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Allen C. Guelzo
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

“The world has never had a good definition of the word liberty,” Abraham Lincoln said in 1864. And surely, from Lincoln of all people, that statement must come as a surprise, and for two reasons. In the first place, no one in American history might be said to have been a more shining example of liberty than Abraham Lincoln. Not only had he exercised liberty to its fullest extent, rising from poverty and obscurity to become the 16th president of the United States, but in the process he became the Great Emancipator of over three million slaves, and if anyone should have been in a position to know what liberty meant, it was Lincoln. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Abraham Lincoln, Civil War, President, liberty, Great Emancipator, slavery, Emancipation Proclamation

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Lincoln and Liberty, Too

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Allen Carl Guelzo

“The world has never had a good definition of the word *liberty*,” Abraham Lincoln said in 1864.¹ And surely, from Lincoln of all people, that statement must come as a surprise, and for two reasons. In the first place, no one in American history might be said to have been a more shining example of liberty than Abraham Lincoln. Not only had he exercised liberty to its fullest extent, rising from poverty and obscurity to become the 16th president of the United States, but in the process he became the Great Emancipator of over three million slaves, and if anyone should have been in a position to know what *liberty* meant, it was Lincoln. The campaign song which accompanied him to his election as president in 1860 cried:

*Hurrah for the choice of the nation!
Our chieftain so brave and so true;
We'll go for the great Reformation –
For Lincoln and Liberty too!*²

Why, then, would he complain that no “good definition” of liberty has ever been on offer? And in the second place, by Lincoln’s day, great minds had been offering definitions of liberty for quite a long time, and the idea that a politician could so breezily announce, in the *anno domini* 1864, that nothing worthwhile had as yet been accomplished in the way of a “good definition” seems, at the very least, cheeky on Lincoln’s part.

But Lincoln had his reasons, and it is not wise to underestimate them. Backwoods-born though he was, Lincoln had more than the usual share of intellectual curiosity, and he spent a lifetime schooling himself in abstruse

questions about political economy, science, philosophy – even the theorems of Euclid. “Anyone,” warned Lincoln’s long-time legal associate Leonard Swett, “who took Abe Lincoln for a simple-minded man would soon wake up with his back in a ditch.”³ And his backwoods birth had been to a family of hard-shell Calvinistic Baptists for whom deep contemplation of the mysteries of predestination and free will came as second nature. Above all, as he explained in 1864, there was a certain slipperiness in the concept of liberty which eluded easy grasp, and nowhere was that more apparent than in the political problem which loomed over all others in his day, that of slavery. “We all declare for liberty,” Lincoln observed, “but in using the same word we do not all mean the same thing.” The slaveowner believes that his liberty consists in the freedom to own slave property without the interference of others; the abolitionist believes that liberty consists in freeing the slave from the slaveowner’s control. This reminded Lincoln of something out of the Gospels: “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 the destroyer of liberty, especially as the sheep was a black one.” As much as he was a believer that “the word *liberty* may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself, and the product of his labor,” there was quite a dispute still going on in 1864 between *that* definition of liberty and one which said that liberty was the freedom “to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men’s labor.”⁴ And, in 1864, that dispute about the meaning of *liberty* was anything but a merely philosophical one. Nor, for that matter, has it become any less urgent – or slippery – in our own day.

It was not that Lincoln’s world actually lacked for definitions of liberty, though, or even what we might call *good* definitions of liberty, since people had been offering pretty respectable ones for almost as long as human thinking had been going on. Some of the earliest uses of the term *liberty* appear on cuneiform tablets in Babylonian libraries; Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon make the struggle of the Greek city-states into epics about liberty, whether from the Persians or from each other; and from Plato through Augustine, liberty becomes internalized as a question over whether individuals possess a freely-acting will.

But along with this increasing sophistication in talking about liberty came an increasing puzzlement over liberty’s ambiguities. Plato agonized over the peculiar way in which the human mind understood one thing, but then did another. “Most people are unwilling to do what is best,” Plato complained, “even though they know what it is and are able to do it.”⁵ Augustine had no doubt that he had a capacity for choosing – a will, or *voluntas* – “as surely as I knew I had life within me.” But he also was con-

scious that he had surprisingly little power over this will: the mind could opt to move in one direction, yet the will “does not carry out its command.” In fact, it turned out that the *will* directed the mind, based on the force of love, rather than the other way round, as Augustine discovered when he contemplated making a public profession of Christianity, but found that his will blocked the path: “I was held fast, not in fetters clamped upon me by another, but by my own will, which had the strength of iron chains.”⁶ This will might be free, in the sense of being loose from the dictate of the mind, but only to *sin* – which did not, in the most ultimate sense, mean much in the way of liberty.

So, in what direction did liberty lie? In a will that complied with the dictates of reason? If so, was the human will actually free to choose? Or was it in a will that controlled the mind and led it to choose what the mind imagined was reasonable but which was actually the direction of the will’s passions? If so, was the will then free, or merely anarchic? And was anarchy, in fact, more of an enemy to liberty than reason?

The medieval scholastics struggled to place the bit of reason firmly in the mouth of the will, but with something less than perfect success. And scholastic theology itself came under severe Augustinian challenge from the most famous Augustinian of them all, Martin Luther. Two things impressed themselves on Luther: “the immutable will of God on the one hand, and the impotence of our corrupt will on the other.” In fact, without “the necessary foreknowledge of God and the necessity of events, Christian faith is utterly destroyed, and the promises of God and the whole Gospel, fall to the ground completely; for the Christian’s chief and only comfort in every adversity lies in knowing that God does not lie, but brings all things to pass immutably, and that his will cannot be resisted, altered, or impeded.”⁷ It was divine grace which gave a corrupted will the power to choose rightly.

Yet even Luther recognized how many-faced the question of liberty could turn out to be, because as soon as he turned his attention to the authority of the Church and the Papacy, it was liberty that Luther wanted to bring to front-stage. “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none,” Luther announced in his last appeal for reconciliation to Pope Leo X. Yet that intrinsic freedom, while it might be enough to nerve Luther to defy papal authority, should not be understood as a license to anarchy: the Christian is also “a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” Luther was aware that “these two theses seem to contradict each other.” But in practice, Luther intended for the Pope to embrace the latter, and be the servant rather than the tyrant, while Luther would embrace the first and blow the trumpet of revolt against Roman authority. And the Christian should consider him/herself “free from all works” for *justification*, yet be willing to take upon

him/herself the yoke of works for *sanctification*, in order to “empty himself ... and to serve, help, and in every way deal with his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him.”⁸

There is no evidence that Abraham Lincoln ever came into direct contact with Luther’s writings. It was, rather, the starkest form of Calvinist predestination that Lincoln absorbed from birth. The Little Pigeon Creek Baptist Church to which his parents belonged affirmed that “we believe in election by grace, given in Jesus Christ before the world began, and that God calls, regenerates and sanctifies all who are made meet for glory by his special grace.”⁹ Lincoln himself was never inclined to embrace this forbidding creed personally – he was never baptized, and never actually joined any church as a professing member. But Calvinism left its imprint on him all the same, even if its substance was filled-in by secular determinism. Judge David Davis, who presided over the circuit court where Lincoln practiced for most of his life, recalled that Lincoln “had no faith in the Christian sense of that term,” but he did have an abiding confidence “in laws, principles – causes & Effects.” His long-time ally in Illinois politics, Joseph Gillespie, said that “in religious matters, Mr. Lincoln was theoretically a predestinarian,” and told Gillespie (with perhaps a double *entendre* in the back of his mind) “that he could not avoid believing in predestination.”¹⁰

Lincoln did not mind telling people, “I am a fatalist,” and have been “all my life a fatalist.”¹¹ In 1847, he described himself as believing in a “Doctrine of Necessity,” in which “the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power, over which the mind itself has no control.”¹² He confessed in 1864 – in fact, just two weeks before his comments on the definition of liberty – that he had never “controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.” Herndon captured this nearly as well as anyone when he recalled that Lincoln believed there was “no freedom of the will”: “Things were to be, and they came, doomed to come; men were made as they are made by superior conditions over which they had no control; the fates settled things” and an individual “is simply a *simple tool*, a mere cog in the wheel, a part, a small part, of this vast iron machine, that strikes and cuts, grinds and mashes, all things, including man, that resist it.” Even his wife acknowledged that Lincoln believed that “what is to be will be, and no cares of ours can arrest or reverse the decree.”¹³

What explained human action then? Lincoln’s answer was, the influence of *motive*. “The great leading law of human nature is motive,” Lincoln explained to Herndon. “Motives moved the man to every voluntary act of his life.” And the power motives exerted was their appeal to human self-interest. “His idea,” Herndon wrote, “was that all human actions were caused by motives, and at the bottom of these motives was self.” Motives

appeal to self-interest; self-interest rises automatically to embrace the motives, and action results. Hence, there “was no freedom of the will,” because human action was little more than a response to motives. “Men are made by conditions that surround them, that have somewhat existed for a hundred thousand years or more.”¹⁴ John Calvin himself could hardly have put it more clearly.

But how do we reconcile a man who denies any belief in human free will or who rejects any notion of human autonomy, with the author of emancipation, the enemy of slavery, and the poster-boy of American self-improvement? Nor is this purely an academic question about the mental inventory of one long-dead president: as a nation, we struggle still with the conundrum of liberty and necessity, and we have not always come up with very attractive answers.

In some senses, Lincoln could avoid any sense of conflict between the imperatives of liberty and determinism by simply compartmentalizing them. He was not, after all, a systematic intellectual, much less an academic, so there was no pressing need for him to reconcile every aspect of his ideas. When Lincoln spoke of liberty as a *political* subject, he seemed never to have even heard of the ghost of Calvin, or Luther, or Augustine. The burning of the “lamp of liberty . . . in your bosoms,” he said, is a natural instinct, which, when rightly attended-to, will guarantee that “there shall no longer be a doubt that all men are created free and equal.”¹⁵ Liberty is a natural right, and its presence in human nature is the greatest safeguard against its destruction by tyrants.

“What constitutes the bulwark of our own liberty and independence?” Lincoln asked during the seven great debates he staged with Stephen A. Douglas in 1858. “It is not our frowning battlements, or bristling seacoasts, our army and navy . . . Our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in us . . . the spirit which prized liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands everywhere.”¹⁶ And not only in us: even the humblest of creatures – the ant, for instance – possesses, and is conscious of possessing, the natural right of liberty. “The ant who has toiled and dragged a crumb to his nest will furiously defend the fruit of his labor against whatever robber assails him.”¹⁷

Politically speaking, the task of Americans in his day, Lincoln believed, was not one of *establishing* liberty – that had already been accomplished in the most signal fashion by the American Founders. They created “a political edifice of liberty and equal rights; ‘tis ours only to transmit these – the former unprofaned by the foot of an invader, the latter undecayed by the lapse of time and untorn by usurpation.” But that was not necessarily an easier task than that of the Founders. In his first great political speech, in 1838, Lincoln

warned that the real danger to American liberty came, not externally, but internally. “All the armies of Europe, Asia and Africa combined, with all the treasure of the earth . . . in their military chest; with a Buonaparte for a commander, could not by force, take a drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years.” No: “if destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher.”¹⁸

And that, of course, was something that Lincoln believed was actually underway, in the spread of slavery. Lincoln regarded the Founders with such worshipful awe that he could not quite bring himself to say that they had made a mistake in turning a blind eye towards the presence of slavery in their new republic. But he did believe that the blind eye they *did* turn had been misunderstood: the Founders tolerated slavery because they were certain that it was a dying institution in America, dying from poor productivity and dying from its inconsistency with the fundamentals of liberty, and they were willing to let it die on its own rather than run the risks involved in ripping it up by the roots. “The plain, unmistakable spirit of that age toward slavery was hostility to the principle and toleration only by necessity.” But rather than attack it head-on and “lose much of what they had already gained” in creating the Union, they “restricted its spread,” banned the importation of slaves, and thus placed it “in the course of ultimate extinction.”¹⁹ But a nefarious Slave Power, nursing a desire for their own advantage and fame, had breathed new life into slavery, made it powerful and profitable, and now demanded full access of all of the Republic’s territories.

What made the Slave Power’s growth so dangerous was its unrelenting appeal to *self-interest*. Slavery, as he told Joseph Gillespie, was “the most glittering, ostentation and displaying property in the world” and so was proving “highly seductive to the thoughtless and giddy-headed young men who looked upon work as vulgar and ungentlemanly.”²⁰ And slavery’s profitability as the labor-system by which America’s most-prized commodity, cotton, was grown gave it the protection of *national* self-interest as well. “You must recollect,” Lincoln warned in 1856, “that the slave property is worth a billion dollars,” and giving up slavery would mean both personal and national economic ruin, while “free-state men” have nothing to hold out as a reward but “sentiment alone.”²¹ He told the story in 1860 of “the dissenting minister who argued with one of the established church” and

was always met by the reply, “I can’t see it so.” He opened the Bible and pointed to a passage, but the orthodox minister replied, “I can’t see it so.” Then he showed him a single word – “Can you see that?” “Yes, I see it,” was the reply. The dissenter laid a guinea over the word,

and asked, “Do you see it now?” So here. Whether the owners of this species of property [slavery] do really see it as it is, it is not for me to say; but if they do, they see it as it is through two billions of dollars, and that is a pretty thick coating.²²

It was not the dollars that Lincoln objected to. He had not worked his way up to a successful law practice merely so that, like Caesar, he could spurn the base rungs by which he ascended. To the contrary, financial self-transformation was, in Lincoln’s eye, the principal blessing of liberty. “We do not propose any war upon capital,” he announced in 1860; if anything, he wanted to “allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with everybody else.” Liberty and equality he distilled into the single concept of “Advancement – improvement in condition.” That “is the order of things in a society of equals.” A truly republican society is one in which “the prudent penniless beginner in the world labors for wages a while, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land for himself, then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him. This is the just and generous system and prosperous system which opens the way to all, gives hope to all, and consequent energy and progress and improvement of condition to all.”²³ The entire purpose of “the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty” was “to elevate the condition of men – to lift artificial weights from all shoulders; to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all; to afford all an unfettered start and a fair chance in the race of life.”²⁴

This, of course, was exactly what slavery did *not* do. A slave was born a slave, continued a slave, and had only the dimmest hope of ever being other than a slave. “The most dumb and stupid slave that ever toiled for a master does constantly know that he is wronged,” Lincoln argued, and the very helplessness he feels in the face of that wrong debases both the slave and his work.²⁵ But slavery spread its wrong beyond the slave. “We think slavery impairs and endangers the general welfare,” Lincoln declared.²⁶ It has fostered “a durable element of discord” within the nation, and will foster “a tendency to subvert the first principle of free government,” and as such, “to prevent the spread and nationalization of slavery is a national concern, and must be attended to by the nation.”²⁷

Very subtly, it is worth noticing, Lincoln had begun to slip the argument from *self-interest* in through the back door of liberty. Enslaving others was an exercise of self-interest, “founded” (as Lincoln said in 1854) “in the selfishness of man’s nature.” He would have liked to rest “opposition to it in his love of justice,” but in fact Lincoln did not trust very much to such nobler instincts.²⁸ He preferred to turn the weapon of self-interest back on the slaveholder, and ask, if slavery was so desirable, why the slaveowner’s self-interest

mysteriously forbade him to embrace it himself. “Although volume upon volume is written to prove slavery a very good thing,” he said in 1854, “we never hear of a man who wishes to take the good of it by being a slave himself Consider if you know any good thing, that no man desires for himself.”²⁹ And in 1863, he asked hostile whites to support the guarantee of freedom to black soldiers in the Union Army because only by keeping the promise that enlistment would lead to freedom could black soldiers, and victory in the Civil War, be secured. “Negroes, like other people, act upon motives,” Lincoln wrote, “Why should they do anything for us, if we will do nothing for them? If they stake their lives for us they must be prompted by the strongest motive, even the promise of freedom. And the promise being made, must be kept.”³⁰ Lincoln began by fearing that self-interest was at war with liberty; it was a measure of his own intellectual agility that, like so many before him, he found a way to re-make self-interest into liberty’s guarantee.

“Whenever this question shall be settled, it must be settled on some philosophical basis,” Lincoln said in 1860.³¹ What Lincoln meant by *some philosophical basis* is not clear; it was certainly not an invitation to regard political questions like slavery as occasions for ethical or metaphysical musings. But he did believe that Americans wanted a “good definition” of liberty, and he was prepared to give it to them. It was not a definition friendly to the interests of the wolf, but it was also one that expected more than we usually do from the sheep, because so much of it assumed that the liberty the Founders had in mind was predominately an *economic* liberty, the freedom of open-ended opportunity. It was, in other words, a very characteristically bourgeois liberty, and there is no mistaking the resemblances and overlaps between Lincoln and the major figures of nineteenth-century liberal economics: Alexis de Tocqueville, Richard Cobden, John Stuart Mill. Lincoln’s liberty belonged to the family of what Isaiah Berlin called “negative liberty” – the freedom to be left alone and unfettered in the pursuit of something desirable, “the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others.”³² Lincoln could barely have noticed, if at all, that the shape of liberty was already being turned on its head in the nineteenth century, to the point where the entrance to a concentration camp (a mere eighty years after Lincoln’s death) could be emblazoned with the hideous motto, *Arbeit macht frei*, and the most popular portrayal of totalitarianism could take as one of its mottos, “Freedom is slavery.”

One of the deadlier by-products of what Eric Hobsbawm called “The Age of Extremes” (from 1914 to 1991) was a desperate effort to claw away from the totalitarians of the recent past (and present) into a new zone of absolute autonomy, governed by neither rule nor religion nor self-interest, but by an absolute annihilation of restraint. We tend to identify this efface-

ment of restraint most readily in its *material* forms, in the increasingly unalloyed and unashamed pursuit of gain and profit at any cost, in the trampling of the “one-percent” over every decency, because decency is itself a restraint. But for all that we lament the unruléd power of the *material* “one-percenters,” we are not nearly so attentive to the trampling of *moral* “one-percenters,” with their feckless pursuit of hedonism, entertainment, and the castration of nature, over every *moral* law – because *morality* is resented by the autonomous Masters of the Universe fully as much as *regulation*, for both come in the form of *restraint*. Instead of using self-interest to assist liberty, we have made the pursuit of self-interest the *essence* of liberty.

But self-interest, powerful though it may be, is an unforgiving master – it corrupts, eats up, and destroys whatever we poor fools expose to it, material, moral or spiritual. The individual who cannot abide moral or material restraint as an impeachment of freedom will never be able to develop self-restraint, either, and lacking that, becomes more than ever a slave. Autonomy thus promises liberty, but ends in bondage. Perhaps Lincoln was a more profound philosopher than we think, or than he thought. If self-interest cannot be allowed to roam over the land without reducing us all to slaves, perhaps it can be tamed in ways that will make it *serve* liberty. For no one, as Lincoln said, who understands what constitutes real self-interest can wish slavery upon themselves. And perhaps, in the end, Luther was right, too: we can only be “the free lord of all, subject to none,” by being “a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

Notes

- 1 Lincoln, “Address at Sanitary Fair, Baltimore, Maryland” (April 18, 1864), in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (ed. Roy P. Basler et al; New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953) 7:301. [Hereinafter CW].
- 2 “Lincoln and Liberty,” in *The Republican Campaign Songster for 1864* (Cincinnati, 1864) 41.
- 3 Henry C. Whitney to William H. Herndon (August 29, 1887), in *Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (ed. R. O. Davis and D. L. Wilson; Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998) 636.
- 4 Lincoln, “Address at Sanitary Fair, Baltimore, Maryland,” 302.
- 5 Plato, *Protagoras* (trans. S. Lombardo and K. Bell; Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1992) 49.
- 6 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 8, sec. 5.
- 7 Martin Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will: A New Translation of De Servo Arbitrio* (1525), *Martin Luther’s Reply to Erasmus of Rotterdam* (ed. J. I. Packer; London: Clark, 1957) 81.
- 8 Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings* (ed. Timothy F. Lull; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005) 393.

- 9 Ida M. Tarbell, *In the Footsteps of the Lincolns* (New York, NY: Harper, 1924) 144.
- 10 Davis interview with William H. Herndon (1866), and Joseph Gillespie to William H. Herndon (January 31, 1866 and December 8, 1866), in *Herndon's Informants*, 181, 506, 529.
- 11 Lincoln, in Isaac N. Arnold, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Chicago, IL: Jansen, McClurg, 1885) 81.
- 12 Lincoln, "Handbill Replying to Charges of Infidelity" (July 31, 1846), in CW 1:382.
- 13 Herndon (February 18, 1886) and "Lincoln's Philosophy and Religion" (August 21, 1887), in *The Hidden Lincoln: From The Letters & Papers of William H. Herndon* (ed. Emanuel Hertz; New York, NY: Viking, 1938) 142, 406.
- 14 Herndon (February 18, 1886), Herndon to Jesse K. Weik (February 25, 1887), and "Lincoln's Philosophy and Religion" (August 21, 1887), in *The Hidden Lincoln*, 142, 179, 408.
- 15 Lincoln, "Speech at Chicago, Illinois" (July 10, 1858), in CW 2:502.
- 16 Lincoln, "Speech at Edwardsville, Illinois" (September 11, 1858), in CW 3:95.
- 17 Lincoln, "Fragment on Government" (July 1, 1854), in CW 2:222.
- 18 Lincoln, "Address Before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois" (January 27, 1838), in CW 1:109.
- 19 Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria, Illinois" (October 16, 1854), in CW 2:274.
- 20 Gillespie to William H. Herndon (January 31, 1866), in *Herndon's Informants*, 183.
- 21 Lord Charnwood, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York, NY: Garden City, 1917) 128.
- 22 Lincoln, "Speech at New Haven, Connecticut" (March 6, 1860), in CW 4:16.
- 23 Lincoln, "Fragment on Free Labor" and "Speech at New Haven, Connecticut" (March 6, 1860), in CW 3:462, 4:24.
- 24 Lincoln, "Message to Congress in Special Session" (July 4, 1861), in CW 4:438.
- 25 Lincoln, "Fragment on Government" (July 1, 1854), in CW 2:222.
- 26 Lincoln, "Notes for Speeches at Columbus and Cincinnati, Ohio" (September 16-17, 1859), in CW 3:434.
- 27 Lincoln, "To Schuyler Colfax" (July 6, 1859), and "Speech at Columbus, Ohio" (September 16, 1859), in CW 3:391, 406.
- 28 Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria, Illinois" (October 16, 1854), in CW 2:271.
- 29 Lincoln, "Fragment on Government" (July 1, 1854), in CW 2:222.
- 30 Lincoln, "To James C. Conkling" (August 26, 1863), in CW 6:409.
- 31 Lincoln, "Speech at New Haven, Connecticut" (March 6, 1860), in CW 4:17.
- 32 Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958), in *Four Essays on Liberty* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1969) 122-123.

Allen C. Guelzo is the Henry R. Luce Professor of the Civil War Era and a professor of history at Gettysburg College. He is formerly Dean of the Templeton Honors College and the Grace F. Kea Professor of American History at Eastern University. Guelzo holds an M.A. and a Ph.D. in history from the University of Pennsylvania, an M.Div. from Philadelphia College of Bible (now Cairn University), and an honorary doctorate in history from Lincoln College in Illinois. He is the author of numerous articles, reviews and books including Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America and Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President, both winners of the Lincoln Prize. His most recent book is Gettysburg: The Last Invasion.