

Better angels

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Eric Foner

THE FIERY TRIAL
Abraham Lincoln and American slavery
426pp. Norton, \$29.50; distributed
in the UK by Wiley, £21.
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Phillip W. Magness and
Sebastian N. Page

COLONIZATION AFTER
EMANCIPATION
Lincoln and the movement for black resettlement
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In one sense, Abraham Lincoln was remarkably consistent in his view of slavery: it was plain wrong. In 1864, at the height of the Civil War and with his Emancipation Proclamation under attack, Lincoln claimed that he could not remember when he had not thought and felt that "if slavery is not wrong, then nothing is wrong". He was, he said, "naturally antislavery". There is little good evidence to contradict that claim, but plenty to suggest that the implications of his disapproval of slavery varied according to time and context. Recalling an incident in 1841 when he witnessed a party of slaves being transported in chains down the Ohio River, Lincoln later wrote that the sight had been a "continual torment to me". Yet, as Eric Foner points out in his compelling new study, *The Fiery Trial*, Lincoln's recorded response at the time had expressed more fascination and bemusement than torment. In 1847, as an established lawyer in Springfield, Illinois, he had chosen to represent a slaveholder seeking to re-enslave a family entitled to their freedom under state law. By 1850, he had acquired a deserved reputation for his antislavery views and votes, yet he had clearly not reached the position where his views on slavery overrode other considerations. His objection to slavery as unjust and unrepugnant was balanced against his commitment to the Constitution, which protected slavery, and his respect for democratically expressed public opinion, which in his experience was largely hostile to abolition. Nor, for that matter, did he let his "naturally" antislavery views override his lawyerly instinct for a profitable case or his partisanship for the Whigs, on behalf of whose slaveholder candidate for president, Zachary Taylor, Lincoln stumped in 1848. As Foner puts it, Lincoln had "developed antislavery ideas but not a coherent antislavery ideology; he had cast antislavery votes but had not yet devised a way to pursue antislavery goals within the political system".

And if his antislavery feelings and beliefs did not, for most of his life, trump other political and personal considerations, a further complication comes from Lincoln's seemingly ambivalent and inconsistent view of the proper role that black people could play in republican America. Lincoln knew very few black people before he became President and, while he was outspoken in his criticism of slavery, he seemed to accept black people's unequal status. Yet when William Johnson, his black manservant, died in 1864, Lincoln chose a startling one-word epitaph for his tombstone: "citizen".

The challenge of understanding how Lincoln's views about slavery related to his views about race and his perception of what was politically wise or possible are especially well illustrated by the issue of his professed support for "colonizing" freed slaves outside the borders of the United States. For historians who want Lincoln to be in step with the antislavery radicals, his public advocacy of colonization was merely a "tactical" ploy to make emancipation palatable to a racist North. His opposition to slavery as an institution was, in this view, necessarily accompanied by a commitment to recognize the rights of freed people. Alternatively, some scholars have seen his support for colonization as evidence that he remained implacably committed to a white man's republic. Eric Foner

aligns himself with a third interpretation: that Lincoln was on a "journey". The President's support for black colonization up to the end of 1862 was sincere, Foner argues, and indicative of his as yet only partial grasp of the implications of the war. But, equally, Lincoln's increasingly certain rejection of the idea after that date was a sign that the "essence" of Lincoln's "greatness" was his "capacity for growth".

Many prominent white Americans in the early nineteenth century, including Lincoln's hero Henry Clay, clung to the chimera of colonization. In 1854, Lincoln condemned the "monstrous injustice" of slavery, but also confessed, "if all earthly power were given to me I should not know what to do, as to the existing institution". His "first impulse", he said, would be to "free all the slaves, and send them to Liberia, - to their own native land". Three years later he even declared the "separation of the races" to be the "only perfect preventative of amalgamation". In retrospect, it may seem surprising that an otherwise pragmatic and eminently sensible politician would endorse such an impractical, if not downright naive, notion as the removal of the entire black population of over 4 million souls. Yet within the memory of the generation that fought the American Civil War, most of the Indian population east of the Appalachians had been "removed" to the West. And contemporaries invoked the biblical example of the Exodus from Egypt as a historical precedent rather than merely an apt metaphor. Even while he was helping to mobilize Northern public opinion against the expansion of slavery's domain in the 1850s, Lincoln avoided committing himself to a vision of what role black people might have in a free labour society.

Once the Civil War against slaveholding secessionists began, Lincoln evidently lost none of his commitment to the project of expatriating African Americans. He appointed James Mitchell, a long-standing campaigner for colonization, to co-ordinate the administration's efforts, and, in August 1862, the President held a well-publicized meeting with a black delegation in which he rather patronizingly sought to persuade them of the advantages of the idea. A large portion of his annual message to Congress in December 1862 was devoted to colonization. Yet, only a month

later, on January 1, 1863, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation and never again publicly advocated colonization.

For Foner, the Emancipation Proclamation represented a real turning point in Lincoln's attitude to race as well as his understanding of what should be done about slavery. The black abolitionist Frederick Douglass visited the White House on several occasions and developed a lasting, if not uncritical, respect for the "Great Emancipator" and, like other white Americans, Lincoln seems genuinely to have been moved by the heroism of black troops. By 1864, Foner suggests, Lincoln had abandoned colonization and had "begun to imagine an interracial future" for the United States. Foner brings to his study the wise judgement and deep authority of a historian who has spent most of his career trying to understand how mid-nineteenth-century Americans thought. Unlike some recent Lincoln biographies, this book is careful to situate Lincoln properly in his political context, and the result is the most convincing and nuanced portrait of Lincoln's views we have.



Abraham Lincoln by George Peter Alexander Healy (1808-94)

Even so, *This Fiery Trial* leaves some lingering questions about the nature and completeness of Lincoln's "journey". Such doubts are reinforced by Phillip W. Magness and Sebastian N. Page in their intriguing and important new book, *Colonization After Emancipation*. They offer fresh evidence about Lincoln's continued commitment to colonization from British Foreign Office files. It appears that no sooner had Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation than he arranged a meeting with the British minister in Washington to talk about what the dispatch to London drily called the President's "hobby": colonization. The plan was to settle former American slaves in British Honduras with the British government covering the costs of transportation and housing in return for a few years of indentured labour. In the end, the Honduras plan, like similar schemes to export African Americans to British Guiana, Dutch Surinam or Haiti, came to nothing. The vast majority of African Americans were hostile to the idea, and infighting

and corruption within the administration dogged the projects all the way, until, in August 1864, Lincoln signed a bill cutting off funding. Yet Magness and Page question whether, even at this point, Lincoln had definitively repudiated the vision of black expatriation. They take seriously some contentious evidence, dismissed in a footnote by Foner, which suggests that, before he died in April 1865, Lincoln proposed another central American colonization scheme. This time, the President allegedly told General Butler that he thought it would be better to export "them all" to "some fertile country with a good climate, which they could have to themselves".

To their great credit, Magness and Page do not push their evidence too hard. This is a measured and subtly argued book. Nevertheless, their research raises important questions. If they are right about Lincoln's support for plans to expatriate freed slaves into 1864, it casts doubt on Foner's argument about Lincoln's capacity for growth. Surely, as Frederick Douglass put it, colonization was merely an "opiate" for the "troubled conscience" of whites, deflecting attention from the necessity of confronting the consequences of black freedom, precisely the kind of self-delusion that Lincoln is supposed to have transcended. What was he doing still contemplating the idea of black removal perhaps even as the war was coming to a close?

The answer may be, as Magness and Page suggest, that in Lincoln's own mind, colonization was not necessarily a retrograde step. They rightly emphasize the "comparatively benign reasoning to his brand of colonisation" which, crucially, never seemed to envisage forced deportation. Even Senator Charles Sumner, the great spokesman for the equal rights of blacks, accepted that a voluntary migration plan did not violate "any principle of justice". Perhaps we must accept that Lincoln was, in W. E. B. DuBois's words, "big enough to be inconsistent". Or perhaps we just need to remember that Lincoln, a principled man in many ways, was also a supreme juggler of options. After all, on the very same day that he allegedly spoke to General Butler about his continuing desire for colonization, he tentatively suggested that the "very intelligent" blacks might be given the vote.

Despite his appeal to the "better angels of our nature", Lincoln was fundamentally a pessimist about social relations. He worried about how equal rights for blacks, however desirable in theory, would work in practice. Is it so surprising, then, that he might have hedged his bets? Enfranchising some freed slaves and colonizing others may seem to be contradictory policies, but may have appeared to Lincoln to be complementary rather than mutually exclusive means of managing the transition from a slave to a free society.

Lincoln's moral clarity about the wrong of slavery as an institution was, so far as I can judge, increasingly matched by an awareness of the equal humanity of black people, yet he remained capable of compartmentalizing and disconnecting those two issues. If Lincoln was on a journey, it was one that remained unfinished at the end of his life. More than that, it was a journey with an uncertain destination. In this respect, as in so many others, Abraham Lincoln embodied the contradictions of the society of which he was a part.