheless emerges not with the censure of racial bigotry attached to his name, but the complexity of a figure who essentially 'embraced colonization as an end run around the problem' (pp. 272–3) of domestic racial violence while also developing his cognizance of its diplomatic and strategic uses to buffer against competing regional interests, including those that supported slave expansionism. This is a deftly argued analysis, and the product may be the most effective holistic integration of Lincoln's policies in the American tropics with his anti-slavery legacy to date.

I will venture a small critique in that the book's use of a Lincoln-Douglas dichotomy imposes certain limitations on its scope of analysis. Douglas' early death in 1861 somewhat limits a further investigation of his multifaceted intellectual and political legacy during the war years – a subject that could be extended to both matters of northern wartime diplomacy and the Caribbeanizing fancies and fantasies of the Confederacy, many of them predicated on the same Democratic coalition causes to which Douglas lent his name in preceding decade. A more tangible continuity might also be developed around Lincoln's competing vision. Although by then an opponent of Lincoln's colonization schemes, William Seward aggressively pursued a strategy of Caribbean expansionism throughout the Johnson administration, albeit an expansionism no longer open to Lincoln's primary criticism, namely that it provided lifeblood for the slave system. Though ultimately defeated in his own time, Seward's two most notable efforts were actually the outgrowth of discussions that were initiated in the final months of Lincoln's life. The first was an unsuccessful canal treaty that Seward and Caleb Cushing negotiated with Colombia in 1867, itself built upon isthmian passage discussions undertaken at Lincoln's behest in the closing weeks of the Civil War. The second was a similarly failed attempt to purchase the island of St. Croix, which grew out of a conversation between Lincoln and Danish minister Waldemar von Raasloff at a White House reception on New Year's Day 1865. Colonization never again attained the public support that Lincoln provided it during his presidency, though this recent memory loomed heavily in the unsuccessful attempt of another of his successors, Ulysses S. Grant, to annex the Dominican Republic.

Yet these and other inquiries are subjects for further scholarly exploration, drawing upon the groundbreaking framework that Robert May has provided. This is a refreshing and engaging work that challenges a

previously static area of historical inquiry to take on both new evidence and a fuller contextual weighing of events beyond the war's battle lines and the nation's borders. It gives us a Civil War that was both the product of international affairs, and a shaping force on their subsequent course with no less moral gravity than the domestic struggle between slavery and freedom, for just as much was at stake in terms of the intended reaches of southward American expansion and influence.

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