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Abstract

Since his death in 1865 Abraham Lincoln has been universally honored in black America. In many black homes and businesses, his photograph often hangs in honor next to the one of Martin Luther King Jr. But a new book by *Ebony* editor Lerone Bennett Jr. contends that Lincoln was a crude bigot who told demeaning darky jokes, had an unquenchable thirst for minstrel shows, consistently used the word "nigger," and supported efforts to ship Negroes back to Africa.

As Jack E. White pointed out in a recent *Time* magazine article, this book largely has been ignored by the mainstream press. The book was not reviewed in *The Washington Post*, *The New Yorker*, *The Chicago Tribune*, or *USA Today*.

JBHE [Journal of Blacks in Higher Education] asked a group of leading Lincoln scholars for their opinions of the Bennett book and the controversy surrounding its publication. Here are the replies:

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Reexamining the Racial Record of Abraham Lincoln

A new book by Ebony editor Lerone Bennett Jr. paints an unflattering view of the nation's sixteenth president, a white man who has been most revered by many in the African-American community. JBHE asked a group of the nation's leading Lincoln scholars to comment on the Bennett work.

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Reviewing the Reviewers

Jonathan Scott Holloway, professor of African-American studies at Yale University, responded:

Lerone Bennett Jr., executive editor of *Ebony* magazine and author of numerous popular histories of the African-American experience — chief among them, *Before the Mayflower* — recently published a provocative book, *Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream*. In what some reviewers have called a 600-page polemic, Bennett argues that Lincoln was an unreconstructed racist who supported the return of blacks to Africa, enjoyed black-face minstrelsy, and emancipated the slaves only when he was forced to do so by political pressure.

Fooling around with a national icon like Lincoln is serious business. And when one argues that the Great Emancipator was a racist who freely referred to blacks in the most pejorative terms one would naturally expect a firestorm. Instead, the book has been met with a deafening silence from the

mainstream press. Jack White, a managing editor for *Time* magazine, wants to know why. White feels that Bennett's public profile alone — he is an established and popular author who is probably the most visible face in the Johnson publishing empire — would be enough to make the mainstream media at least a little curious about such important claims. Is the silence another example of the limited curiosity of the mainstream media? Or, is it the manifestation of an unarticulated desire to protect a valuable part of America's cultural memory?

When White's essay “Was Lincoln Racist?” ran in May 2000 the only major newspaper that had reviewed *Forced Into Glory* was the *Los Angeles Times*. Most recently, the book was reviewed in the Sunday edition of the *New York Times* book review section (August 27, 2000). These were prominent reviews written by two of the leading scholars in the field — Eric Foner of Columbia University and James M. McPherson of Princeton. But despite these two reviews — and neither reviewer was enthusiastic about the book — White's question remains: Why the silence?

While respecting White's inquiry I would like to ask a slightly different question: Who *is* reviewing the book? For whatever reason, it is evident that the editors of major daily and weekly newspapers and magazines do not think the book merits their reviewers' attention. But in our present world of computer networking and electronic communications perhaps we should seek other places to find out about this book and how it is being received. Bennett, after all, is not a professional academic. While his works are carefully, if selectively, researched, they are not intended for college seminars and graduate courses. Instead, Bennett writes for a much broader public, and we should turn to this venue to locate the book's reception.

Turning to Amazon.com, the Internet retailer, yields some interesting findings. Amazon provides its audience the opportunity to review the books it sells and also affords this

same audience the chance to evaluate the quality of the book review itself. By doing so, Amazon has created, in its own electronically artificial way, a space for public hearings on books of common interest. As of the end of August, Bennett's book has been reviewed eight times by Amazon readers and these reviews, in turn, have been critiqued by more than 175 readers.

Forced Into Glory is a book of extremes and the reviews reflect that — it is either loved or hated. What is enlightening about the discussion is that we get to hear from Bennett's target audience. Generally speaking, the reviewers do not write as Lincoln scholars but as avid readers searching for insight. We hear, then, from the consumers as consumers, not as professional editorialists or book reviewers. And this public, unlike the mainstream media, is far from silent on the book's strengths and weaknesses. *Forced Into Glory* is lauded because it is thought-provoking, or, alternatively, dismissed because it is a "temper tantrum."

But the most important facet of this public, electronic review is that the authors are not fettered by editors' or mainstream corporate sensibilities. As a result, the low-brow crashes into the high-brow, the race signifiers run into the social conservatives. "Stephanie," for example, writes that "African Americans traditionally have a strong distrust of the Republican Party. It's because of racists and bigots like Lincoln, Hoover, TR, Nixon, Reagan, Bush, Helms, Gingrich, and the rest. Republication Party has always been a lily-white party and I wish black conservatives realize that fact. Bennett knows his history and those critics, who are white, need to take heed and realize that Lincoln was a racist who do not like people of color period." [sic] Meanwhile, Art Hunter tells us, "This book was a severe disappointment. . . . The author (and those who feel as he does) are free to leave the country. They can get a passport for 50.00 and go. This country would be better off if they were gone. The hatred they spew creates divisiveness this country doesn't need. This book was 600 pages of ingratitude for the good life he [Bennett] currently leads." [sic] Another Amazon reviewer, Clay W. Sigg, has a professional critic's touch. He states that "Lincoln comes across as ambitious, indecisive, manipulative, misguided, decidedly racist, and desperately craving some kind of long-lasting historical legacy." Sigg is also prescient: "The book," he argues, "is so 'outside the box,' it will probably be censored by the mainstream media."

Forced Into Glory, while largely ignored by the main-

stream media, still excites the arguments and passions of a not so silent public. Jack White is correct to wonder why the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, or even the *Chicago Tribune*, Bennett's hometown newspaper, remain mum. Far worse books written by less talented and credentialed authors are frequently reviewed in those venues. But while asking White's question, let us take the time to ask other questions and seek answers in other venues. It may turn out that by searching "outside the box" we can get a clear picture of how a book is received and how at least one kind of public locates its value in our world of letters and ideas. *Forced Into Glory* deserves to be reviewed by the mainstream media. If they do decide to review it, they will, in this instance, be following the lead of the public for whom they allegedly write.

Lincoln Was a Product of His Time

William E. Gienapp, professor of history at Harvard University, responded:

I have not read Mr. Bennett's book, and therefore it would be unfair for me to comment on the merits of his argument.

I do not know why "the mainstream press" has ignored this book, since they do not turn to me for advice. But I would not attach much significance to that fact. Being reviewed in these papers promotes sales, but such reviews are no indication of a book's quality or importance.

Abraham Lincoln was a product of his society and his times, and he was no more able to completely transcend his culture than his modern-day critics are able to transcend theirs (although I think that he was much more successful in attempting to do this than they are). Modern critics' condemnation of Lincoln for not having the racial sensibilities of our own times is fundamentally ahistorical. Some of his racial comments grate on modern ears and are especially painful to African Americans. But to emphasize these words to the exclusion of his larger record on race, slavery, and black Americans' rights, and to ignore the profound change that the war produced in his thinking, is to fundamentally distort both his life and his historical legacy.

These critics also condemn Lincoln for failing to attack slavery immediately during the war and for his caution in promoting racial equality. Had he followed the advice of anti-slavery radicals (and modern critics) on these issues the Confederacy would have won the war and the chains riveting the limbs of American slaves been fastened tighter than ever.

Lincoln Rose Above Racism

Gabor Boritt, director of the Civil War Institute, Gettysburg College, and Fluhrer Professor of Civil War Studies, wrote:

If Lincoln was not antislavery down to his bones, he was America's greatest war criminal for his antislavery stand and election that prompted the southern states to go to war. Lincoln accepted that war at a cost of 1.5 million casualties in a nation of some 31 million. In a nation of 275 million that the United States is today, that number translates into more than 13 million people. The cost of Freedom and Union was high.

Did Lincoln share any of the country's pervasive nineteenth-century racism? Most likely, though Frederick Douglass thought he rose above it. Most whites carried deep prejudices, including Robert Gould Shaw, for example, the white colonel of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment who died with his African-American troops and was made famous in our time by the film *Glory*. Lincoln, too, was killed by a maddened black-hater after the president spoke about extending the franchise to some black people.

The Retreat From Lincoln Studies

Allen C. Guelzo is the dean of the Templeton Honors College at Eastern College and winner of the Lincoln Prize for 2000 for his biography *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing).

“Radical Republicans,” wrote George H. Boker in his 1864 election pamphlet *The Will of the People*, were “prone to condemn” Abraham Lincoln “as a half-hearted Abolitionist, who required perpetual stimulation to perform his duty; and who is not to be trusted because he did not, immediately on his inauguration, carry out the views which he had previously expressed of opposition to slavery.” So Americans have known, and knew pretty generally even during Lincoln's lifetime, that the Great Emancipator was also a cautious emancipator, and far less of an enthusiast for abolition and black civil rights than his mythical image might suggest. For that reason, there is really less surprise in Lerone Bennett's slashing and provocative condemnation of Lincoln as a racist, as an unwilling liberator — even as a pre-emptive conservative whose motives in issuing an Emancipation Proclamation are, in Boker's words, “not to be trusted” — than Bennett seems to think.

The real surprise in *Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's*

Lincoln's Parable on Liberty



“The shepherd drives the wolf from the sheep's throat for which the sheep thanks the shepherd as a liberator, while the wolf denounces him for the same act as a destroyer of liberty, especially as the sheep is the black one. Plainly the sheep and the wolf are not agreed upon a definition of the

word liberty; and precisely the same difference prevails today among us human creatures in the North, and all professing to love liberty. Hence we behold the processes by which thousands are daily passing from under the yoke of bondage, hailed by some as the advance of liberty, and bewailed by others as the destruction of all liberty.”

— Abraham Lincoln (1864)

White Dream is how much Bennett's book is the culmination of one of the most peculiar phenomena in American historical self-understanding, and that is the silent, almost-unnoticed withdrawal of African Americans from what was once the great consensus of blacks' admiration for Abraham Lincoln. While year after year popular magazine surveys continue to show that Lincoln remains the greatest of presidents in our national memory, African Americans have quietly withdrawn their consent from that proposition. In the years I worked and taught in West Philadelphia, I could find pictures of Martin Luther King Jr., or even Malcolm X, in black-owned businesses and restaurants; but the once-universal portraits of Abraham Lincoln are gone. Bennett's book is a good explanation of the disappearance.

Forced Into Glory is also a marker of another larger and more unsettling disengagement, since the withdrawal from Lincoln marches in tandem with a withdrawal from the promise of Lincoln's emancipation and its replacement by a nihilism which sees no meaning in American freedom and no hope for real racial progress. 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,

Illustration: David Levine

despair, and alienation from American public life have never been higher among African Americans, and Bennett's book is an uncomfortable measure of the depth of that bitterness, funneled at the single, largest popular symbol of racial reconciliation in American history. For all of his occasional gestures toward "rainbow" politics, the full effect of *Forced Into Glory* is contempt, for the American experiment as it has been lived out and for Lincoln as its badge of hope. "Lincoln is a key, perhaps the key, to the American personality," Bennett acknowledges, and he is not shy about admitting that a book about Lincoln is a book "about race, heroes, leadership, political morality, scholarship, and the American dream." And Bennett is dubious, if not simply hopeless, about them all.

It is because Bennett is wrong about Lincoln, however, that he is also wrong about all the other weightier matters of the law and the spirit of that "American dream."

Wrong, but not entirely wrong. Bennett's basic case against Lincoln has five parts: (1) Lincoln was not a great emancipator because the Emancipation Proclamation was so written that it, whatever it did legally, actually freed no single slave on the day of its issue and, in fact, Lincoln deliberately wrote it that way to head off the *real* emancipation document, the Second Confiscation Act; (2) Lincoln did this because he was antiblack and procolonization (which Bennett equates with ethnic cleansing) and only really favored plans for gradual emancipation which would have kept blacks in bondage into the twentieth century; (3) Lincoln took these stances because he consciously embraced whiteness and white privilege and entertained paranoid cultural and sexual fantasies about blacks and black inequality; (4) emancipation actually came through the Thirteenth Amendment, and only through the agitation of a handful of white equalitarians like Wendell Phillips, Charles Sumner, Owen Lovejoy, and Lyman Trumbull, who were the true great emancipators; and (5) the Emancipation Proclamation was a part of the chain of events which led to black freedom, but only one link in that chain.

What is *not* wrong in this scenario is that Lincoln harbored views on blacks which we should be bold enough to admit

were racist. As Bennett points out with relentless urgency, Lincoln's written and oral record is spotted with affirmations of white superiority, racist jokes, contempt for the abolitionists, the N-word, and, finally, advocacy of black deportation. What Bennett just as relentlessly ignores is the chronology of that racism, from much, much more over time to much, much less, and finally to what even William

Lloyd Garrison admitted was a "desire to do all that he can to see it right and possible for him to do to uproot slavery, and give fair play to the emancipated." Lincoln's last public speech, on April 11, 1865, endorsing voting rights for black Union veterans in Louisiana, was what triggered the rage of John Wilkes Booth and led directly to Lincoln's murder. If what too many Lincoln biographers have wanted to prettify is Lincoln's residual racism, then what Bennett just as willfully uglifies is Lincoln's capacity for change, for growth, for yielding to the logic of events that blacks themselves were shaping during the Civil War.

It is that willfulness which carries Bennett from there into a series of damaging historical misjudgments. Bennett believes that the Emancipation Proclamation was consciously crafted by Lincoln to preempt the implementation of the Second Confiscation Act, which Bennett insists liberated all the slaves of the rebel South. Actually the act liberated the slaves not of the rebel South but only those Southerners in actual rebellion (Bennett mistakes the act's targeting of those "in rebellion" for all residents of the Confederate states), which is to say those enlisted in the Confederate army or holding office in the Confederate government. The act would have done considerably less than the proclamation, since it would have allowed any slaveholder not in Confederate uniform or Confederate office to have kept legal title to their slaves. In fact, it failed to address the status of the thousands of black "contrabands" who had run away to the Union army and made themselves free by flight but whom the act would have "returned" (to borrow Bennett's imagery) to slavery.

If the supposed preempting of the Second Confiscation Act does not demonstrate Lincoln's deceit, then Bennett's

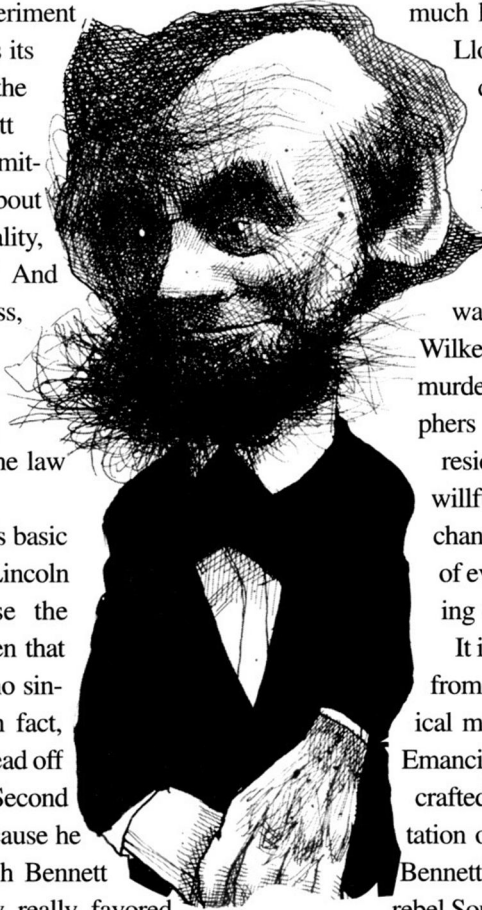


Illustration: John Springs

default position is to ask why, if Lincoln had no evil designs in the proclamation, did he not show any better ones? Why, for instance, is the text of the proclamation so flat, so missing in the great flights of eloquence Lincoln summoned on other occasions? Why did Lincoln wait 18 months after the start of the Civil War to issue the proclamation? Bennett is sure of what *he* would have done in Lincoln's place: "I would have freed the slaves immediately and provided 40 acres of land and a mule to each head of household." Isn't this slowness, Bennett asks, ipso facto proof of Lincoln's want of good intentions toward blacks and black equality?

The answer to these questions, like the Second Confiscation Act, is bound up with Bennett's careless plunge after every blot he can find on Lincoln's racial record. Let us understand several things about Lincoln's situation in the Civil War. First, Lincoln is a constitutional president. He does not possess plenary powers, either to perform good deeds (like freeing slaves) or to perform evil ones. When, in 1863, Salmon P. Chase begged Lincoln unilaterally to expand the scope of the proclamation, Lincoln pointed out in a letter of reply to Chase the dangers of such an action:

Would I not thus give up all footing upon constitution or law? Would I not thus be in the boundless field of absolutism? Could this pass unnoticed, or unresisted? Could it fail to be perceived that without any further stretch, I might do the same in Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri; and even change any law in any state? Would not many of our own friends shrink away appalled? Would it not lose us the elections, and with them, the very cause we seek to advance?

The sum of Bennett's complaint is that Lincoln did not set aside the Constitution at once and establish a benevolent dictatorship; and indeed, Bennett is not reluctant to dismiss the Constitution as "marks on pieces of paper," especially when set beside the crying evil of slavery. "What could possibly be a greater evil to the cause of human liberty than slavery?" Bennett asks. And I reply, with Lincoln: the destruction of a Constitution which keeps presidents from ever returning any of us to slavery again.

Second, Bennett severely (and the word *severely* is in this case not severe enough) underestimates the degree of resistance in the white North to any moves toward emancipation during the Civil War, and to any subsequent moves toward

black civil equality. Bennett refers to the white equalitarians — Phillips, Sumner, Lovejoy, Trumbull — as proof that sufficient good will on these policies existed to make Lincoln's warnings about white backlash mere special pleading. But any inspection of the newspapers, letters, diaries, and congressional proceedings of the war years shows that Lincoln was taking sizable political risks in emancipation. The

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proclamation triggered massive electoral punishment of the Lincoln administration in the 1862 elections. In Lincoln's home state of Illinois, the legislature went Democratic, called

for a negotiated end to the war, and had to be prorogued by the Republican governor to keep Illinois from withdrawing from the war effort. The proclamation brought the principal Union army, the Army of the Potomac, within inches of a coup under its Lincoln-hating commander, George B. McClellan. Even worse, it brought the foreign imperial powers — especially Britain and France — to the brink of intervention in the Civil War, since European opinion was convinced that emancipation would set off slave uprisings (reminiscent of the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857-1858) which would bathe the South in white blood. Had Lincoln not displayed the caution he did, emancipation might never have happened at all, or might have been aborted by political eruptions which would have put all practical hope of black freedom out of mind for another generation.

Nor is it clear that Bennett's equalitarian heroes were particularly more distinguished in their leadership than Lincoln in his. Wendell Phillips, the most consistent equalitarian, was also a romantic Jeffersonian Democrat who attacked those who "trust more to reason than to feeling," and whose party (and political ideology) had created the original political sanctions for slavery in the first place. Charles Sumner, who perpetually prodded Lincoln toward emancipation, also described Lincoln as "a good honest Anti-Slavery man" who, as much as Sumner found him frustrating to move more quickly, "made speeches that nobody else could have made." Lyman Trumbull was a political maverick whose version of the Thirteenth Amendment actually gutted it of language which would have specified black civil rights. Owen Lovejoy, preacher and politician, was a bitter and courageous foe of slavery in Congress. But even Lovejoy introduced measures as an Illinois legislator that at least con-

doned the prospect of colonization. In 1855 Lovejoy “presented a remonstrance from the colored people of the State,” asking for the delay of any colonization proposals “until they are all able to read and write, and unless separate colonies be assigned to those of different shades of color.” The reason for this novel brand of separate but equal deportation was the free blacks’ “objection . . . that blacks and mulattoes cannot live harmoniously together.” Racism, in the nineteenth century, spared no one.

The problem of slavery in the Civil War was not one of whether to do right, but of how to do right in the midst of a racial and political hurricane without pulling down the constitutional house which affords the only protection from the storm. This is why, thirdly, the

Emancipation Proclamation appeared to do so little in Bennett’s eyes: because there was

no mechanism for it to do more. The proclamation was, as Bennett repeats, only an edict under martial law, and applied only in those areas where martial law was in effect — not to the loyal slave states of Kentucky, Missouri, Delaware, and Maryland, and not even to those zones of the Confederacy now securely behind Union lines. This, for Bennett, is proof of Lincoln’s reluctance to destroy slavery with one sweeping universal decree. Actually, it was Lincoln’s recognition that, legally, he had no authority as president to issue universal decrees, and that any step beyond a martial-law emancipation would be contested in the federal courts, where Roger Taney (the author of the infamous Dred Scott decision) was still ensconced as the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

The concern I have for Bennett’s book is that excesses like these only beg Lincoln biographers and American historians to ignore it. And Bennett makes the ignoring easier by indulging a bizarre rhetoric of black racial fascism, in which blackness and whiteness become ontological qualities, with white the color of oppression and black the color of the oppressed, and truth “the perspective of the disinherited.” This is what gives Bennett the rationale for excluding from *Forced Into Glory* any serious consideration of the restraints that compelled so prudent a movement toward emancipation and black civil rights. Once one wears the mantle of the “disinherited” no other perspective needs to be reckoned with as “truth.” But so thought every fascist regime of the last century, all of them posing their own race or ethnicity or

group identity as the “disinherited,” and eventually targeting Jews or kulaks as the “oppressor.” It is certainly no comfort to find Bennett citing as his ideological authorities, against Lincoln, the French Stalinist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the “disinherited” theorist of terrorism, Frantz Fanon, if only because they remind us of how routinely twentieth-century movements of self-determination based on racial identity and racial grievance quickly degenerated into totalitarianism that eliminated personal freedom and autonomy. Wisdom, in a time of great wrongs like slavery or apartheid or the Holocaust, is to know when the claims of justice ought to yield to the need for reconciliation. That is wisdom admittedly hard to find, and it is not found on the pages of *Forced*

Into Glory.

“*The study of Lincoln can be in itself a passage to freedom for both white and black Americans.*”

But that is what should compel Lincoln scholars to take Bennett much more seriously than I fear

they will — not so much because his arguments have historical weight, as because the retreat of African Americans from Lincoln and Lincoln studies is itself a disaster, especially coming as it does from highly successful upper-middle-class African-American business entrepreneurs like Bennett. For that cohort to turn its back on Lincoln is a silent vote against the politics of Enlightenment prudence and for Kantian romantic absolutism, against the transformation to autonomy and for the self-victimization of victimhood, against (as Patterson puts it) moral responsibility and for the trap of determinism. But the flaccid notice given to this retreat by white students of Lincoln is no less lamentable. Certainly, the Lincoln studies organizations which I have been part of over the years have made no particularly determined effort to address this retreat. “We can succeed only by concert,” Lincoln said in 1862. “It is not, ‘can any of us imagine better?’ but, ‘can we all do better?’” The question now echoes ominously, even among the Lincoln fraternity.

There is a terrible loss implied by this mutual failure. The study of Lincoln can be, in itself, a passage to freedom, for white and black Americans alike, a study that acknowledges all the crudeness and all the shortcomings of our American undertakings, both personal as well as those imposed by circumstances, yet without ever losing the hope to do better, to expect a “vast future.” Bennett, in the end, had the most fundamental point right: the study of Lincoln is the study of ourselves as Americans. Withdrawal from that study spells a sadly diminished future for us all.

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