Lincoln, Congress, and Emancipation

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Sometimes, when another work on the Civil War, slavery, and emancipation lands on one's desk, there is a natural tendency to wonder if we actually need it. What is left to say, the historian may ask, about Lincoln, Congress, and emancipation? And then a tragedy like Charlottesville in August 2017 occurs. One watches, with mounting disbelief and horror, the waving of flags and the chanting of slogans drawn from another nationalist nightmare. And one realises that, for the United States, possibly (or, worse still, possibly not) now at the nadir of its admittedly bumpy but nevertheless determined national trajectory toward liberty, equality and inclusiveness, the narrative of Lincoln, Congress and emancipation can never be revisited and refreshed often enough.

Paul Finkelman and Donald Kennon have, in this collection of 'classroom-ready' (according to the cover blurb) essays, drawn together the very best team of historians to do precisely this. They have had some practice. Kennon, the series editor of 'Perspectives on the History of Congress, 1801-1877' published by Ohio University Press, and Finkelman have worked on similar volumes before; this is, in fact, their fourth collaboration, and there is a fifth in the offing at the time of writing. For this particular collection, they have elicited original essays from historians who have been thinking and researching and writing about abolition and slavery, secession and emancipation, politics and power for many years now. Indeed, this volume is a veritable who's who of some of the leading historians of the Civil War era, broadly conceived: Seymour Drescher, Amy S. Greenberg, James Oakes, Orville Vernon Burton, Beverly Wilson Palmer, L. Diane Barnes, Michael Burlingame, Jenny Bourne, and Matthew Pinsker. Together, what these scholars have given us is a collection that spans the story of Lincoln and emancipation, from the 16th president's early years in Congress through to Steven Spielberg's 2012 historical drama, *Lincoln*.

Finkelman sets the scene in a sharp, succinct introduction that anyone still hung up on the questions of slavery's constitutional position before the Civil War, white southern political power, or Lincoln's personal views on the subject might do well to read and reread until it sinks in. And the essays that follow, beginning with Drescher's location of emancipation in a comparative legislative landscape, work to contextualise but also complicate the narrative of slavery's violent destruction in the United States. Drescher's chapter is especially pertinent in this respect, summarising as it does the very different abolitionist imperatives in

Britain and in France that finally resulted in emancipation. In Britain, mass petitions proved potent in the pressure for change, such that abolition in that country was, in the words of Alexis de Tocqueville, 'the act of the nation and not of its rulers' (p. 20). The French public, by contrast, evinced a 'relative indifference to antislavery', and in this case emancipation was effected in the emotional and spatial gap between metropole and colonies and grounded in the desire to minimise the economic and political impact on the nation of slavery's demise (p. 28).

American anti-slavery, as Drescher emphasises, found itself, in effect, caught in a cleft stick between these contrasting approaches. In the 18th century, anti-slavery sentiment was, as in the French case, muted in order not to rock the new, national boat; but in the 19th century, the British popular agitation pattern began to emerge in America in the form of a growing anti-slavery movement, but one that deviated from the British precedent in its inclusion of free black abolitionists. It was at this point and in this broader context that Lincoln entered the political fray, but in a way largely overlooked in the popular, and often the scholarly, representations of the Lincoln legend. Amy Greenberg seeks to correct this in her focus on Lincoln's brief, and largely downplayed, stint in the House of Representatives in 1846–7, in particular his opposition to the war with Mexico. Lincoln's demand that President Polk identify the precise 'spot' where American blood was apparently shed on American soil (the justification for the war) prompted the *Illinois State Register* to dub him 'the Rancho Spotty', a dismissive, racist sobriquet that followed Lincoln beyond his brief congressional term, but one that his subsequent election to the Presidency has all-but obscured.

'The pull of the Civil War,' Greenberg argues, 'is such that it has proved difficult for scholars to take seriously either the 1847 war, or opposition to that war by Lincoln, on their own terms' (p. 45). It is her goal, largely fulfilled, to reinstate the significance of the U.S./Mexican War to Lincoln's career and, in the process, highlight the role of Lincoln in bringing that conflict to an end. But this chapter also raises larger questions, ones central to this collection, about Lincoln's moral opposition to a possibly indefensible, certainly unpopular war, the role that slavery played in both its congressional and public unpopularity, and the abolitionist angle on the matter in the years that followed. This last underpins the focus of James Oakes' chapter, which examines the transition from a 'national antislavery policy' that, through a combination of moral suasion and practical restrictions, aimed at forcing 'the slave states to abolish slavery on their own', to one of 'military emancipation' the purpose of which 'was not to destroy slavery but to win wars' (pp.62–3). Over the course of the secession winter, as Oakes details, Republicans presented the seceding states with that choice: Union, and a slow, but managed death for slavery; or secession, and a swift and violent termination that would inevitably give 'free rein to the pent-up insurrectionary instincts of four million slaves' (p. 69).

Oakes moves on to drill down, as does the following chapter by Vernon Burton, into Lincoln's particular take on the relationship between secession and emancipation. Both emphasise, as Greenberg did, the forensic precision with which Lincoln dissected the Constitutional compromises and silences on the subject of slavery, the legal obligations it nevertheless imposed on those who opposed it whilst the Union held, and the likely outcome for slaveholders if it did not. For both, Lincoln represented the calm in the eye of the storm that was the secession winter of 1860–1. Oakes quotes the London *Times* journalist William Howard Russell, who found Washington political society in early 1861 standing shoulder to shoulder on the subject of slavery's inevitable demise, the expectation 'that England was bound by her anti-slavery antecedents to discourage to the utmost any attempt of the South to establish its independence on a basis of slavery,' and the assumption that the Republicans 'were the representatives of an active war of emancipation.' It 'was easy enough', Oakes comments, 'for Republicans to wrap themselves in the mantle of emancipation', and issue all kinds of dire warnings to the seceding states; but posturing was not policy, and the white South, having had considerable practice over the years preceding the election of 1860, was rather better than the North at the game of bluff and counter-bluff on the subject of the Union (p. 79). In this tense and threatening atmosphere Lincoln may well, as Burton suggests, have 'wanted to believe the irrationality of secession would stop', but wanting to believe something and believing it are not, of course, the same thing at all (p. 95).

Burton's angle on Lincoln, secession and emancipation emphasises the personal over the political in many

ways. His focus moves from Lincoln's belief in and adherence to the rule of law as he understood it in relation to slavery, to the rather less tangible, but potentially more potent invocation of America as an 'imagined community'. As Burton explains, America for Lincoln was ultimately not, as John Adams is believed to have described it, 'a nation of laws and not of men,' but very much a nation of men united, as Lincoln famously phrased it in his First Inaugural Address, by 'bonds of affection ... mystic chords of memory stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land' (p. 87). Indeed, Lincoln's actual words are the crucial component and evidential base of Burton's argument. The series of word clouds that he has devised identify those words that Lincoln used in a positive way between his election and his inauguration: words such as 'constitution, states, union, law, friends' dominate; but others, such as 'necessary/necessity, contrary, force, federal, fugitive, trouble, anxiety, impossible', in slightly smaller-script, hint not just at the iron fist inside the verbal velvet glove but foreshadow the terrible human cost of the conflict to come (p. 93).

Burton concludes his chapter with reference to Don Doyle's work on the Civil War in a global context, and specifically the question posed by the hero of Italian unification, Giuseppe Garibaldi, as to whether the emancipation of the slaves was, in fact, the Union's mission statement as the nation went to war.⁽¹⁾ It was a good question. But for radical Republicans such as Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner, it was really a rhetorical one. And it is the radical perspective that Beverly Wilson Palmer explores in this volume. Through the speeches, letters and legacy of Stevens and Sumner, she explains, we can better appreciate the tortuous passage of the 13th Amendment through Congress. Palmer is, of course, the very best person to turn to on the subject of these two men, having edited their letters and papers, and her detailed insights into their respective perspectives comes through strongly in this chapter. Both used every possible argument and angle, moral, material, military, diplomatic, and practical, to advance the cause of emancipation from the war's opening months; or as soon as it became evident that a swift Union victory was not on the cards. And their arguments increasingly found their echo in later Lincoln speeches, especially in respect of what Stevens denounced as the 'puerile inconsistency' of being willing to send northern men to war to save the Union but not to emancipate the South's slaves in order to hasten that end (p. 113).

Both Stevens and Sumner were acutely conscious of the fact that emancipation, neither by itself nor when ratified through Constitutional Amendment, was the end of the problem for former slaves, of course. And it is here that the new national narrative of freedom, one they both did so much to draft and determine, becomes rather murkier. As far as post-emancipation equality was concerned, the radical Republican legacy was grounded, or perhaps mired is the better word, in a far longer game, one that, as Palmer noted at the outset of her essay, America is still playing in the 21st century. At the time, arguably no one was more aware of this risk than black spokesman and activist, Frederick Douglass. 'Much was anticipated of Douglass,' Diane Barnes notes in her contribution on 'the complications of emancipation', and inevitably he could not meet all the expectations placed on him, either by his contemporaries or by scholars since. In advocating for the deployment of black military units, Douglass was inspired more by hope than expectation. His hope was strong, of course, not least because his two sons served in the now-famous Massachusetts 54th, but equally he harboured no illusions about the growth of anti-black sentiment in the northern states even as African-American regiments marched off to the front.

Trapped 'between responsibility to his race and his desire to fulfil a role within the Republican Party's war strategy', Barnes argues, Douglass held faith with the Republicans, despite the party's many and glaring inconsistencies in the matter of slavery and its abolition, largely because he was, above all else 'a pragmatist' when it came to the subject of emancipation (pp. 137, 142). But the ultimate pragmatist on this subject was, of course, Lincoln himself. And Michael Burlingame, in a chapter subtitled 'Reluctant emancipator?', takes issue with those scholars whose inability to recognise the 16th President's particular brand of pragmatic *realpolitik* has led them, at various points, to question Lincoln's commitment to ending slavery. This is not to suggest, and Burlingame would certainly be the last to do so, that Lincoln acted absent any moral or ideological drivers whatsoever. This was far from the case. But his recognition that, on the subject of emancipation after 1861, virtuous intentions would simply vanish into the void without military victory, has been wilfully misinterpreted over the years by some whose idealism at times subsumed, even negated their

common sense.

Burlingame's argument, taken together with Finkelman's following chapter in which he analyses 'Lincoln's long road to freedom', means that Lincoln the 'railroad lawyer' who 'became the Great Emancipator' is accorded two very strong cases for the defence in this volume. Both carefully parse the President's path to emancipation in order to challenge, and dismiss, any last vestiges of the accusation that Lincoln was slow to act against slavery and only did so when forced by the circumstances of the Civil War, specifically the self-emancipation of thousands of the South's slaves who fled to Union lines, supported the Union army (even when, at times, the Union army did not support them), and so destabilised the 'peculiar institution' that its collapse, along with that of the Confederacy, became inevitable. Just as slavery as an institution in the United States emerged out of the gradual accumulation of legislation designed to restrict black rights so, Finkelman shows, its dismantling required a reversal of that process through such apparently limited pieces of legislation such as the Confiscation Acts and even the Emancipation Proclamation itself, culminating in a Constitutional Amendment that removed it, but not its shadow, from America's legal and social landscape.

Not the least of Lincoln's objections to slavery, Burlingame notes, was his view of it as 'a kind of institutionalized robbery', a denial of the free-labour individualism at the heart of Republican ideology (p. 150). In the penultimate chapter in this volume, Jenny Bourne pursues this theme, and considers emancipation in terms of its transfer of property rights 'from former masters to former slaves', examining not just the economic impact of abolition on former slave-owners but its impact on former slaves; the latter estimated through an analysis of slave hire rates (p. 211). Bourne locates her detailed economic analysis within the wider context of the debate over reparations for black Americans whose ancestors were enslaved and/or exploited by the South's Jim Crow laws. 'The abolition of slavery in the United States could be cast in terms of a taking', Bourne concludes, 'but the direction of the taking is ambiguous' (p. 231). And she is careful to emphasise that 'pecuniary losses' are hardly the whole story where slavery, its costs and its legacy, is concerned.

It is that legacy that is the subject of this collection's final chapter by Matthew Pinsker that examines the 2012 film, *Lincoln* and its representation of the passage of the 13th Amendment. Pinsker provides a close critique of the film, drawing out in particular what he regards as the 'darkness' at its heart: the portrayal of the amendment being forced through, in part, by a certain amount of bribery and corruption in the form of 'shady patronage offers'. By their nature, such offers are not likely to be drafted in plain manuscript, but Pinsker does point readers towards a letter in the William Henry Seward papers written by Robert Latham that suggested that the pecuniary might persuade the unpatriotic. He notes that, absent any clues as to tone, this may well have been intended as a joke (p. 244). At the risk of sounding cynical, this seems unlikely. This entire collection has been about politics and pragmatism, the pecuniary as well as the patriotic, the moral and the material working together to right one nation's most glaring wrong. The film *Lincoln* is just one more historical-fictional iteration of the 16th President's life and legacy, and it is intended as entertainment. The more interesting question might be, not how accurate is it and what do its inaccuracies reveal, but how was it intended to play to an audience in 2012; how might it play to an audience now, both in the United States and abroad?

With this in mind, Pinsker's careful analysis of *Lincoln* is an especially apt conclusion to this collection. The issues he addresses go to the heart of a national narrative determined, since its inception, to be one about freedom and opportunity, republicanism and individual rights, democracy and equality but frequently derailed by human failings. In this respect, the timing of the volume is likely to be significant, drawing readers' attention as it does to an historical moment when the United States went to war in order to achieve the promise of its founding as a republic dedicated to equality, published at a time when that promise may be under some threat. In this context, non-American readers may bridle just a little at some of the assumptions voiced here. The political events of 2016, when this volume appeared, may make them less susceptible, for example, to the idea that the 'New' world should still aspire to 'redress the wrongs of the Old' (p. 38). But this is an American work, of course, written largely for a national, not an international audience. It is a collection dedicated to the heroes of America's national story. The villains, be they secessionists,

slaveholders, or simply scholars who have queried the direction of Lincoln's moral compass get fairly short shrift here. They lurk, implicitly, behind the curtain, an amoral, sometimes malevolent force that drives the action forward. The spotlight, quite rightly, is on the struggle and its successful outcome with only hints of slavery's long and destructive afterlife post-1865, one that continues to impact the United States today.

Notes

1. Don H. Doyle, *The Cause of All Nations: An International History of the American Civil War* (New York, NY, 2015), chapter 1.[Back to \(1\)](#)

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