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“The Scorpion’s Sting”: Dr. James Oakes and the 2014 Lincoln Lyceum Lecture

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Abstract

The annual Lincoln Lyceum Lecture took place on Thursday, March 27th at 7:30pm in Gettysburg College’s Mara Auditorium. This year’s Lincoln Lyceum guest speaker was Dr. James Oakes, two- time winner of the Lincoln Prize for his books *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass* (2008 Prize) and *Abraham Lincoln and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics and Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861 -1865* (2013 Prize). He has previously taught at Princeton University and Northwestern University and is currently the Distinguished Professor of History at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Gettysburg College, Lincoln Lyceum Lecture, James Oakes

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

“The Scorpion’s Sting”: Dr. James Oakes and the 2014 Lincoln Lyceum Lecture

April 17, 2014

By: Meg Sutter, '16

The annual Lincoln Lyceum Lecture took place on Thursday, March 27th at 7:30pm in Gettysburg College’s Mara Auditorium. This year’s Lincoln Lyceum guest speaker was Dr. James Oakes, two- time winner of the Lincoln Prize for his books *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass (2008 Prize)* and *Abraham Lincoln and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics and Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861 - 1865 (2013 Prize)*. He has previously taught at Princeton University and Northwestern University and is currently the Distinguished Professor of History at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.



Dr. Oakes addressed a lecture hall of students, professors, and the local Gettysburg community with his lecture entitled “The Scorpion’s Sting: The Origins of Slavery’s Destruction.” He began by asking the audience if they knew what he was referencing by titling his lecture “The Scorpion’s Sting.” To answer, he quoted Thaddeus Stevens when he described the Republican Party’s policy to “encircle the Slave States of this Union with Free States as a cordon of fire, and that then slavery like a scorpion, would sting itself to death.” The Republican Party hoped that if the government did nothing to preserve slavery and instead merely recognized it, slavery would gradually die away. Lincoln himself proclaimed that slavery would “die a natural death.” After all, the North had abolished slavery one state at a time, so why would the Southern states not succumb as well?

Dr. Oakes took us through Lincoln’s struggles during the war on how to destroy slavery gradually yet permanently. Before the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln hoped to

abolish slavery gradually. He proposed to Delaware Congressman George Fisher in the fall of 1861 to compensate slaveholders in Delaware to free their slaves. If this succeeded, Lincoln hoped it would be a role model for other border states like Missouri, Kentucky, and Maryland to follow. When Delaware refused the proposal, Lincoln opened it up to all border-states. Any state willing to free its slaves would be compensated by federal funds. When again this failed to take root in the border-states, Lincoln was forced to radically alter his plan.

On January 1, 1863, Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation freeing all the slaves in the states and parts of states in rebellion. Lincoln's policy of gradual emancipation suddenly changed to immediate emancipation. This was the first time in history that a military emancipation was meant to completely abolish slavery, Oakes claimed. In previous wars throughout history, slaves joined sides against their masters; however, the institution of slavery was not completely abolished. Freed slaves were now allowed to join the Union army to fight the rebels. But the Emancipation Proclamation did not free all the slaves. It excluded areas not under rebellion such as captured Southern cities like Nashville and New Orleans and the border-states. The problem Lincoln faced now was how to emancipate the slaves in these areas and how to make emancipation permanent. Lincoln was unsure he even had the right to completely abolish slavery.

In December of 1863, Lincoln proposed a new policy that would bypass any supposed unconstitutionality with the Emancipation Proclamation. He issued the Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction that allowed any persons in rebellion to take a loyalty oath to the Union. If ten percent of a state's eligible voters took the oath then a new state government could be formed. In January of 1864, Florida began its efforts to restore a state government to the Union. In response to Lincoln's new policy, the Republicans made a better approach by drafting the 13th Amendment. State-by-state abolition was necessary to pass the 13th Amendment, though. Arkansas began the process in early 1864 when it became the first state to abolish slavery of its own accord in sixty years. Other southern states began to follow Arkansas's lead including Maryland, Louisiana, Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee. By the last year of the war only one more state was needed to pass the 13th Amendment. Finally on December 6, 1865, the amendment was ratified.

Dr. Oakes argued that the South had seceded to preserve slavery. While the abolition of slavery and the ratification of the 13th amendment were "inconceivable in 1860," these measures were plausible in 1865.