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Allen C. Guelzo
Gettysburg College

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How Abe Lincoln Lost the Black Vote: Lincoln and Emancipation in the African American Mind

Abstract
No other American president has wielded the power of words with greater skill than Abraham Lincoln. "No one can read Mr. Lincoln's state papers without perceiving in them a most remarkable facility of 'putting things' so as to command the attention and assent of the people," wrote Henry J. Raymond, editor of the New York Times in 1864, and Raymond had an editor's unerring eye for this sort of thing. Massachusetts congressman George Boutwell, reminiscing for Allen Thorndike Rice twenty years after Lincoln's death, thought that "Lincoln's fame" would "be carried along the ages" by his writings, and especially the "three great papers ... the proclamation of emancipation, his oration at Gettysburg, and his second inaugural address."

Keywords
Abraham Lincoln, Civil War, African American, black, vote, Emancipation Proclamation, citizenship

Disciplines
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No other American president has wielded the power of words with greater skill than Abraham Lincoln. “No one can read Mr. Lincoln’s state papers without perceiving in them a most remarkable facility of ‘putting things’ so as to command the attention and assent of the people,” wrote Henry J. Raymond, editor of the New York Times in 1864, and Raymond had an editor’s unerring eye for this sort of thing. Massachusetts congressman George Boutwell, reminiscing for Allen Thorndike Rice twenty years after Lincoln’s death, thought that “Lincoln’s fame” would “be carried along the ages” by his writings, and especially the “three great papers . . . the proclamation of emancipation, his oration at Gettysburg, and his second inaugural address.”

Not too many, even today, would disagree with Raymond and Boutwell about Lincoln’s preeminent way with words. But what may jar us about Boutwell’s praise is the order in which placed his top three Lincoln picks: the Second Inaugural third, the Gettysburg Address second, and the Emancipation Proclamation first. But putting the proclamation first was not just a slip of Boutwell’s pen, since Boutwell was convinced that the proclamation was Lincoln’s greatest document: “If all that Lincoln said and was should fail to carry his name and character to future ages, the emancipation of four million human beings by his single official act is a passport to all of immortality that earth can give. There is no other individual act performed by any person on this continent that can be compared with it. The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, were each the work of bodies of men. The Proclamation of Emancipation in this respect stands alone. The responsibility was wholly upon Lincoln; the glory is chiefly his. No one can now say whether the Declaration of Independence, or the Constitution of the United
States, or the Proclamation of Emancipation was the highest, best gift to the country and to mankind.”

Nor was Boutwell alone in the years after the Civil War in giving the Emancipation Proclamation pride of place among Lincoln’s achievements. The proclamation, announced the abolitionist Robert Dale Owen, “forms an era in our national history. It severed the past from the future.” Isaac Arnold, who sat with Boutwell in the wartime Congress, portrayed Lincoln’s “stupendous decree of immediate emancipation” as “the dream of his youth, the aspiration of his life.” In debate over the proclamation in Congress, Ohio representative John Hutchins declared that “The president’s proclamation, whatever may be the issue of it, makes a new era in our politics, and marks a new epoch in history. Henceforth we are to have a Republic redeemed, regenerated, disenthralled by the genius of universal emancipation.” When Lincoln’s tomb was dedicated in 1874, the figure of Lincoln standing before the tomb’s obelisk held a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation in its left hand. Eight of the eleven outdoor statues of Lincoln installed in public squares and parks before the century’s end depicted him in various poses with the proclamation.

But in all of these high praises for the Emancipation Proclamation, a certain note of ambivalence was already present. Unlike the other two of “the three great papers,” admirers of the proclamation wavered unsteadily between the document itself and the consequences that flowed from it. One reason for this was certainly stylistic. Unlike the Gettysburg Address or the Second Inaugural, the Emancipation Proclamation had not been written with a view towards speaking, and it lacked the guiding purpose of Lincoln’s other rhetorical masterpieces—the desire to persuade. One of the first voices to send up wisps of sarcasm over the proclamation’s


language was Karl Marx. The author of a few proclamations of his own, Marx was half-amused that Lincoln’s language reminded him of “ordinary summonses sent by one lawyer to another on the opposing side.” Along with Marx, Adam Gurowski, a curmudgeonly Polish expatriate who labored (always thanklessly, in his own judgment) as a translator in the State Department, growled into his diary that the proclamation was “written in the meanest and the most dry routine style; not a word to evoke a generous thrill. . . .” British prime minister Lord Palmerston dismissed the proclamation as “a singular manifesto that could scarcely be treated seriously. It is not easy to estimate how utterly powerless and contemptible a government must have become which could sanction such . . . trash.” British newspapers heckled the proclamation as worse than “a joke. It is a laughing-stock of Europe. The bare idea of a Government, in the last stage of incapability, proclaiming a coup d’etat to take effect three months hence, is more than ridiculous—it is pitiable.”

Slowly, over time, the gap between the deed and the rhetoric of the Emancipation Proclamation threatened to slip it from its pedestal, something which can tracked by the shrinking amount of space devoted to the proclamation in Lincoln biographies, as well as by the relentlessly expanding numbers of books that occupied themselves only with the Gettysburg Address, the Second Inaugural, or the famous “Bixby Letter”—which, as it turned out, was written not by Lincoln but by his secretary John Hay. By the 1920s, the proclamation was beginning to puzzle those who could not understand how the same pen could have written both the proclamation and the Gettysburg Address. “This all-important paper,” wrote Daniel Kirkham Dodge in friendly bewilderment, “is as lacking in literary qualities as the calls for troops and the formal communications to Congress on routine business.”

When the Lincoln Memorial was dedicated in 1922, quotations from the Second Inaugural


and the Gettysburg Address flanked the great Daniel Chester French statute of the seated Lincoln, but there was no matching quotation from the proclamation, and for once, the hands of the Lincoln statue were empty.

But the unkindest cut at the proclamation came from the hands of historian Richard Hofstadter, in his savage essay on Lincoln in The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It (1948). A one-time member of the circle of American Marxist intellectuals around Partisan Review and an admirer of the iconoclasm of Charles and Mary Beard, Hofstadter viewed American politics as a single, consistent and deeply cynical story of how capitalism had corrupted Jeffersonians and Hamiltonians alike and turned the United States into “a democracy of cupidity rather than a democracy of fraternity.” But he reserved his angriest bon mots for Lincoln and for the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln’s opposition to slavery, in Hofstadter’s reckoning, was kindled only by the threat it posed to free white labor and the development of industrial capitalism. Lincoln “was, as always, thinking primarily of the free white worker” and was “never much troubled about the Negro.” No one, then, should be fooled by the proclamation. Its motives were entirely other than had been advertised, and that was what explained its stylistic flaccidity. “Had the political strategy of the moment called for a momentous human document of the stature of the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln could have risen to the occasion.” Instead, what he composed on New Year’s Day 1863 “had all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading.” It accomplished nothing because it was intended to accomplish nothing “beyond its propaganda value.””

5. Hofstadter, “Abraham Lincoln and the Self-Made Myth,” in The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It (1948; reprint New York: Knopf, 1973), 117, 129, 131. Hofstadter could not have realized this, but a “bill of lading” was actually an extremely important commercial document in the antebellum economy. “There is no one instrument or contract used in commercial transactions made to subserve so many various, useful, and important purposes, as the Bill of Lading,” wrote P. C. Wright in DeBow’s Review in July 1846, “Yet it appears ... that there is no one so little understood, as to its legal effect, when applied to some of the purposes to which it is peculiarly adapted. ... A Bill of Lading is defined to be an instrument signed by the master of a ship, or by someone authorized to act in his behalf, whereby he acknowledges the receipt of merchandise on board his vessel, and Engages ... to deliver the same at the port of destination in safety. ...” If this was what the Emancipation Proclamation was supposed to do, then Hofstadter was offering Lincoln more of a compliment that he intended. On Hofstadter, see Eric Foner, “The Education of Richard Hofstadter,” in Who Owns History? Re-Thinking the Past in a
The influence of Hofstadter’s easily repeatable quip about “the moral grandeur of a bill of lading” has had long innings, and even the most favorably disposed of modern Lincoln biographers, including David Donald, have found themselves forced to concede that the proclamation “lacked the memorable rhetoric of his most notable utterances.”6 But Hofstadter had a second charge to his explosive, and that was his skepticism about Lincoln’s intentions. The featurelessness of the proclamation’s prose figured in Hofstadter’s judgement as the key to a gloomier historical secret—the sheer political insincerity of the proclamation. Fewer academic historians have been willing to surrender this second point to Hofstadter. But in at least one circle of American culture, Hofstadter’s second charge has become almost an unquestioned wisdom, one that has taken root, with macabre irony, among the very African Americans who were supposed to be the proclamation’s chief beneficiaries.

In the jubilation that surrounded the arrival of emancipation, free blacks in the North and enslaved blacks in the South rejoiced at the sound of Lincoln’s name and ignored that the proclamation was limited by Lincoln only to slaves in the Confederate states—not to Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, or Delaware—and even then only to those areas not occupied by the Union army. Still, Lincoln was “our Moses,” wrote Elijah Marrs, who had run away from slavery to join a Union regiment. “Lincoln was indeed our Moses,” remembered one African American soldier, “He gave us our freedom.” Or if not Moses, Lincoln was even more exalted: “Lincoln died for we, Christ died for we, and me believe him de same mans,” said one freed slave on Hilton Head Island, in South Carolina. John Hay remembered “a prayer-meeting at Hilton Head,” where a youngster announced that he would like to see Lincoln. “A gray-haired patriarch rebuked the rash wish, saying ‘No man see Linkum. Linkum walk as Jesus walk. No man see Linkum.’” The black soldiers whose enlistments in the Union army were made possible by the procla-


mation adopted resolutions of gratitude: “We cannot express in words our love for the President of the United States, as language is too weak to convey that estimation in which we hold him.” When Lincoln’s carriage passed a brigade of black soldiers supporting the siege of Petersburg, Virginia, in 1864, they broke ranks and jubilantly surrounded Lincoln’s entourage with shouts of “Hurrah for the Liberator, Hurrah for the President.” The black wartime correspondent Thomas Morris Chester watched Lincoln pass through the joyful crowds of Richmond’s blacks, and wrote: “The colored population was wild with enthusiasm. Old men thanked God in a very boisterous manner, and old women shouted upon the pavement as high as they ever had done at a religious revival. . . . Even then they thought [freedom] must be a pleasant dream, but when they saw Abraham Lincoln they were satisfied that their freedom was perpetual. One enthusiastic old negro woman exclaimed: ‘I know that I am free, for I have seen father Abraham and felt him.’”

Likewise, it was from the proclamation that blacks over and over again dated a conclusive sense of liberation from slavery. When Richard Hill was interviewed by a congressional committee on Reconstruction in 1866, and asked when he became free, Hill replied, “When the proclamation was issued,” and it was then that he decided to run away from his master in Richmond. Edmund Parsons testified before the same committee that “I have been a slave from my childhood up to the time I was set free by the emancipation proclamation.” Daniel Pettis ran away from his master in Huntsville, Alabama, in January 1865 because “under the Proclamation of the President of the United States, I consider myself a Free Man.” Even William Thornton, a black Baptist minister in one of the Virginia counties exempted from the proclamation, still dated his freedom from the proclamation, and considered himself “made free under the proclamation.” Whatever the fine print of exemptions, “The negroes [now have] altogether different feelings from those of former times,” wrote a federal provost marshal in the summer of 1863, “a spirit of independence—a feeling they are no longer slaves.”


It scarcely mattered how word of the proclamation arrived, whether informally along the slave grapevine, or more openly, as in the case of James Simms of Savannah, who brought copies of the proclamation from Virginia to distribute among Savannah’s blacks. The superintendent of contrabands at Fortress Monroe was surprised to find “some men who came here from North Carolina” already “knew all about the Proclamation.” Rebel prisoners at Fortress Monroe told him “that one of his negroes had told him of the proclamation five days before he heard it in any other way,” while others claimed that “their negroes gave them their first information” of the proclamation. One Union soldier believed that “intelligence of ‘Massa’ Linkum’s emancipation proclamation had doubtless reached every Negro household from Mason and Dixon’s line to the Gulf of Mexico.” In Alabama, Louis Hughes’s master tried to suppress news of the proclamation, but word spread from whisperer to whisperer in the quarters. “We knew it was our right to be free,” Hughes recalled, “for the proclamation had long been issued.” The proclamation “is well-known by the negroes,” warned a Georgia planter, “and is causing some trouble by the bad ones.” Ignoring the exceptions made in the proclamation for the occupied parishes in Louisiana, slaves on Louisiana plantations staged parties in anticipation of “emancipation day,” and one of them told a Union soldier, “We gwine to be Massa Linckum’s children new year’s morning!”

It is beyond anything but imagination to guess at how many slaves were directly or indirectly liberated by the proclamation. But it clearly contributed to the increased disintegration of slavery around its shrinking edges, as the presidential mandate for freedom triggered a fresh cascade of running away that began sweeping off the underpinnings of slavery. “The hopes of freedom, kin-


dled by the emancipation proclamation, paralyzed the industrial power of the rebellion,” wrote Secretary of War Stanton in evaluating the causes of Southern defeat, “Slaves seized their chances to escape; discontent and distrust were engendered; the hopes of the slave and the fears of the master... shook each day more and more the fabric built on human slavery.” Rebel prisoners at Fortress Monroe told the contraband superintendent that the proclamation “had played hell with them.” In the Mississippi river valley, as many as twenty thousand slaves took French leave of their masters after the proclamation was issued, clogging contraband camps in Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Natchez, and Union-occupied Vicksburg.

Even in the areas that were technically exempt, the proclamation made “the condition of things... unsettled, revolutionary, with nothing clearly defined, neither slave nor slaveholder having any rights which they felt bound mutually to respect.” Once the proclamation was issued, the former slave H. C. Bruce noticed that “slave property in the state of Missouri was almost a dead weight to the owner; he could not sell because there were no buyers.” Although Missouri was technically exempt from emancipation, the proclamation still managed to destabilize slavery even where slavery remained legal. “All the negroes in this country will run off,” predicted a Missouri secessionist at the end of October 1862, “they go in droves every night.” In Unionist Tennessee, which was also exempt from the proclamation, General William S. Smith complained in March 1863 that “whole families... are stampeding and leaving their masters.” The exasperated general thought that “something should be done to shield our service from the charge of furnishing an Asylum to the Servants of loyal men living in districts not affected by the emancipation proclamation.” But Smith could not keep “abolition officers from Michigan and other northern states” from telling Kentucky slaves “that on the first day of January next, they are all to be free, and will have a right even to kill their masters who may attempt to restrain them.” Major General Lovell Rousseau wrote to the adjutant-general of the Department of the Cumberland in January 1864

that “Slavery is virtually dead in Tennessee, although the State is excepted from the emancipation proclamation. Negroes leave their homes and stroll over the country uncontrolled.” The commandant of the military district around Norfolk, Virginia, “told the Negroes in the contraband camp at Craney’s Island before the issuing of the President’s Proclamation, that they were free.” He was embarrassed to discover, after the proclamation was published, that the Norfolk district had been exempted. But when the contrabands appealed to the army surgeon at Craney’s Island “to ask him if there was no hope for them,” he pointed across Hampton Roads toward Fortress Monroe and asked, “What should you do if you knew that you could become free by going to yonder point.” Three hundred “took the hint . . . and went to Fortress Monroe.”

More than seventy years after the proclamation, former slaves interviewed as part of the Works Project Administration’s slave narrative project still spoke of Lincoln as “a good man and wanted everybody to be free, both white and black.” Some had even incorporated Lincoln into their own private mythologies of emancipation: “Did I eber hear ob Abraham Lincoln? I got his history right here in my house. He was de president of de United States that freed four million slave. He come to Beaufort befo’ de war and et dinner to Col. Paul Hamilton house at da Okas. He left his gold-headed walking cane dere and ain’t nobody know de president of de United States been to Beaufort ‘till he write back and tell um to look behind de door and send um his gold-headed walking cane . . .”


Other ex-slaves retailed stories that described Lincoln personally appearing at the plantation gates at the head of a column of black soldiers, telling the cook, “You ain’t got no more master and no more missus,” or opening the smokehouse and telling the newly freed slaves, “Help yourselves; take what you need; cook yourselves a good meal!” The freed slaves at Port Royal, South Carolina, could only “with some difficulty” be “made to believe he was not a Colored man, who went around, begging for jobs of rails to split, till he was made president.”

But even then, the note of ambivalence was there. Frederick Douglass, who had impatiently snapped at Lincoln on the pages of Douglass’ Monthly for sloth and indifference, came away from his first meeting with Lincoln in August 1863 surprised to find the president “the first great man that I talked with in the United States freely, who in no single instance reminded me of the difference between himself and myself, of the difference of color.” Douglass spoke of Lincoln in an eulogy in December 1865 as “emphatically the colored man’s president.” In 1883 he praised Lincoln as “the greatest statesman that ever presided over the destinies of this Republic” and “the one man of all the millions of our countrymen to whom we are more indebted… than to any other.” Yet, in 1876, with emancipation yielding few of the fruits blacks had anticipated, Douglass sounded a more bitter note. Speaking at the dedication of Thomas Ball’s Emancipation Monument in Washington, Douglass described Lincoln as “a white man” who “shared the prejudices common to his countrymen toward the colored race.” While it was true that “in his heart of hearts he loathed and hated slavery,” that was not the same thing as sympathy with the victims of it. “We are at best only his step-children,” Douglass cautioned. Lincoln “was not, in the fullest sense of the word, either our man or our model.” From “the genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent.” It was only when one stepped back and saw Lincoln against the seething background of white racism across the Union that the Great Emancipator appeared “swift, zealous, radical, and determined.”


14. Douglass, in Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln, 193; Douglass, “Our Work is
Douglass’s suspicions, however, remained comparatively isolated. And with good reason: the African American adulation of Lincoln had a sharp political edge to it that not even Douglass could afford to blunt. If blacks could claim themselves as heirs of Lincoln’s special attention and interest as the Great Emancipator, then an appeal to Lincoln’s memory might add valuable leverage that strengthened their claim to a real share in American life. “Abraham Lincoln! What mighty magic is this name!” exclaimed James L. Curtis on the Lincoln Centennial in 1909. “With talismanic power, it swerves the darts of hate and malice aimed at a defenceless race, so that though they wound, they do not destroy. With antidotal efficacy, it nullifies the virus of proscription so that it does not stagnate the blood nor paralyze the limb of an up-treading and on-going race.”15 Booker T. Washington, who came the closest of any African American to being a sort of national spokesman for American blacks in the Jim Crow era, lauded Lincoln in 1891 as “that great man, the ‘first American’” and in his autobiography, Washington claimed, “I think I do not go too far when I say that I have read nearly every book and magazine article that has been written about Abraham Lincoln. In literature he has been my patron saint.” A. B. Daniel’s 1896 lithograph, Emancipation Proclamation, depicts Lincoln handing a rolled copy of the Proclamation to an angel “sent from the Lord above.” An accompanying poem urges blacks to: “Reverence him, though our skins are dark, / Reverence him in our churches and parks; / Let us teach our children to do the same, / And teach them never to forget his name. / He was our Moses, to us and our race, / And our children should never forget his face. . . . / God was with him as we all can see. / Praise him: Reverence Lincoln! We are forever free!”

In the 1918 poster Welcome Home, a black soldier returning from the First World War greets his family underneath a portrait of


Lincoln; the 1919 print, The Emancipation Proclamation, surrounds a central oval of Lincoln with vignettes of black accomplishment. The first African American biography of Lincoln, William Lilly’s 1932 Set My People Free reaches only as far as his inauguration as president in 1861, but all the same it portrays Lincoln as a life-long enemy of slavery.16

For more than a half-century after the proclamation, African Americans turned its anniversary into an emancipation holiday. There was no uniformity in the exact date, since there had been no uniformity to when news of the proclamation reached the ears of many slaves. In the North, September 22, July 4, August 1, April 6, and November 1 were all celebrated for their connections with some aspect of emancipation; in Texas, blacks chose June 19—“Juneteenth”—as their Emancipation Day, since the news of the proclamation was not officially read to Texas slaves until June 19, 1865. What was probably the first of these jubilees occurred on New Year’s Day in 1866, when over ten thousand blacks crowded the Charleston race-course to hear speeches from white Union army generals and African-American ministers. Over the years, emancipation festivals included parades, barbecues, prayer-meetings, sermons, speeches, and invariably, readings of the Emancipation Proclamation. (As late as the 1970s, William Wiggins found that the Atlanta emancipation celebrations still eagerly recruited readers of the proclamation. One of the organizers explained that they wanted a “reading of the Emancipation Proclamation so that it is a burning fire for the audience,” and “whenever they found a person who would really do it with understanding, it was a great and glorious thing”).17


In 1913 the fiftieth anniversary of the proclamation brought on a rush of black celebrations. A bill to fund a national emancipation exhibition died in Congress after lengthy hearings, but other states and cities sponsored a full calendar of events to mark the anniversary. In North Carolina, the Negro Ex-Slaves Association organized a reunion of former slaves; in Richmond, a National Negro Exposition debuted in the summer of 1915; in Chicago, 135,000 people turned out for exhibitions that memorialized Lincoln and the progress of American blacks since the proclamation. W. E. B. DuBois, the leading black intellectual of his generation, wrote a “pageant of Negro history” for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People entitled The Star of Ethiopia to commemorate emancipation, and for nine nights in October 1913 it packed the Twelfth Regiment Armory with three thousand people each night. James Weldon Johnson composed an ode for the front page of the New York Times on New Year’s Day 1913 entitled, “Fifty Years,” hailing the proclamation as the beginning of black freedom and Lincoln as the patron saint: “O brothers mine, to-day we stand / Where half a century sweeps our ken, / Since God, through Lincoln’s ready hand, / Struck off our bonds and made us men.”

For at least another generation, the image of Lincoln and the proclamation as the symbols of American belonging still exerted a powerful pull on black loyalties. The rise of Jim Crow segregation in the South occurred hand in hand with the efforts of Southerners to downplay the significance of slavery both for the war and for Lincoln, and blacks battled back by keeping slavery and Lincoln’s image as the Great Emancipator at the forefront of the nation’s memory. “There is a belated but persisting view of this great character as a sort of sublimated politician, concerned only with saving the Union,” warned Albert E. Pillsbury at Howard University; but this, Pillsbury explained, was only the tactic of Southern white racists who wanted to deprive blacks of Lincoln’s mantle. Even Paul Robeson, at the nether end of the political spectrum from any Republican, invoked the name of Lincoln, this time as a sort of honorary socialist. In 1951, speaking at the funeral of Mother Bloor, Robeson grouped Bloor “in the tradition of Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, John Brown, Lincoln, Douglass and Thaddeus

Stevens,” thereby creating one of the most jumbled versions of ancestor-worship yet seen in America. And little more than a decade later, Martin Luther King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to tell of his “dream” of racial harmony and call upon Americans to fulfill the promise of Lincoln’s “momentous decree.”

But even as King spoke, a vast disenchantment with Lincoln and the proclamation was struggling to the surface of African American culture. It was a disenchantment with long roots in the ambivalence of abolitionists like Douglass and the failure of Reconstruction. But it had even more to do with the rise, between 1920 and 1960, of a self-assertive black middle class more inclined to fight in the courts than to appeal to the image of Lincoln in defense of their rights. The proportion of black males in white-collar jobs rose from a minuscule 4 percent of the African American male population to 22 percent, with black women in similar jobs rising from 6 percent to 36 percent of African American women; the Great Migration of blacks to the urban North black caused the percentage of African Americans bound to agriculture to drop from 43 percent to 14 percent; black family incomes doubled between 1940 and 1960, and, perhaps most telling of all, black life expectancy rose by 10.5 years. These gains, coming as they did before the landmark series of Civil Rights laws in the 1950s and 1960s, were the work of African Americans themselves, who then bristled at the suggestion that they were dependent on a leg up from Abraham Lincoln.

If anything, the arrival of a vanguard of black bourgeoisie at the borders of the promised land of the American middle class only sharpened black resentment at the survivals of inequality that remained.

No one traced this arc of black middle-class disenchantment with greater accuracy than W. E. B. DuBois. Born in 1868 of mixed-race parentage in Massachusetts and boasting a Ph.D. from the University of Berlin, DuBois felt no personal debt to Lincoln as an emancipator and little personal need to drape himself in the protective imagery of Lincoln. Dubois’s earliest appraisal of Lincoln, in an


21. “Curiously enough,” admitted W. E. B. DuBois, this was the fruit of the “pro-
address delivered at Jane Addams’s Hull House on Lincoln’s Birthday in 1907, was respectful but distant. On the one hand, DuBois had no reluctance about speaking of Lincoln as “the man who preserved the American union, swept slavery from the United States and is looked upon as... ‘the First American.’” But DuBois thought the greatness of Lincoln was best measured by the fact that, although “he did not always see the right at first,” he always retained a “capacity for growth” that allowed him to turn and become the man who “led the very leaders into freedom.” That capacity for growth and self-examination led DuBois to urge Americans to “take pattern of Lincoln” and “make America still a land where men like Lincoln may flourish and be recognized—a land of opportunity and of opportunity not simply to the rich, but to the poor, not simply to the Gentile, but to the Jew, not simply to the white, but to the black, a land of opportunity for all men, and for all women, too.”

Over the next decade and a half, with the shocking rise of black lynchings, white race riots in Chicago, Springfield, and other northern cities, the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, and the gloomy failure of Wilsonian internationalism to do anything to alleviate the burdens of blacks at home, DuBois’s estimate of Lincoln fell. Lincoln now seemed less a teachable convert to racial equality and more a combination of redneck bigot and white paternalist—which is to say, more like the irksome white bluestockings he had to deal with as part of his work in founding the NAACP. In 1917, in an address to the InterCollegiate Socialist Society, DuBois offhandedly pointed to the irony of “the very man who is called the Emancipator” declaring that “his object was the integrity of the Union and not the emancipation of the slaves; that if he could keep the Union from being disrupted, he would not only allow slavery to exist but would loyally protect it.” Five years later, as editor of the NAACP’s mag-


azine, The Crisis, DuBois was more ascerbic. Shocking black and white readers alike, DuBois described Lincoln as “a poor Southern white, of illegitimate birth, poorly educated and unusually ugly, awkward, ill-dressed.” That he should also be the author of black freedom only showed to DuBois that “he was big enough to be inconsistent—cruel, merciful; peace-loving, a fighter; despising Negroes and letting them fight and vote; protecting slavery and freeing slaves.” The subsequent outcry forced DuBois to recant on the pages of The Crisis. But DuBois could not surrender his criticism entirely, and he warned blacks not to be so naive as to forget that the same Lincoln who wrote the proclamation had also uttered a string of racist and derogatory comments about blacks.23

Once he left The Crisis, DuBois issued no more qualifications on the subject of Lincoln. In a lecture in 1936 on “The Negro and Social Reconstruction,” DuBois mentioned Lincoln only as the champion of colonization, not emancipation. In 1952, as DuBois plunged further into Marxism and pan-Africanism, he mocked the naive belief that Lincoln had any interest in the slaves for their own sake. “The Civil War resulted in emancipation for the slaves, not because the North or Abraham Lincoln fought for this, but because freedom for the slaves whose labor supported the South was the only way to win the war.” The only good thing he could say about the proclamation at the end of his life was that “the task was left unfinished”—and that comment, he never published.24

DuBois died, an expatriate in Ghana, in 1963, the year of the proclamation’s centennial. That time, unlike 1913, the anniversary arrived under a cloud of bitterness and denial. The organizer of a symposium on the proclamation at the University of Chicago wondered sardonically why “there was not a grand and official national celebration of the hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation” and answered his question with another question: “What is there to celebrate?” James Baldwin, in The Fire Next Time, advised


his nephew that “the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon.” The Emancipation Proclamation was only “a technical emancipation” in Baldwin’s eyes so long as the African American remained “the most despised creature in his country.” Martin Duberman’s play, In White America, rehearsed the history of black freedom in just the fashion of the 1913 Emancipation pageants, but this time it was a drama of agony and unslaked thirst, with no mention at all of Abraham Lincoln.25

From time to time, the civil rights movement of the 1950s could still invoke the name of Lincoln. (Roy Wilkins admitted in his autobiography to rubbing “the head of Lincoln”—a bust that Attorney General Ramsey Clark kept in his office—“as I often did when we were squeezed into an awful corner.”) But the leadership of the movement clearly owed its inspiration to other sources. Martin Luther King made occasional references to Lincoln and the proclamation, but his practical ideal was Gandhi. Echoing DuBois, King described Lincoln the night before his own assassination in Memphis as “a vacillating president” who “finally” decided that he had no choice but “to sign the Emancipation Proclamation.”26 Black historian John Hope Franklin issued a short history of the Proclamation for the centennial, and still stubbornly cast the proclamation as “an Act of Justice.”27 But Franklin’s voice was lost in the fracturing of the civil rights crusade and the breaking away of a black power movement that wanted nothing to do with Lincoln, the Proclamation, or anything else white liberals wanted to offer. As Julius Lester wrote, in Look Out, Whitey! Black Power’s Gon’ Get Your Mama!, “Blacks have no reason to feel grateful to Abraham Lincoln. Rather, they should be angry at him. After all, he came into office in 1861. How come it took him two whole years to free the slaves? His pen was sitting on


his desk the whole time. All he had to do was get up one morning and say, ‘Doggonit! I think I’m gon’ free the slaves today. It just ain’t right for folks to own other folks.’ It was that simple. . . . There were many factors which led to the Emancipation proclamation, and it is not only misleading, but a lie, to depict Lincoln as the Great Emancipator.’’ 28

Disenchantment now turned into outright denunciation, marked vividly in February 1968, when Lerone Bennett posed the wickedly provocative question, “Was Abe Lincoln a White Supremacist?” on the pages of the black cultural magazine Ebony. Student protesters at Howard University at once took up Bennett’s cry, denouncing “Abraham Lincoln . . . as a reactionary white supremacist” and repudiating any civil rights strategy based on “molding the black student into a strange and pathetic hybrid acceptable to whites.” 29 The Howard students had forgotten, or never knew, that only fifty years before the denunciation of Lincoln as a “white supremacist” had been the tactic of segregationists and white supremacists of the real article.

Bennett spent the next thirty years refining and enlarging his case against Lincoln and the proclamation. In his popular history of African Americans, Before the Mayflower, Bennett declared that “Insofar as it can be said that Lincoln had a policy it was to rid America of both slaves and blacks.” Echoing Richard Hofstadter, Bennett dismissed the proclamation as a document “as dry as a brief in a real estate case.” Still, Bennett was willing to qualify his criticism of the proclamation far enough to add, “Still there was something about the piece of paper. . . . It converted a vague war for Union into something men would get their teeth into: a war for freedom.” 30 By 1999, however, Bennett had jettisoned even that qualification. In Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln’s White Dream, Bennett indicted Lincoln as a calculating bigot who issued the Emancipation Proclamation precisely to head off the real emancipation that abolitionists and blacks were pressing for: “He believed until his death that the Negro was the Other, the inferior, the subhuman, who had to be—Lincoln said it was a NECESSITY—subordinated, enslaved, quarantined to protect

the sexual, social, political, and economic interests of Whites. Everything he did . . . everything he said, even the speeches his defenders are always praising, was based on this racist idea, which defined his life [and] his politics. . . .”

While Bennett’s book was scorned and sometimes caricatured by white reviewers (Pulitzer Prize-winner James M. McPherson denounced Bennett for making “Abraham Lincoln . . . no better than Adolf Hitler”), it should have awakened its readers to what is surely one of the most dramatic transformations in American historical self-understanding in the past century, and that is the slow, almost-unnoticed withdrawal of African Americans from what was once the great consensus of blacks’ admiration for Abraham Lincoln. When, a year after Forced Into Glory was published, Bennett was invited to lecture at the Schomburg Center in Harlem, white participants in the program were visibly shaken, not only by Bennett’s violent harangue against Lincoln, but by the enthusiastic applause (laced with anti-Semitic comments) of the black audience.31

Bennett’s acid skepticism scorches more than just the historical standing of Abraham Lincoln. The withdrawal from Lincoln by African Americans has moved in step with the emergence in the minds of many Americans of a profound nihilism that sees little meaning in American freedom and little hope for real racial progress. “If black freedom is . . . conditioned on recognizing white authority to define that freedom,” wrote one black legal scholar in 1992, “the gift-exchange is a swindle. . . . That white America gained so much moral capital” from emancipation “while black Americans gained so little material capital, suggests that there is something deeply wrong with the popular account of emancipation as a gift from whites to blacks.”32 This angry disenchantment with emancipation was not exactly unanticipated: Alexis de Tocqueville had predicted that “When inequality is the common law of a society, the strongest inequalities do not strike the eye,” but “when everything is nearly on a level, the least of them wound it.” And it gave birth to what we may call de Tocqueville’s law of equality: “the desire for equality always becomes more insatiable as equality is greater.”33

So, at just the moment when the engagement of blacks and whites as Americans has never been more necessary—simply (as William Julius Wilson argues) in the name of economic survival in the face of devastating economic globalization—and even at the moment when (as Orlando Patterson has reminded us) blacks have never been closer to the goal of economic and civil integration into the American mainstream, the levels of resentment, despair, and alienation over America’s racial future have never been higher. Bennett’s book was, in that context, simply an uncomfortable marker of the depth of that bitterness, funnelled at the single, largest popular symbol of racial reconciliation in American history.

For all of Bennett’s occasional gestures toward “rainbow” politics, the full effect of Forced Into Glory was almost a rehearsal of de Tocqueville’s law applied to American history in general and to Abraham Lincoln in particular. Bennett, after all, had no desire to diminish Lincoln’s historical importance. “Lincoln is a key, perhaps the key, to the American personality, and that what we invest in him, and hide in him, is who we are,” Bennett acknowledged, and he cheerfully admitted that any book about Lincoln and emancipation is a book “about race, heroes, leadership, political morality, scholarship, and the American Dream.” The difference was that Bennett was dubious, if not simply hopeless, about them all. Far from diminishing Lincoln, Bennett saw Lincoln’s importance at the vortex of America’s racial struggle as a sign of how overwhelming the odds against equality and reconciliation were. In what amounted to a complete reversal of historical standing, Lincoln belonged, not to the ages, but to the Confederacy.

Bennett is surely right in at least one respect: If the Emancipation Proclamation was the empty and faint-hearted gesture of an unrepentant racist, then the whole history of American racial politics that flows downstream from the proclamation becomes tainted. And the hope of a “rainbow nation” becomes little more than an illusion, with no evidence of real historical roots or precedent. If Abraham Lincoln can be unmasked as a manipulative politician, an ill-disguised white demagogue who never wanted to issue such


a proclamation in the first place and who ended up issuing one that had no actual force or intention behind it, then the expectation of a future for white and black Americans as co-workers in the great American project of liberty and equality collapses in helplessness and disappointment.

Lincoln and his proclamation once occupied a place of central importance in the minds of black and white Americans alike. And with good reason, for his proclamation was the most socially revolutionary pronouncement of any American president, and it deserves restoration to a position in the canon of African American testimonies to freedom and deliverance. At the same time, the fate of the proclamation raises an equally important question about reform movements and American legal and constitutional theory. Lincoln was, in many respects, our last Enlightenment politician, especially in the sense that he was guided, like the founders, by an Enlightenment politics of prudence. A major problem in understanding the Emancipation Proclamation is that this prudential politics was, even in Lincoln’s lifetime, being eroded by a romantic Kantian politics of absolutism, which allowed for no compromises with the demands of free will, choice, and autonomy. From the nineteenth-century abolitionists to modern constitutional theory, Kantianism (especially in the contemporary work of John Rawls) has held much of the ground of public ethics, casting Lincolnian prudence ever further into the shade and forcing us to ask questions about Lincoln’s motives in emancipation as though they were merely matters of his own impulse or preference. The underlying question of Lincoln’s strategy in emancipation is not so much a problem of race or Lincoln’s timing or the pressures of the Civil War as it is an unsuspected problem in American intellectual history and the displacement of prudence by absolutism.

Most important, there is every evidence that, as the early DuBois acknowledged, Lincoln understood that emancipation inevitably entailed citizenship and civil equality for blacks. In his last public speech on April 11, 1865, Lincoln praised the fledgling Reconstruction government of Louisiana for “giving the benefit of public schools equally to black and white, and empowering the Legislature to confer the elective franchise upon the colored man.” By the time of his last cabinet meeting, on the day of his assassination, Lincoln’s “expressions in favor of the liberality toward negro citizens in the reorganization” of the defeated Confederacy “were” (according to radical journalist Whitelaw Reid) “fuller and more emphatic than” at any earlier time. Schuyler Colfax
recalled that Lincoln that morning had spoken “with great impressiveness of his determination to secure liberty and justice to all, with full protection for the humblest, and to re-establish on a sure foundation the unity of the Republic after the sacrifices made for its preservation.” In the end, his death at the hands of John Wilkes Booth, a negrophobe and white supremacist who was enraged at Lincoln’s endorsement of black civil equality, was directly linked to those “expressions.”

So, let the proclamation be “a bill of lading.” But let us remember it as a bill of lading that itemized the destinies of four millions of human beings, bound in the way of danger for the port of American freedom.