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# Condemning Colonization: Abraham Lincoln's Rejected Proposal for a Central American Colony

## **Abstract**

This article focuses on a proposal by Abraham Lincoln to settle freed African Americans in Central American countries. The backlash from several countries reveals that other countries besides the warring United States were also struggling with reconciling racial issues. This also reveals how interwoven racial issues were with political crises during the Civil War because it not only effected domestic policies but also international relations.

## **Keywords**

Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, Colonization, Slavery, Foreign Relations

# CONDEMNING COLONIZATION: ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S REJECTED PROPOSAL FOR A CENTRAL AMERICAN COLONY

Matthew Harris

By the second year of the Civil War, the issue of racial inequality was not only a critical part of the divided country's domestic feud but also a key component in the Union's foreign policy. Events during the mid-1800's revealed that racial strife and tensions existed not only within the warring states but also across the hemisphere. Several Central American nations' rejection of suggested Union initiatives showed how intertwined race and politics had become after the first year of conflict.

On August 12, 1862, Abraham Lincoln met with a group of former Washington slaves to discuss the future of African American society. Lincoln's initial Emancipation Proclamation, which freed every slave in the Confederate States of America, was still over a month away. Here, he was speaking with a select group of freedmen, hoping to figure out the destination of the millions of African Americans, whose new future he was privately constructing with Congress.<sup>1</sup> The problem was that Lincoln did not know what to do once all of those people were free. He knew that very

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<sup>1</sup> Lincoln had begun acquiring funds for a colonial expedition as early as March and considering emancipation as early as July; see Roy P. Basler, ed., *1861-1862*, vol. 5, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 370.

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soon he was going to free millions of slaves from bondage and was desperately concerned about how the country should proceed from there.

Lincoln's speech to the freedmen was not long, but it held grim tones. He openly admitted that he did not know how to best aid African Americans. Just because their freedom was near did not mean that they would have a happy future. The poor race relations that had, and, he imagined, always would, existed between blacks and whites troubled Lincoln. He believed that neither group could ever get along: "In a word we suffer on each side."<sup>2</sup> Lincoln was thinking ahead. Most Unionists did not want to give up their land for former slaves, even if they wanted relative equality. One possible solution, therefore, was to send them off to establish their own country.<sup>3</sup>

Lincoln implored his audience to make sacrifices for future generations and set out to establish their own country. Liberia was open as a colony to freed American slaves, but the country lay across the Atlantic, far from what most African Americans considered their home. Most African Americans and abolitionists had abandoned the concept of colonization, suggesting it was a lazy excuse for not simply improving the American social system.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Lincoln suggested that the freedmen look to nearby Central America

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> A notable opponent to colonization of Liberia was abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who initially supported resettling the African coast but realized that this just pushed the problem of racial equality off rather than confronting it head on; see Angela F. Murphy, *Jerry Rescue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 41-42.

as their new home. A location that connected both the Atlantic and Pacific seemed most suitable to Lincoln, and he suggested that it could serve as the hub for transportation between Eastern and Western coasts of the United States. The president seemed to have a particular spot in mind. The meeting closed with Lincoln advising the freedmen to consider the proposition. He then assured them that resources and government support would always be available if they chose to go.<sup>5</sup>

The President's suggestion to send large numbers of freed slaves to Central America caused international backlash and showed that other countries were still adapting to mixed-race societies just as much as the warring United States. Two major factors caused Central American countries to react with vehemence to Lincoln's suggestion. The first factor was a growing regional unity against foreign manipulation, and the second was prevalent racial, social structuring that had begun with Spanish colonization centuries earlier.

Lincoln appointed Kansas Senator Samuel Pomeroy (also Chair of the Committee on Public Lands) to survey and make proposals for land purchases in Central American countries.<sup>6</sup> Before Pomeroy could make any direct efforts to acquire land, multiple United States newspapers published

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<sup>5</sup> Basler, *1861-1862*, 373-374.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Pomeroy was a Radical Republican who took part in several pre-war abolitionist movements such as the New England Emigration Aid Company and 'Bleeding Kansas.' His viewpoints made him the perfect candidate to enthusiastically acquire land for freed slaves; see Albert, Castel, "Pomeroy, Samuel Clarke (1816-1891)." *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History*.

Lincoln's speech.<sup>7</sup> The news traveled quickly to Central America, where the information was republished and interpreted in quite a different way. The Central American press and public did not view the colonization plan as a mere suggestion and found it offensive. The July 20, 1862 edition of the *Honduras Official Gazette* reprinted an article from the *Boston Daily Advertiser* and stated, "They [African Americans] desire to emigrate to Central America... they desire to bring to the United States that great commerce of the Pacific, which ought to increase... the riches and power of their common country."<sup>8</sup> Central Americans were paranoid that African Americans intended to invade their region with the primary goal to bring more prosperity to the United States rather than help develop their new homes.

Agitation in Guatemala, Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica had already begun with the printing of the Honduran article and was building upon previously-held worries. Concerns grew regarding a large influx of African descendants to the region, along with

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<sup>7</sup> Northern newspapers widely published this speech in its entirety or as a summary with an analysis of Lincoln's 'Colonization Scheme.' For example, the *Daily Ohio Statesman*, which published the speech, and the *Juliet Signal* included an analysis which suggested that the plan showed that Lincoln disfavored a mixed-race society; see *Daily Ohio Statesman* (Columbus, Ohio), 22 Aug. 1862, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress*; *Juliet Signal*. (Juliet [i.e., Joliet], Ill.), 26 Aug. 1862, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress*.

<sup>8</sup> *Message of the President of the United States to the Two Houses of Congress at the Commencement of the Third Session of the Thirty-Seventh Congress* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1862), 892.

worries about their allegiance to the United States. Every country was loathe to have an intrusive United States colony on their borders. The concept for the colony, and Lincoln's speech, had also been published before Pomeroy or Secretary of State William Seward announced it to the various Central American diplomatic correspondents. The agitated public and politicians assumed this meant that the United States planned to take land without permission. The backlash against the proposal was swift.

The Minister to the United States for Guatemala and Salvador, Antonio J. Yrisarri, issued a frank statement, saying, "Colonization cannot take place, because it does not suit the views of those governments."<sup>9</sup> Neither government was interested in selling land to another country, and they did not want immigrants unless they were educated. Immigrants would only be accepted if they were "colonists of a different class, who may have had a more liberal education than those that can be acquired in a state of slavery."<sup>10</sup> The Secretary of Foreign Relations for San Salvador and Nicaragua, Pedro Zeledon, had even harsher words to say. He thought allowing freed slaves into the country would worsen it due to the "degradation of that race." It also was unacceptable for immigrants to act "under the special protection of another nation."<sup>11</sup> Not only were former slaves not wanted as immigrants, but the idea of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 895.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 896.

either of the countries' governments not having control over immigrants to their nations was insulting.

Honduras was preemptive in their response, despite the fact that no one had even reached out to buy land or suggested the idea. Foreign Minister James R. Partridge communicated the opinion of the Honduran President. Due to the newspapers, the president figured the United States should know Honduras' opinion on the matter of colonization and immigration. Honduras only wanted "industrious *whites*" like the "*German* immigrants... in Costa Rica," who had created prosperity in that country. Bringing in freed slaves was "not at all desirable" because Honduras already faced problems with their own free African population that supposedly refused to be law-abiding citizens. Just like the representative from San Salvador and Nicaragua, the Honduran president said that his country would gladly accept educated or industrious white immigrants from the United States but wanted no more migrants of African descent.<sup>12</sup>

Nicaragua was the most vehemently opposed to the colonization of freed slaves in their country. The foreign minister of the United States in Leon de Nicaragua, Andrew B. Dickinson, communicated with the Nicaraguan government and had this to say: "The people of Nicaragua are very generally opposed to such a scheme," and "they feel indignant at being ranked with the North American negro." Not only were Nicaraguans against the idea of colonization, but they were also completely offended that anyone even

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 891.



thought that they should live with or around African descendants. The whole of Nicaragua was apparently in a panic for several weeks about Lincoln's proposal. They considered it the "greatest degradation for the country to be overrun with blacks."<sup>13</sup> In the public mindset "negroes... are worthless, idle, thieving vagabonds," and if they were allowed to intermingle with Native Americans they would give birth to "the worst cross-breed that society can be infested with." A deep fear that the United States meant to upend their society and destroy its fragile racial balance had taken hold in Nicaragua.<sup>14</sup>

The only country that was open to the idea of colonization was Costa Rica. Months earlier, in May, the congress of that country began to consider proposals for a "tract of land for the settlement of free negroes."<sup>15</sup> This was a seemingly independent move from the growing unity of the Central American coalition it soon joined.

One location, Chiriquí, was perfectly suited for Lincoln's desire to have a trans-oceanic colony and was considered perfect for the health of African Americans. The problem, however, was that the land was the object of a dispute between Costa Rica and New Granada (modern-day Colombia). United States Ambassador to Costa Rica Charles N. Riotte could not see a peaceful resolution between the two countries resulting in a sale to the United States. He also could not recommend his government spend "one cent" to

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 893-894.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 896.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 887.

set aside land because the United States “government would most surely be swindled” by salesmen and landowners with useless property whose sole desire was to make a quick profit by setting freedmen up for failure.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, the Costa Rican government was initially open to colonization, but the United States had to both resolve a massive territory dispute and convince the winner to sell the highly disputed land, or wade through a mire of risky real estate transactions themselves. Costa Rica’s consideration of the proposal did not last long, though. At the same time, American businessman Ambrose W. Thompson also suggested that the United States use a large plot of land he owned in the disputed area. This land, somewhere between seventy thousand to one million acres, (later claimed to be around three million) had been sold to Thompson by a French businessman in 1854 and was considered for various mining and colonization purposes ever since.<sup>17</sup>

A regional effort was assembled to stop the colonization plan in mid-September 1862 when Minister Luis Molina—a legation of Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Honduras—composed a letter to Seward. As the three countries’ representative, Molina communicated that no country at the meeting “would consent to the formation in its

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 889.

<sup>17</sup> The French had also tried to colonize the land in the 1850s but several business and colonization failures led to a buyout by Thompson; see Paul J. Scheips, “Gabriel Lafond and Ambrose W. Thompson: Neglected Isthmusian Promoters,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 36 no. 2 (May 1956), 212.

territory of independent colonies, whatever might be their color and place of departure.” None of the countries wanted a United States-controlled colony inside their region, no matter who was settling it. He also stated that the countries did not want an unexpected influx of former slaves, “a plague... the United States desire to rid themselves [of].” Furthermore, the United States had no claim to the Costa Rican land because it had not been sold directly from the government to Thompson. Even if it were legal, the land was in a disputed zone, so their government could not recognize the sale.<sup>18</sup>

These five Central American countries had made it clear that they were not going to allow a colony in or near their borders. A few seemed open to the idea of limited African American migration but were still concerned the United States might provide too much aid for them.<sup>19</sup> United States support for the proposal also seemed to dwindle. A nationally reprinted article originating from the *New York Sun* compared Lincoln’s attempt to move African Americans to another country to that of a beetle trying to move a cannonball out of a tire rut.<sup>20</sup> The comparison not only

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<sup>18</sup> *Message of the President*, 889-900.

<sup>19</sup> This would have included military aid if there were conflicts or passive assistance such as food and building materials. Any help, however, could have been seen as the United States undermining that government’s authority. The migrants to any of these countries would have been considered citizens of the countries, and the concept of an outside body aiding citizens without permission is interpretable as sedition.

<sup>20</sup> The *New York Sun* was a Republican-leaning paper. Their comparison for moving the race issues like trying to move a cannonball is similar in philosophy to the rejection of Liberian colonization. The

indicated how futile the effort to remove such a massive number of people would be, but also that African Americans did not wish to leave the country.

Due to Pomeroy's continued public organization of the project, concerns continued through October 1862 in Central America, and Seward had to reaffirm multiple times that the United States was not going to settle in Central America.<sup>21</sup> Even so, the Palace at Managua introduced new passport laws in a paranoid attempt to keep former slaves out and prevent abolitionists from smuggling them in.<sup>22</sup> Why were these countries so ardent in their attempt to keep the United States and African Americans away from their borders?

Just a decade earlier, filibusters (United States citizens who unlawfully invaded other countries with military force, such as William Walker) invaded Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean in attempts to acquire land and power.<sup>23</sup> After failed attempts in Mexico in the

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race issues of the United States were there to stay and had to be dealt with, not pushed away; see *Western Sentinel*. (Winston [i.e. Winston-Salem], N.C.), 03 Oct. 1862, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress.

<sup>21</sup> Molina had received word that Pomeroy was travelling around the capitol recruiting men for the expedition to found new colony. Landfall was meant to be in October, Molina received word in late September. At this point it appeared that despite a month of backlash Pomeroy was still organizing the colonization plan prolonging the agitation of the Central American legation, Seward had to personally contact the Department of Interior to halt the efforts; see *Message of the President*, 904.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 906-907.

<sup>23</sup> For a great source regarding the most famous filibustering cases, see Robert E. May, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering in*

early 1850's, Walker set out for an assault on Nicaragua in 1855. Taking advantage of that country's civil war, he managed to secure himself as president of the country for a short time before a multi-national armed force removed him from power. As president, and during his retreat northward, however, he managed to inflict serious damage to the reputation of the United States. To make matters worse, instead of refuting the actions of the filibuster, President Franklin Pierce supported the new Nicaraguan regime when he acknowledged its legitimacy.<sup>24</sup> Besides how he forcefully maintained power, Walker's actions, such as burning Catholic churches, assaulting clergy, and trying to reestablish slavery, left Central Americans with a horrendous impression of the United States.<sup>25</sup>

The negative impression of the United States was also exacerbated by the growing slavery tensions in the country and the strain on the republican form of government. Across Latin America during the 1850's, Central Americans

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*Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Pierce almost immediately rescinded his recognition, however. Perhaps the initial recognition seemed to stick with Nicaraguans more than his later refutation. Although the United States government attempted to prevent filibustering, the country seemed divided on the issue and ultimately regional support or opposition dictated what parties were able to embark on filibustering expeditions. Walker continued filibustering until he was executed by yet another Central American defender, Honduras, in 1860; see Kenneth Nivison, "Purposes Just and Pacific: Franklin Pierce and the American Empire," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 21 no. 1 (March 2010), 14-15.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Denton, "Filibusterism and Catholicity: Narciso López, William Walker, and the Antebellum Struggle for America's Souls," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 33 no. 4 (Fall 2015), 11.

feared that the United States planned to force its idea of democracy southward. Mostly, this fear stemmed from the assumption that should the United States acquire any of their countries, citizens would not meet the voting requirements of a country that seemed to only respect the level of whiteness as a prerequisite to political power.<sup>26</sup> The majority of Central Americans, many being of mixed race with varying levels of skin fairness, had only truly begun to exercise tentative, democratic rights in the last three decades, and the United States' 'Manifest Destiny' loomed as a threat to their political autonomy.<sup>27</sup>

The resistance to foreign powers in Central America was another growing trend during the mid-1800's that seemed to unite the region into a cohesive political entity of its own. Elites who had the most influence and power in the region adopted the label of Latin America beginning in the 1840's. The adoption of a 'Latin' identity was not only a direct reaction to filibustering but also fear of cultural annihilation.<sup>28</sup> International racial and political differences greatly strained foreign relations as Central America began to view itself as a more liberal, democratic entity than the United States and European powers, both of which were thought to be encroaching on the Latin race.

Clearly critical to Central America's rejection of colonization or migration was a tremendous amount of

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<sup>26</sup> Michel Gobat, "The Invention of Latin America: A Transnational History of Anti-Imperialism, Democracy, and Race," *American Historical Review* 118 no. 5 (December 2013), 1353.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 1352.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 1367.

racism and unfounded stereotypes. The countries of Central America had shifted towards liberal democratic governments during the 1840's and 1850's, but with much bloodshed. Each country finally established a democratic republic, similar to the United States, as their governing bodies. However, the notion that African descendants and mixed-race peoples would have gained more rights during this time of liberal enlightenment is false. In fact, the mid-1800's coincided as a time of not only the growth of liberal styles of government but also the growth of racist ideology across Latin America.<sup>29</sup>

While this was many Central Americans' first chance to self-govern, they also used it as an opportunity to exclude minorities such as those with large amounts of native or African heritage. Elites were afraid of their own level of whiteness luring the United States to conquer them, but these people used the same racist concept to dictate who had rights in their own societies. Central American elites also applied the new idea of the Latin race to exclude those from power who were not European enough. The rejection of mixed races was a direct counter to global concerns of the Americas' 'mongrelization': the mixture of so many very different racial groups. To combat this, elites attempted to portray themselves as pure descendants of Spain and France rather than a mixed culture of Europeans, Natives, and Africans.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> David Cook-Martin and David FitzGerald, "Culling the Masses: A Rejoinder," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38 no. 8 (June 2015), 1323.

<sup>30</sup> Gobat, *The Invention*, 1355.

Elites' rejection of mixed race society in Central America also became blended with abuse and intolerance of those they perceived as inferior. Black and mixed-race people were seen as having only negative qualities, as the communications with the various foreign ministers had previously suggested. The mistreatment of mixed race individuals was probably a direct mimicry of American and European practices, once again trying to illustrate how Latin American elites were just as white as any other European descendant. The abuse that the lower classes suffered resulted in violent outbursts that often worsened the strain between elite and commoner.

Latin American elites feared these riots and revolts. In many places, former slaves or mixed-race peoples outnumbered elite whites dramatically. The fear of being massacred and overwhelmed by the lower classes was not a groundbreaking idea in the 1860s. Revolutionary general and political leader *Símon Bolívar* had feared the same in the 1820s following Bolivia's independence. Even after having large numbers of mixed race people, or, as he referred to them, *pardos*, serve in his army, he did not want to give them many rights following independence from Spain.<sup>31</sup> He ensured that the same class-based system endured through the wars of revolution, at least in his country. His reiteration of old Spanish caste ideas gave the system longevity through the Latin American independence movements of the early

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<sup>31</sup> Aline Helg, "Simon Bolivar and the Spectre of 'Pardocracia': Jose Padilla in Post-Independence Cartagena," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 35, no. 3 (August 2003): 454, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3875308>.



nineteenth century. These ideas lingered for decades and strengthened once more in the mid-nineteenth century.

Bolívar's fear was the rise of a *pardocracia*, or a society ruled by the *pardos*, where whites and elites would be exterminated and stripped of all power. For years he attempted to maintain a government where *pardos* were seemingly equal but not equal enough to impact the government or topple the elite system.<sup>32</sup> As one of the most influential revolutionaries and writers in the post-colonial Americas, Bolívar was undoubtedly influential in Central America during the 1860s. If his ideas on race and fear of *pardocracia* were not direct causes of the racist ideology of the region, they at least affirmed that elites' fears of lower classes and non-whites were well founded. Consistent racial and class conflict post-independence also seemed to lend credence to some of Bolívar's ideas.

One such example is when poor laborers and former slaves in La Ciènega, Panama, rose up in violent protest and destroyed several U.S. buildings.<sup>33</sup> The protests were a direct reaction to local Panamanians losing their jobs to transport industries on the isthmus such as railroads and steamships after formerly using man and mule power to transport cargo and people.<sup>34</sup> Industrialization took away traditional jobs such as these, and the workers' reactions to the changes

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Daley Chen Mercedes, "The Watermelon Riot: Cultural Encounters in Panama City, 1856," *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, 1990, 86-87.

<sup>34</sup> The term Panamanian is used, but at the time the isthmus was still owned by New Granada. Ibid., 89.

explain why elites viewed the mixed races not only as violent, but also lazy. More than likely, white elites confused lack of work and job opportunities, especially for poor laborers, with laziness. In actuality, the beginning of the Industrial Revolution had put more strain on an already heavily-bowed system of social inequality. The racism shown in the communications between the U.S. and Central America resulted from a lack of privileges and the lack of knowledge for modern, industrial jobs slowly replacing traditional ones. The supposedly-liberal governments of Central America actively oppressed instead of liberated. Africans and natives were not violent and lazy but were subjects to a region that refused to modernize a large group of its population with obvious negative outcomes that were viewed as racial inferiority, rather than government incompetence.

Each Central American country stood ardently in their rejection of United States colonization to the region. Fear of the United States encroaching onto their territory made each country extremely hesitant to negotiate land terms after a decade of filibustering and inter-American violence. To Central America, the United States had morphed from a role model into a hovering menace whose government and people could bear down on their countries at any moment.

The racial climate in Central America proved unforgiving of the proposal. The cultures of the area had been built around race and class. The formation of a Latin American identity bolstered the attempts of elites to portray themselves as white and reject mixed race and mixed culture

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society. These elites viewed Black and mixed-race individuals as inferior, despite playing a large part in their unemployment through the introduction of industry without proper education.

Lincoln's 'scheme' to colonize freed slaves into Central America had been a disaster. Seward and his ambassadors worked throughout the fall of 1862 to ensure that good relations were maintained with Central America. The United States, in the midst of its bloodiest conflict, could not afford to break friendships with even the smallest of countries. The ultimate question, what to do with all of the freed African Americans, had to wait. Even this small attempt to answer it had kicked off an international panic and threatened the United States with diplomatic retaliation. International tensions and cultural phenomena in Central America prevented any possible settlement and caused Lincoln's first colonization plan to fail.

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