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The Lincoln Enigma: The Changing Faces of an American Icon

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The Lincoln Enigma: The Changing Faces of an American Icon

Description

Nearly a century and a half after his death, Abraham Lincoln remains an intrinsic part of the American consciousness, yet his intentions as president and his personal character continue to stir debate.

Now, in *The Lincoln Enigma*, Gabor Boritt invites renowned Lincoln scholars, and rising new voices, to take a look at much-debated aspects of Lincoln's life, including his possible gay relationships, his plan to send blacks back to Africa, and his high-handed treatment of the Constitution. Boritt explores Lincoln's proposals that looked to a lily-white America. Jean Baker marvels at Lincoln's loves and marriage. David Herbert Donald highlights the similarities and differences of the Union and Confederate presidents' roles as commanders-in-chief. Douglas Wilson shows us the young Lincoln—not the strong leader of popular history, but a young man who questions his own identity and struggles to find his purpose. Gerald Prokopowicz searches for the military leader, William C. Harris for the peacemaker, and Robert Bruce meditates on Lincoln and death. In a final chapter Boritt and Harold Holzer offer a fascinating portfolio of Lincoln images in modern art.

Acute and thought-provoking in their observations, this all-star cast of historians—including two Pulitzer and three Lincoln Prize winners—questions our assumptions of Lincoln, and provides a new vitality to our ongoing reflections on his life and legacy. [*From the publisher*]

Keywords

Abraham Lincoln, Civil War, Slavery, Emancipation, Emancipation Proclamation

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Comments

Attached is Gabor Boritt's introduction to the edited volume, *The Lincoln Enigma: The Changing Faces of an American Icon*.

Introduction

As the new millennium dawned at the Green Parrot in Key West, the Rocking Jakes played loud and the crowd roared and swayed. A watering place for locals, its New Year's patrons were happy. Key West is the southernmost town in the United States. Next to the pinball machine, "Revenge from Mars," above the jukebox, close to the pictures of the Beatles and Mohammed Ali, hung a large portrait of Abraham Lincoln. Nobody looked at him, no more than at other parts of the decor. Lincoln was safe and forgotten—an American security blanket.

At the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had preached, the mood, as always, was prayerfully solemn.



The millennium dawns at Key West. Photo: Jake Boritt

So it was in many black churches across the country on this Emancipation Day or Jubilee Day. The celebrations "represent the real Fourth of July or Independence Day for African Americans," explained an NAACP leader. "The first one, July 4, 1776, did not apply to us."¹

In Gettysburg the revelers congregated in the town square. The cold made breaths steam, but nothing could dampen the palpable happiness. Locals mixed with visitors, some from lands faraway. Pickpockets worked the crowd. Close to midnight a beautiful young woman wandered out of the hotel in the square, her white wedding dress cut low, bare arms raised, champagne in hand. She danced. Then the spectacular fireworks started heralding the new millennium.

In one corner of the square named after him stood Abe Lincoln, barely on the curb, an arm on the back of a tourist. Nearly six foot four, an exact life-size bronze, his face based on a life mask (a plaster cast taken by sculptor Clark Mills in 1865), his hands based on a plaster cast also made from life in 1860, his black suit a perfect copy of the one he wore to Ford's Theatre, his hat, too, authentic, down to the label inside it, his boots sized to the outline of his feet drawn by a Pennsylvania shoemaker in 1864. Seward Johnson's sculpture stood there as the twentieth century ended with fireworks and noise, readily ignored by all, for he was so much part of the place.

At the local college's beautiful modern library, in the spacious dark of the apse, slept an exhibit of Sam Fink's 15 watercolors, each containing Lincoln and a dazzling calligraphy of the 272 words of the Address. Dark of the night now. But the students would return, the lights would come on; and the exhibit, "The Gettysburg Address is Alive and Well," would stay up through the year 2000. As the new millennium dawned, Lincoln was alive and well.

A few weeks earlier, Ohio State University's women's rugby team, visiting the nation's capital for a game, wished to be noticed; so a dozen members went to the Lincoln Memorial and posed topless. A *Washington Post* photographer caught the action. In the brouhaha that followed someone observed that the Memorial should be remembered for "Martin Luther King, Jr., not for the breasts of the Ohio State women's rugby team."² But the women athletes, with a \$600 yearly budget, wanted more equality, and turned to Lincoln.

Gays wanting the same did the same by trying to recruit him posthumously. Larry Kramer, playwright and gay activist firebrand, claimed to have discovered the diary and letters of Joshua Speed, Lincoln's intimate friend, which proved that they had a long affair, not a long friendship. Almost certainly this is a hoax, but it has accomplished its purpose: having the country, indeed the world, contemplate the possibility that its greatest son was gay. As

2000 dawned the Memorial got its play, too, with some 1,000 gay people holding a mock marriage ceremony around it. And the first notable Lincoln book of the new century, Jan Morris's *Lincoln: A Foreigner's Quest* from Simon & Schuster appears to suggest a gay young man. Its author used to be a man.

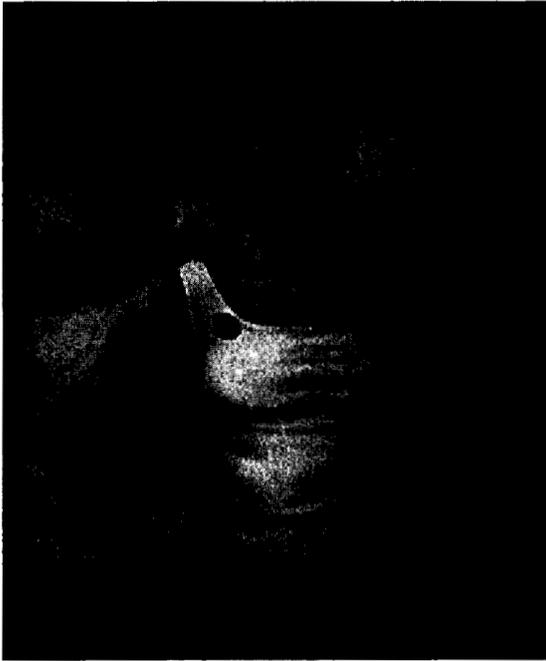
David Herbert Donald, the author of the Lincoln Prize-winning, best-selling biography, *Lincoln* (1995), found during his book tour the question, "was Lincoln gay," the most commonly asked. I myself have been queried about his sexual orientation, from as far away as ABC of Australia. In fact it is possible to find evidence that to twenty-first-century readers might suggest homoerotic behavior. Historian Robert H. Wiebe has argued that Lincoln found security in a male dominated political world, that he harbored a deep emotional attachment to male fraternity. He was a "man's man." Of course male bonding is not the same as homosexuality. As a young man Lincoln had shared for years the bed of his closest friend, Speed, and later riding the circuit as a lawyer he shared the beds of countless others—as did most everyone else. Anyone familiar with the ways of poor societies would find nothing unusual about such practices.

But Lincoln's male bonding went beyond what circumstances dictated. If we believe a Union officer's recollections about the scuttlebutt that went around in the company that guarded the president at Washington's Soldiers' Home, the summer White House where he spent a large portion of his time, we have this:

Captain [David V.] Derickson, in particular, advanced so far in the President's confidence and esteem that, in Mrs. Lincoln's absence, he frequently spent the night at his cottage, sleeping in the same bed with him, and—it is said—making use of His excellency's night-shirts! Thus began an intimacy which continued unbroken until the following spring. . . .

In November 1862, Lincoln wrote that "Captain Derrickson [*sic*] . . . and his Company are very agreeable to me; and while it is deemed proper for any guard to remain, none would be more satisfactory to me than Cpt. D and his company."³ So it was to be, the Company remained the presidential guard until the end of the war, but its Captain was appointed provost marshal in Pennsylvania the following spring.

Where does this leave us? Pretty much where Wiebe put us. Lincoln strongly bonded with men but what may suggest homosexuality in our time most likely did not so much as occur to most people in his time. There is no evidence that it did to Lincoln. In history, context is all-important and the first



Gay Icon by Jeff Crosby. The artwork first appeared in Salon.com, at <http://www.salon.com>. An online version remains in the Salon archives. Reprinted with permission.

duty of the historian is to understand the past in the terms understood by those who lived that past.*

Yes, Lincoln is alive and mostly well, and, once again, lots of people want a piece of him. But not everyone. A professor took a taxi through the black neighborhood of a big midwestern city, and carried on an amiable conversation with the driver. But then he was asked what he did for a living? Teach Abraham Lincoln. The white driver stopped on the spot and ordered his passenger to “get the hell out.” Look around you. See how you’ll do. On the other side of the spectrum, Minister Louis Farrakhan thinks Lincoln was one awful racist honky and a sworn enemy of blacks. An *Ebony* magazine editor proposed that much in 1968 and expanded the ahistorical hobby horse into a 650-page book in 2000.

But at Tiannamen Square when a lone student stood before a column of tanks, the other students supporting him had Lincoln’s words on their lips: “of the people, by the people, for the people.” Uncomfortably enough, when the president of China, Jiang Zemin, came calling on the United States, he, too,

* I am indebted to Matthew Pinsker for sharing his discovery of the Derickson material that, for the first time, puts the president in bed with someone other than his wife.

cited Lincoln. So did Pope John Paul II during his visit. When General Colin Powell declined to run for the presidency of the United States, he pointed with reverence to only one name. Earlier, in Tehran, before the revolution was stolen, Lincoln's words appeared in blood red on the city's walls. And the Republic of Togo saw fit to greet the new millennium with a stamp of the American hero.

Harry Hahn, a 67-year-old Lincoln presenter—one of a group of several dozen Lincoln look-and-dress-alikes who perform around the country—met his maker as Mr. Lincoln before elementary school students in Gettysburg, in February 2000. About the same time, as Cuba and the United States sparred over the fate of a young boy, Elián González, back home in his small town his best friend waited for him: Lincoln Anthony. On the lighter side, “The Stinkin’ Lincolns,” a five-man rock band dressed up as Abes, continued to perform. The armed bandit known to the Maryland police as “Dishonest Abe” robbed nine stores “disguised” as the president, before being captured. And according to my latest search engine scouring the World Wide Web, *Abe Lincoln’s Air Force* is at last flying. About time.

Folksinger Ray Owen sings his tune:

Lincoln—the man, the car, the tunnel
My how in time your name has grown
Lincoln—the diner, the penny, the highway
And that building with the great big beautiful dome⁴

The whole country rides Abraham Lincoln, as the epilogue to this book helps illustrate visually. Scholars do, too. And well they should. The story stays alive, and though some would stuff him and mount him, he won't let us. It is a cliché by now yet still true that history is a never-ending conversation between the past and the present, and among Lincoln scholars the goal still is—some will call it anachronistic—to find the truth. So it is good that our cab stops and we are forced to get out and take stock.

Chapter 1, “The Voyage to Linconia,” looks at the most discussed serious Lincoln subject among both young people and African Americans who talk about such matters. For a century and more Lincoln was “The Great Emancipator,” the American saint, but during the last generation some, perhaps many, came to think of him as just another “honky.” He had issued the Emancipation Proclamation but also used the “n” word and proposed a constitutional amendment to colonize black people abroad, perhaps in Africa. “Did He Dream of a Lily-White America?”

The problem of slavery and its corollary, race, grew into the paramount issue of the nineteenth century and led to the Civil War. Lincoln, in turn, came to believe that the nation's survival depended on emancipation. He had always hated slavery, but white prejudice seemed irremediable. He must have shared some of it himself: this was the mid-nineteenth century. On a few occasions he could not avoid being goaded into admitting that, while he opposed slavery, he did not favor civil rights for blacks and had a dim view of the future of race relations. If it were impossible for blacks to be free, equal, and prosperous in the United States, the government should help make it possible elsewhere. For the sake of whites as well as blacks, Lincoln came to support black colonization.

He managed to avoid directly confronting the utter improbability of transporting four and a half million working people abroad, 15 percent of the population. The mental processes that allowed the down-to-earth president to advocate such a road can be understood via modern psychoanalytic theory, but common sense itself provides an explanation. The country had to embrace black freedom to survive physically and spiritually. The white majority opposed emancipation unless accompanied by colonization. Lincoln went along, refusing to see, for a time, that colonization was a "lullaby." Chapter 1 quotes Shakespeare's *King Lear*: "I have no way, therefore want no eyes."

Chapter 1 also shows that Lincoln's colonization policy was aimed not at blacks but whites. But if he used a chimera to advance emancipation, barely below the surface he frequently betrayed his disbelief in the scheme. Once emancipation was in place, he quickly abandoned the notion. Instead he turned to making black people into soldiers and citizens. That, in any case, was what the vast majority of African Americans desired by then, inspired in part by the president. Starting to advocate limited black franchise for Louisiana by the spring of 1864, Lincoln explained "they would probably help, in some trying time to come, to keep the jewel of liberty within the family of freedom."⁵

Colonization came to nothing and chapter 2 takes a step back to "Young Man Lincoln." In it Douglas L. Wilson points to questions all young people face: "Who am I?" "Who do I want to be?" perhaps even "What is my destiny?" From early on Lincoln was a person with a "wish and will to be different." He also hoped to accomplish "great" things, to do good that would be remembered. Doubts beset him, however, about his own powers and about his destiny. Suffering at times from depression and raised in fatalism, he saw "dark forces within him [self] that he could not control, that could, in fact, take control of *him* and draw him under."

Through a deep reading of evidence, Wilson finds a Lincoln who may have even worried about his own sanity. Back in the 1820s, a fortune-favored friend of

his Indiana youth, Matthew Gentry, had gone suddenly raving mad. Young man Lincoln had snuck out at night to listen to his friend's moaning. In the 1840s, he returned to the scene, found Gentry, and wrote a poem about him. Its first stanza:

But here is an object more of dread
Than ought the grave contain—
A human form with reason fled,
While wretched life remains.

Lincoln himself survived and triumphed. And in the White House he reminded another old friend, Kentucky's Joshua Speed, of his youthful anxieties and longings, and explained how meaningful it was to do good with the Emancipation Proclamation. "We frequently hear," Wilson concludes, "that true champions . . . take no counsel of their fears. These are, indeed, heroic qualities and well beyond the capabilities of most of us. In this light, it seems important to recognize that Abraham Lincoln, our greatest national hero, was apparently not such a person."

In chapter 3, Jean H. Baker turns to marriage, one of the most controversial subjects of turn of the century Lincoln scholarship. Even as feminist historians reshape the scholarly landscape, the discussion of the Lincoln marriage grows more heated and more complex. Nor does it stay within the confines of academe. In the mid-1980s novelist Gore Vidal promoted his best-selling novel *Lincoln* by appearing to suggest on various talk shows and the like that Lincoln had syphilis, had infected his wife, and caused the early death of three of his four children. In 1998, during the Clinton soap opera, a story of unfaithful presidents ran through the media and listed Lincoln among them. Lack of evidence mattered not. If in the nineteenth century, and well beyond, the Lincoln marriage was idealized—for Americans wanted a happy family in their White House—in our time, in an Age of Divorce and changing sexual mores, people still want their Lincoln on their side. He remains the attractive fellow.

Much of the scholarly discussion of the Lincoln marriage inevitably relies on at times conflicting reminiscences. "Mary and Abraham: A Marriage" goes beyond that and anchors the subject in the sociological literature of the nineteenth century American courtship, wedding, and marriage. "Marriage is a noose," Baker begins ironically, and the reader quickly realizes that, for once, the largely male domain of Lincoln scholarship is leavened by a woman's viewpoint. Instead of a hellcat preying on her husband, Baker finds a very interesting woman who was very important to Lincoln's success in life. Their marriage followed the route of so many other middle-class marriages of the time, with its separate spheres for men and women. It had its rough times, but its bonds, coming from "sex, parenting, and politics," proved strong. "Mary, Mary *we* are elected," said Lincoln, as he rushed home with the news of the presidential election in 1860.

Then they were in the White House, the war came and did not go well for the Union. Lincoln agonized about the lack of military success. "If I had gone up there, I could have whipped them myself," he exclaimed after the Battle of Gettysburg. The commander in chief had fervently hoped that the great battle would at last end the bloody war. Instead, the defeated Robert E. Lee skillfully disengaged his Army of Northern Virginia, retreated to the Potomac, stood his ground, and finally escaped back to Virginia. "My dear general," Lincoln wrote to George Gordon Meade, his commander in the field, "I do not believe you appreciate the magnitude of the misfortune involved in Lee's escape. He was within your easy grasp, and to have closed upon him would . . . have ended the war. As it is, the war will be prolonged indefinitely. If you could not safely attack Lee last Monday [in Pennsylvania], how can you possibly do so South of the river. . . . Your golden opportunity is gone, and I am distressed immeasurably because of it."⁶ Lincoln never sent the letter, but the aftermath of Gettysburg left him in tears.

In chapter 4 Gerald J. Prokopowicz takes quite seriously Lincoln's notion of taking field command. After all, he spoke in a like vein at other times, too, and even acted on his words in a modest way. Also, social norms of the day expected the war leader to show his own physical courage. But what might have happened had Lincoln taken to the field? How would he have done? The would-have-beens of history are many, and few are the historians with the courage—or foolhardiness—to take them on. Prokopowicz faces the challenge squarely and ventures forth with an original assessment.

Chapter 5 by David Herbert Donald compares the commanders in chief of the United States and the Confederate States. The constitutions of the two republics defined the war powers of the president with identical language and the similarities in how Lincoln and Davis conceived of their jobs as general-in-chief is "striking." Their strategic plans amounted to "mirror images." Both got involved in detailed military planning and kept control of the selection of generals. Both considered taking the field of battle. Both received scathing denunciations, and the reader will be hard put to identify from a sample list which was aimed at whom.

But the contrasts turned out to be more important than the similarities. Donald notes but does not emphasize differences in personalities: one quick to take offense; the other conciliatory. Instead he focuses on the different ways the two presidents understood their war powers. Lincoln defended the United States by going well beyond "any express constitutional authorization or any legislation of Congress," his actions ranging from the suspension of the writ of *habeas corpus* to emancipation. Davis purposefully contrasted himself to such actions of the administration in Washington and allowed his road to be "negatively defined by the steps Lincoln took." Refusing to use his war powers

broadly, Davis failed to curb sufficiently "the dissent and disloyalty that signally contributed to the collapse of the Confederacy." Donald does not follow David Potter's famed 1959 Gettysburg lecture, which proposed that had the warring republics exchanged presidents, "the Confederacy might have won its independence."⁷ But it is clear who was the better commander in chief.

Chapter 6 focuses sharply on questions of liberty, war, and the Constitution. Many appear to believe that to save the American Union, Lincoln sacrificed the fundamental law of the land. Some decry this destruction of liberty by a would-be dictator. Others praise what they see as the justified subordination of a cumbersome, perhaps antiquated document to the noble ideas of the Declaration of Independence and a commitment to equality. Both sides see a "closet revolutionary" and, Allen C. Guelzo argues, both are wrong. Did Lincoln "regard the Constitution as a wax nose, to be reshaped according to his own egalitarian idealism," or did he yield to his supposed desire to be a dictator, Guelzo asks.

His rousing "No!" shows a thinker who, from an early age on, displayed a deep regard for the Constitution, whether pertaining to technical language or original intent. As for Jefferson's Declaration, it "was the central statement of Lincoln's political idealism." It buttressed his hatred of slavery, but it did not take away from his reverence for the fundamental law. Rather than seeing a conflict between the two, Lincoln saw them as complementary. When war forced him toward extra-Constitutional remedies, he limited these to military necessity and sought careful legal advice. Most strikingly, in the middle of the horror of civil war, he ran for reelection and, at least at times, expected to lose. Said he afterwards, "The election was a necessity. We cannot have free government without elections; and if the rebellion could force us to forego, or postpone a national election, it might fairly claim to have conquered and ruined us. . . ."⁸

In chapter 7 William C. Harris challenges the past generation's orthodoxy about the kind of peace Lincoln looked for at the end of the war. The fortunate initials of his most popular general, U.S. Grant, victor at Fort Donelson and, it seemed, ever after, metamorphosed into "Unconditional Surrender" Grant, and by 1864 many assigned the general in chief's sobriquet to the president as a policy. Historians, too, in recent decades have spoken about how winning the election that year created a mandate to demand the unconditional surrender of the Confederacy. Harris argues, however, that Lincoln never intended to impose such harsh, radical terms on the defeated foe.

He was reelected on a platform of Union and Emancipation, and that is what he hoped to achieve in peace, using a lenient reconstruction plan for the post-war South that relied on Southern Unionists. Unconditional surrender might create anarchy and would derail "a Union of hearts and hands as well as of States." And so in February of 1865, at the Hampton Roads, Virginia, meeting with Confederate

peace commissioners, Lincoln reaffirmed his generosity, going so far as to favor substantial monetary compensation for slave owners. (His cabinet would have none of it.) In the waning days of the war, meeting with his generals on the *River Queen* at City Point, Virginia, in essence Lincoln told Grant, Sherman, and Admiral David Dixon Porter to "let 'em up easy." After hundreds of thousands of deaths, he seemed almost childishly anxious to prevent one last battle. "Must more blood be shed!" he was remembered to say, "can not this last bloody battle be avoided?" He wanted the Confederate army to go home and take up a life of peace. He desired no punishment, even for the leaders. Northern soldiers sang about hanging Jeff Davis on "a sour apple tree"; Lincoln hoped he would escape, "unbeknownst to me." The president worked hard for the Thirteenth Amendment to create Constitutional support for the Emancipation Proclamation. "A King's cure for all," he called it. Together with it he also wanted a return to loyalty to the United States by all. He wanted no more. He wanted peace.

Lincoln believed his cause to be just, but the cost was horrifying. "War, at best, is terrible," he said in 1864, "and this war of ours . . . is one of the most terrible. . . . It has carried mourning to almost every home, until it can almost be said that the 'heavens are hung in black.'"⁹ The war planted death all around him. But as Robert V. Bruce shows in chapter 8, death was Lincoln's old, lifelong acquaintance. Throughout the nineteenth century and earlier, too—well before the Civil War—death held an intimate part in the life of Americans. This was ever so much more true of Abraham Lincoln. "The Riddle of Death" played a central role in his thoughts.

On the eve of his presidency, in an autobiography, Lincoln wrote in a matter-of-fact way that "in his tenth year he was kicked by a horse, and apparently killed for a time." He used humor at times to deal with death. But in that same year his mother's aunt and uncle had died of the "milk sickness" (brucellosis), and then his mother died, too, all within a matter of days. A brother he never knew died before Lincoln was born. His other sibling, sister Sarah, died in childbirth when he was 18 and she barely older. When his sweetheart, Ann Rutledge, died, we know that Lincoln fell into a deep depression in response. Lincoln and death were intimate, indeed.

If in the frontier society of his youth the end of life was looked upon as a release from toil and hardship, his own reaction displayed uncommon emotion. His favorite poems, songs, and dramas focused on the subject. In 1846, the future author of the Gettysburg Address could write that "I would give all I am worth, and go into debt," to be able to author an indifferent poem by little known Scottish poet William Knox. Its message: life is short, "A flash of lightning, a break of the wave." If around Lincoln peaceful pictures of heaven eased the pain for most people, his lawyerlike mind rejected such visions. And yet,

the prospect of oblivion terrified him. So he turned to another defense: to have life after death one needed to survive in the memory of people. "If Lincoln did not believe that those who died for the Union would afterward live in a blissful Valhalla," Bruce writes, he could at least believe that, as he said at Gettysburg, they would live in everlasting memory." As for himself, he helped save the Union, and, as he told his friend Speed, with the Emancipation Proclamation "my fondest hopes will be realized."

In an epilogue to this book, Harold Holzer and I look at how Lincoln lives in modern art. "Modern" is a controversial term, and chapter 9 begins somewhat arbitrarily, at the great trauma of the twentieth century (comparable to a degree to the Civil War): the Depression and World War II. "Lincoln in 'Modern' Art" moves all the way to the dawn of the new millennium. "Art," too, is a controversial term, perhaps undefinable. This chapter focuses on painters and sculptors, but it takes note of folk art, commercial art, postage stamps, caricature, film, television, and the World Wide Web. In the process it turns up a treasure trove of Lincoln art—an American icon throbbing with life. As Holzer and I quote Picasso's words about Lincoln, here is "real American elegance."

One of the works included in the modern art portfolio is *Lincoln and Ravens*, part of *The Columbus Suit* created by Carl Beam as the country moved toward the 1992 quincentenary of the European discovery of America (see photo on p. 191). Beam, who continues to work on the theme, was raised on a reservation with an Ojibway mother and a European-American father. Not surprisingly, his work speaks of both the great achievements and the great tragedies of the "discovery." His *Lincoln and Ravens*, a photo emulsion steel engraving, hangs as the centerpiece of a permanent exhibition at Gettysburg College, in a large room where the faculty meets and where distinguished visitors at times speak. The work testifies that Lincoln, as a central symbol of America, carries on his shoulders the glory of this nation—and sometimes also the burden of its sins.¹⁰

In Native American history, Lincoln is not a heroic figure. He is best known for his action in the aftermath of the Minnesota Sioux uprising of 1862. The Sioux had been "treated" out of their lands, cheated and starved. One functionary announced that "if they are hungry let them eat grass or their own dung." Instead they revolted and killed some 350 of the enemy—men, women, and children—the largest number of casualties ever inflicted by Indians on whites in U.S. history. Some might find it easy to say that the whites got what they deserved.

The massacres (that is what they were to whites) took place as General Robert E. Lee invaded the North. The Indian uprising seemed to threaten the very existence of the United States. Already engaged in a lethal struggle with the slaveholding empire of the Confederacy at its front, the Minnesota Sioux

attacked from the back. People whose sons and husbands fought in the Union army, away from home, were near revolt. Lincoln knew little about the Indians but sent west General John Pope of Second Bull Run fame (or lack thereof), where he put down the uprising harshly and followed it with military trials. Three hundred and three men received death sentences. Lincoln demanded full records of the cases and, also, the names of the real culprits. Pope responded by darkly threatening “indiscriminate” massacres by the populace if leniency were shown. The junior senator from Minnesota loudly seconded the opinion. Lincoln hoped to return the cases west for review, but was told that only he could exercise the pardon. He then went laboriously through the records, reducing the death list to 39. All but one died in the largest public execution in the history of the United States. More important to the majority at the time, Lincoln cheated the gallows of 264 Indians. He performed by far the largest act of executive clemency in American history. The outraged senator from Minnesota knew that there was no hope for the country “except in the death of the President and a new administration.” The Sioux continued to die and suffer.

And we have Beam’s *Lincoln and Ravens*. In Native American cultures the raven carries heavy symbolism. In various Indian religions it stands for both death and myth. The raven is “as capable of massive blunders as he is of glorious exploits.”¹¹ But Beam also illustrates the complex way multiculturalism sometimes works and the cliché that truth is in the eye of the beholder. For Lincoln’s admirers can find in Beam a heroic image, the chiseled face, the manly beauty, the symbol of freedom, unity, and of the American Dream of the right to rise. Reaching deeper, the black ravens might remind the viewer of the ending of slavery. Lincoln the Emancipator. Some will conjure up Edgar Allan Poe’s lines—“Nevermore!”—and the horrors of slavery and of a brother’s war.

Great Emancipator—Saver of Indian Lives—Indian Executioner. The United States at the end of the second millennium is perhaps the greatest of nations, the most prosperous in the history of humankind, powerful, ever more free, tolerant. Lincoln is her most fitting symbol. Beam’s Lincoln allows for all that and also reminds us of the underside of American history and so tries to point to an even better future. As we enter the new millennium and note heartily that Lincoln is alive and well in American culture, we can also point to a future that beckons: *Lincoln and Ravens*.

Autumn 2000
Farm by the Ford
Gettysburg

Gabor Boritt