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## Lincoln and the Abolitionists

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# Lincoln and the Abolitionists

## **Abstract**

It has always been one of the ironies of the era of the Civil War and the end of slavery in the United States that the man who played the role of Great Emancipator of the slaves was so hugely mistrusted and so energetically vilified by the party of abolition. Abraham Lincoln, whatever his larger reputation as the liberator of more than three million black slaves in the Emancipation Proclamation, has never entirely shaken off the reputation of being something of a half-heart about it. [excerpt]

## **Disciplines**

History | United States History

## 5. "FIENDS...FACING ZIONWARDS": ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S RELUCTANT EMBRACE OF THE ABOLITIONISTS

It has always been one of the ironies of the era of the Civil War and the end of slavery in the United States that the man who played the role of Great Emancipator of the slaves was so hugely mistrusted and so energetically vilified by the party of abolition. Abraham Lincoln, whatever his larger reputation as the liberator of more than three million black slaves in the Emancipation Proclamation, has never entirely shaken off the reputation of being something of a half-heart about it. "There is a counterlegend of Lincoln," acknowledged Stephen B. Oates, "one shared ironically enough by many white Southerners and certain black Americans of our time" who are convinced that Lincoln never intended to abolish slavery, "was a bigot...a white racist who championed segregation, opposed civil and political rights for black people" and "wanted them all thrown out of the country."<sup>i</sup> And a great deal of that reputation is still linked to the denunciations of Lincoln issued by virtually all of those who occupied the abolitionist vanguard, whether they be (as in Frederick Douglass's taxonomy) Garrisonians, Tappanites, Free Soilers, or even old Liberty Party men.<sup>ii</sup>

It has been a large part of the task of Lincoln biographers ever since to deplore that image of Lincoln as the sort of extremist rhetoric that abolitionism was pretty generally renowned for; or to insist that Lincoln may have had elements of racism in him but gradually effaced them as he moved on his "journey" to emancipation; or to suggest that Lincoln was all along an abolitionist but dragged his feet over emancipation out of pragmatic political considerations. Josiah Gilbert Holland, whose *Life of Abraham Lincoln* was the first full-dress Lincoln biography in 1866, ridiculed the way in which "Mr. Lincoln has been assailed...for being too slow" to emancipate the

slaves." Holland believed that Lincoln certainly "saw the time of emancipation coming," but he "felt himself still withheld from meddling with slavery by any sweeping measure" until 1862 because of his respect for the Constitution and his unwillingness to precipitate the border slave states into secession. Isaac Arnold, a one-time Democrat but strong anti-slavery ally of Lincoln's in the Civil War Congress, upped the ante of justification by insisting that "Lincoln in his younger days dreamed of being an emancipator" and "had always wished to emancipate the negroes," but "wished the change to 'come gently as the dews of heaven, not rending or wrecking anything.'" And even much more recently, Michael Burlingame sees Lincoln's "core" value as "a deep hatred of slavery" and believes that "Lincoln was hardly a reluctant emancipator." David Donald re-assuringly observes that "Lincoln's views on slavery were not, in fact, so far from those of his critics"; the only reason why he did not join those critics earlier as an abolitionist activist was "because he had so little personal knowledge of slavery." LaWanda Cox, Lincoln's most vigorous academic justifier, writes that there is actually "something breathtaking in his advance from prewar advocacy of restricting slavery's spread to foremost responsibility for slavery's total, immediate, uncompensated destruction by constitutional amendment." It is only because "the constraints under which Lincoln felt he must labor were not always recognized by antislavery men," that Lincoln, then and now, has been charged with "irresolute policy and wavering commitment."<sup>iii</sup>

Still, not even the most vigorous apologists for Lincoln can entirely escape the sense of distance, no matter how varying they estimate its distance, between the Emancipator and the abolitionists. Indeed, they underestimate it, for the differences the abolitionists saw between themselves and Lincoln were not illusory or mere matters of timing and policy. They involved

not only the aggrievement of the righteous, but also the irritation of Lincoln himself; and not only quarrels over timetable and voting rights, but unbridgeable cultural issues. And only when those differences are allowed their full play can we begin to recognize how deeply Lincoln's place in the story of slavery's end upsets some of the most recent, broad theoretical constructions of the anti-slavery movement, and how much it questions the moral and political assumptions of American reform, which have always drawn strength from the abolitionist example, rather than Lincoln's, ever since.

That the abolitionists disliked Lincoln almost unanimously cannot be in much doubt. They themselves said it too often, beginning as early as the mid-1850s, when Illinois abolitionists looked at Lincoln with a measure of suspicion as a recruit to the anti-slavery cause. Chicago newspaper editor Charles H. Ray told Elihu Washburne in December, 1855, that Lincoln would probably be a highly unreliable ally of the new Republican party. "I must confess I am afraid of 'Abe'" because "he is Southern by birth, Southern in his associations and southern, if I mistake not, in his sympathies." Besides, "his wife" -- Mary Todd Lincoln -- "is a Todd, of a pro-slavery family, and so are all his kin." And the suspicions only became deeper from the moment he stepped into the national spotlight as the Republican candidate for the presidency in 1860. Charles Grandison Finney, the New School revivalist and president of the nation's abolitionist hotbed, Oberlin College, scored Lincoln in the first issue of the *Oberlin Evangelist* to appear after the nominating convention:

The Republican Convention at Chicago have put in nomination for President

Abraham Lincoln of Illinois, a gentleman who became widely known a year and a half ago by his political footrace against S.A. Douglas for the place of United States Senate from their state. In that campaign he won laurels on the score of his intellectual ability and forensic powers; but if our recollection is not at fault, his ground on the score of humanity towards the oppressed race was too low.

In the eyes of black abolitionist Hezekiah Ford Douglass, Lincoln was no significant improvement on Stephen A. Douglas during the famous Lincoln-Douglas senatorial campaign in 1858; and Lincoln's stature suffered no improvement for Douglass during the 1860 presidential campaign. "We have four parties in this country that have marshalled themselves on the highway of American politics, asking for the votes of the American people," Douglass wrote, but "so far as the principles of freedom and the hopes of the black man are concerned, all these parties are barren and unfruitful; neither of them seeks to lift the negro out of his fetters, and rescue this day from odium and disgrace." Lincoln, in particular, was no different from any of the opposition.

I do not believe in the anti-slavery of Abraham Lincoln, because he is on the side of this Slave Power of which I am speaking, that has possession of the Federal Government. ...Now, two years ago, I went through the State of Illinois for the purpose of getting signers to a petition, asking the Legislature to repeal the 'Testimony Law,' so as to permit colored men to testify against white men. I went to prominent Republicans, and among others, to Abraham Lincoln and Lyman Trumbull, and neither of them dared to sign that petition, to give me the right to

testify in a court of justice! ...If we sent out children to school, Abraham Lincoln would lick them out, in the name of Republicanism and anti-slavery!<sup>iv</sup>

Lincoln's election in November, 1860, did little to mollify abolitionist criticism, much less to give them joy at the prospect of a publicly anti-slavery president in the White House. Lincoln's unwillingness to use the outbreak of the Civil War in the spring of 1861 a pretext for immediate abolition convinced William Lloyd Garrison that Lincoln was "unwittingly helping to prolong the war, and to render the result more and more doubtful! If he *is* 6 feet 4 inches high, he is only a dwarf in mind!" Garrison had never really believed that Lincoln's Republicans "had an issue with the South," and Lincoln himself did nothing once elected to convince him otherwise. Lincoln's first annual message to Congress in December, 1861, nettled Garrison for its promises to restrain the scope of the war from becoming a "violent and remorseless, revolutionary struggle." Remorseless revolutionary conflict was exactly what Garrison was praying for as a means toward destroying slavery. "What a wishy-washy message from the President!" Garrison exclaimed, "He has evidently not a drop of anti-slavery blood in his veins; and he seems incapable of uttering a humane or generous sentiment respecting the enslaved millions in our land." Frederick Douglass, who had parted fellowship with Garrison over the issue of non-involvement in politics, hoped for better than Garrison did from Lincoln, but only seemed to get more disappointments. Lincoln's presidential inaugural, with its promises not to interfere with Southern slavery if the southern states attempted no violent withdrawal from the Union, left Douglass with "no very hopeful impression" of Lincoln; if anything Lincoln had only confirmed Douglass's "worst fears." Although Douglass would later go on to co-operate with Lincoln, and

describe him after his assassination as "emphatically the black man's president," at least until the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, Douglass flayed Lincoln as "an itinerant Colonization lecturer, showing all his inconsistencies, his pride of race and blood, his contempt for Negroes and his canting hypocrisy."<sup>v</sup>

Even in Lincoln's Congress, Republican abolitionists -- like Zachariah Chandler, Henry Wilson, Benjamin Wade, George W. Julian, James Ashley, Thaddeus Stevens, and Charles Sumner -- all heaped opprobrium on Lincoln's head. Wade, according to Joshua Giddings, "denounced the President as a *failure* from the moment of his election"; it mattered nothing to Wade if the war "continues thirty years and bankrupts the whole nation" unless "we can say there is not a slave in this land." "Lincoln himself seems to have no *nerve* or decision in dealing with great issues," wrote Ohio representative William Parker Cutler in his diary; and Maine senator William Pitt Fessenden erupted, "If the President had his wife's *will* and would use it rightly, our affairs would look much better." Sometimes, Lincoln said to his attorney-general, the Missourian Edward Bates, these Radical Republicans were "almost fiendish." "Stevens, Sumner and Wilson, simply haunt me with the importunities for a Proclamation of Emancipation," Lincoln complained to Missouri senator John B. Henderson, "Wherever I go and whatever way I turn, they are on my trail."<sup>vi</sup>

None of the abolitionists, however, was more vituperative in his contempt for Lincoln than the patrician, Wendell Phillips. As a self-professed "democrat, a Jeffersonian democrat in the darkest hour," Phillips was already disposed to suspicion of anyone like Lincoln who took Henry Clay, the paladin of the Whigs, as his "beau Ideal of a statesman." While Lincoln eulogized Clay in 1852 as Providence's gift to the nation, Phillips a few months later rejoiced,



"when we think how the slave trembled at the sound of [Clay's] voice," it was no indiscretion to imagine that "from a multitude of breaking hearts there went up nothing but gratitude to God when it pleased him to call that great sinner from this world." Once Phillips had Lincoln firmly in his sights after the Chicago nominating convention in the spring of 1860, he was no more merciful. "Who is this huckster in politics?" Phillips exclaimed "Who is this county court advocate?"

Here is Mr. Lincoln.... He says in regard to such a point, for instance as the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, that he has never studied the subject; that he has no distinctive ideas about it.... But so far as he has considered it, he should be, perhaps, in favor of gradual abolition, when the slave-holders of the district asked for it! Of course he would. I doubt if there is a man throughout the whole South who would not go as far as that.... That is the amount of his anti-slavery, if you choose to call it such, which according to the Chicago thermometer, the Northern states are capable of bearing. The ice is so thin that Mr. Lincoln, standing six feet and four inches, cannot afford to carry any principles with him onto it!

Three weeks before Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, Phillips was accusing Lincoln of "conducting this war, at present, with the purpose of saving slavery. ...If he had been a traitor, he could not have worked better to strengthen one side, and hazard the success of the other." Even after the Proclamation took effect, Phillips still raked Lincoln for not doing

more. "He is honest," Phillips allowed, "but we must remember the very prejudices and moral callousness which made him in 1860 an available candidate...necessarily makes him a poor leader,-- rather no leader at all,-- in a crisis like this."<sup>vii</sup>

It has been tempting to write much of this off to the not-inconsiderable egos of many of the abolitionist leaders, to the impatience which three decades of agitation had engendered in the abolitionist faithful, or to the presumably-forgivable political naivete of the abolitionists, who simply did not realize that Lincoln was on their side, but had political realities to deal with which they did not understand. For most interpreters, Lincoln and the abolitionists were simply a convergence waiting to happen, and this has become, for the most part, the familiar cadence of the story. Lincoln himself deliberately fed such perceptions from time to time. "Well, Mr. Sumner," Lincoln remarked to the florid Massachusetts Radical in November, 1861, "the only difference between you and me on this subject is a difference of a month or six weeks in time." He told the Illinois businessman and politician Wait Talcott that the opinions of "strong abolitionists...have produced a much stronger impression on my mind than you may think." And John Roll, a Springfield builder and long-time acquaintance of Lincoln's, heard him reply to a question as to whether he was an abolitionist, "I am mighty near one."<sup>viii</sup>

But being "near one" was precisely the point. If to be opposed to slavery was to be "near" abolitionism, then almost the entire population of the northern free states was "near" abolition. But opposition to slavery never entailed outright abolition. Antislavery might just as easily take the form of containment (opposing the legalization of slavery in any new states), colonization (forced repatriation of blacks to Africa), gradual emancipation (freedom keyed to decades-long timetables), or in the minds of most Northerners, nothing at all, so long as slavery got no nearer

than it was. "I am a whig," he wrote to his long-time friend Joshua Speed in 1855, "but others say there are no whigs, and that I am an abolitionist." But this, Lincoln denied: "I now do no more than oppose the *extension* of slavery."<sup>ix</sup> Even when he would finally contemplate emancipation, it was not on the abolitionists' terms: His ideal emancipation legislation would "have the three main features -- gradual -- compensation -- and the vote of the people," all of which the abolitionists abhorred.<sup>x</sup>

Lincoln's analysis of the abolition radicals as "fiends" has long roots in his own personal history. Born into a rigidly predestinarian Separate Baptist household, Lincoln rebelled against his parents' religion early in adolescence, and while he continued all through his life to retain a vivid sense of the power of providence, of the lack of human free will, and the absolute predestination of all events, it was a highly secularized sense of providence and predestination. In fact, if there was one element of the Separate Baptists' religion which did stick firmly with him, it was their suspicion of reformers. Almost as an expression of their disbelief in the human capacity to alter events, the most radical predestinarian Baptist sects supported no "Secret Societies, Christmas Trees, Cake-Walks, and various other things tolerated and practiced by Arminian churches [and] condemned in plain terms in the New Testament." Not surprisingly, the mature Lincoln also pulled shy of reform organizations: as a non-drinker, he endorsed the Washington Temperance Society in the 1840s (and delivered one of his earliest surviving full-length speeches to the Springfield, Illinois, chapter of the Washingtonians in 1842), but the success of the Washingtonians was predicated largely on being a secular temperance group which attempted to

make no moral judgements on recovering alcoholics. (Nevertheless, Lincoln's Democratic critics accused him of joining the Washingtonians to promote himself politically: "Does any rational man believe for a moment," asked one Democratic newspaper, "that Abraham Lincoln, B.S. Clement and Edward D. Baker have joined the Washingtonian Society from any other than political motives?").<sup>xi</sup>

That exception was filled in Lincoln's life by his political allegiance to the Whig party. Like the Whigs, Lincoln was a liberal nationalist; he looked for his political identity not in regional or ethnic sources but in the broad opportunities for self-improvement and self-transformation provided by the entire nation. In his 1852 eulogy for Henry Clay, Lincoln extolled Clay as "that truly national man" whose devotion to liberty and equality led him to walk a middle path of compromise to save the Union. "Whatever he did, he did for the whole country," rather than for the sake of sectional diversity. Clay "loved his country, but mostly because it was a free country...because he saw in such, the advancement, prosperity, and glory, of human liberty, human right and human nature," rather than because he shared ties of kin or blood or race with other Americans. If there was an American identity, it was founded on appeals to a universal human nature and universal human rights, discovered not in the passionate Romanticist ideals of race or gender but by reason. For Lincoln, the "Happy day" inhuman history will come "when, all appetites controled, all passions subdued, all matters subjected, *mind*, all-conquering *mind*, shall live and move the monarch of the world. Glorious consummation! Hail fall of Fury! Reign of Reason, all hail!"<sup>xii</sup> And Lincoln's most famous utterance was a blunt statement that the American Republic was founded upon a universal "proposition, that all men are created equal."

The place Lincoln gave to the centrality of "propositions" was underscored by the

reverence with which he approached the federal Constitution, a reverence which guaranteed he would run afoul of the abolitionists. One of his earliest comments on the abolitionist movement, in the Henry Clay eulogy in 1852, criticized the abolitionists as the enemies of constitutional government for their denunciations of the Constitution as a pro-slavery ploy. "Those who would shiver into fragments the union of these States; tear to tatters its now venerated constitution; and even burn the last copy of the Bible, rather than slavery should continue a single hour," Lincoln said, "together with all their more halting sympathizers, have received and are receiving their just execration."<sup>xiii</sup>

What it is vital to see is that, while none of this made him friendly to the abolitionists, none of it made him indifferent to slavery, either. He was not exaggerating when he said, "I have always hated slavery," during his great debates with Douglas in 1858; and in 1854, he explained, "I object to it because it assumes that there *can be moral right* in the enslaving of one man by another."<sup>xiv</sup> Fundamentally, what set Lincoln apart from the abolitionists was that his definition of slavery was a Whiggish, economic one rather than a evangelical one. When he talked about slavery, what he meant before the 1850s was any relationship of economic restraint, or any systematic effort to box ambitious and enterprising people like himself into a "fixed condition of labor, for his whole life." This 'slavery' was what he experienced as a young man under his father, and he came to associate it with agrarianism and the Jeffersonian ideology which protected it. "I used to be a slave," Lincoln said in an early speech; in fact, "we were all slaves one time or another...and now I am so free that they let me practice law." Slavery, in this sense, included anyone, even a "freeman," who is "fatally fixed for life, in the condition of a hired laborer." Abolitionism provided a vastly different framework for opposing slavery, based on a Romantic

absolutism which repulsed Lincoln. When the Illinois legislature resolved in January, 1837, that "property in slaves, is sacred to the slave-holding states by the Federal Constitution," Lincoln and Whig judge Daniel Stone protested that "the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy." But the protest bent obligingly in the other direction far enough to add that "the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends rather to increase than to abate its evils." Far from sympathizing with abolitionists in the 1830s and 1840s, Lincoln believed that "the whig abolitionists of New York" had robbed Henry Clay of the 1844 presidential election by wasting crucial votes on the abolitionist Liberty Party. It was one of the things Lincoln pointed out for praise in Henry Clay (in contrast to Wendell Phillips), that although Clay "was, on principle and in feeling, opposed to slavery" and to the idea that "the negroes were to be excepted from the human race," Clay was no abolitionist, and had no workable plan "how it could at *once* be eradicated, without producing a greater evil, even to the cause of liberty itself." Nevertheless, Lincoln insisted that "I can express all my views on the slavery question by quotations from Henry Clay. Doesn't this look like we are akin?"<sup>xv</sup>

Lincoln was not galvanized into open opposition to slavery until 1854 and the Kansas-Nebraska bill, when it became evident that slavery was not going to accept confinement to the Southern states, but intended to extend itself across the western territories, and perhaps even into the free states, where slave labor could then compete with free wage labor. Even so, the only solution he could imagine was a non-confrontational program of "gradual emancipation," with financial compensation offered to slaveowners, and following that, repatriation back to Africa in American-sponsored colonies. "My first impulse would be to free all the slaves, and send them to Liberia,--to their own native land," Lincoln remarked in 1854. As late as 1863, as president,

Lincoln was still experimenting with colonization schemes; by the testimony (admittedly unreliable) of Benjamin F. Butler, he was still toying with them within a few hours of his death.<sup>xvi</sup>

Lincoln's fundamental approach to the problem of slavery as a political-economic one as much as a moral one stands in dramatic contrast to the most basic instincts of American abolitionism. Dangerous as it is to generalize about a movement as fissiparous as the American abolitionists proved themselves to be over the course of thirty years, there are nevertheless certain common reflexes, and almost all of them run counter to Lincoln's. The most fundamental difference was the location of religion in the abolitionist matrix; for it could be said that, no matter how many abolitionists (including Garrison, Phillips, Abby Kelley, Theodore Dwight Weld, James Birney and the Grimke sisters) turned their backs on organized Protestantism, nevertheless, evangelical Protestantism *was* the abolitionist matrix. As Robert Abzug has remarked, "Garrison...recreated the evangelical drama of American society's sin, declension, and possibility for renewal, and he reset its term." The day that Garrison burnt a copy of the Constitution at the annual Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society picnic in Framingham was the day Moncure Conway "distinctly recognized that the antislavery cause was a religion" and "that Garrison was a successor of the inspired axe-bearers,-- John the Baptist, Luther, Wesley, George Fox...."<sup>xvii</sup>

But this was the position for religion in public life which Lincoln, who was almost pathologically shy of bringing his religious life into public view, deplored. Although as a Whig, Lincoln was more receptive to public affirmations of religious postures than previous Democratic presidents, he adamantly refused to allow religion to dictate policy. Religious delegations which

came to offer him direction were usually given short shrift, and sometimes a rare display of Lincolnian abruptness; he received the petition of the National Association for the Amendment of the Constitution and their proposal to re-write the preamble of the Constitution to recognize "the rulership of Jesus Christ and the supremacy of divine law," but took no action upon it.<sup>xviii</sup> The religious sentiments which pervade the Second Inaugural are more substantial than any American president, before or since, but they are also remarkable for the message of restraint they contain, that no one has sufficient insight to understand the intentions of God.

Lincoln experienced even more distance from the abolitionists once some of the specifics of abolitionist religion came more clearly into view. His non-belief in free will -- that "the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power, over which the mind itself has no control" -- had been increasingly rejected by evangelical revivalism in the 19th century. Even evangelicals who liked to consider themselves Calvinists re-defined their Calvinism in ways that allowed them to preach that conversion to God was a spiritual act one could perform for oneself, at once, instead of waiting mutely for God to do it as *his* choice. What immediatism was for the revivalists translated into demands for immediate abolition of slavery in the hands of Garrison, Henry Ward Beecher, Elizur Wright, and the Tappan brothers. "Under the government of God, as exhibited in this world, there is but one remedy for sin, and that is available only by a *repentance*, evidenced by reformation.

There is no such thing as holding on to sin with safety. It is not only to be renounced, but the very occasions of it are to be avoided at whatever sacrifice.

...The entire agency which God has provided to reclaim the world should be



adapted to produce *immediate repentance*. ...The doctrine of the immediate abolition of slavery asks no better authority than is offered by scripture. It is in perfect harmony with the letter and spirit of God's word. ...It is the duty of the holders of slaves immediately to restore them to their liberty, and to extend to them the full protection of law, as well as its control. ...Also, it is the duty of all men to proclaim this doctrine -- to urge upon slaveholders *immediate emancipation*, so long as there is a slave -- to agitate the consciences of tyrants, as long as there is a tyrant on the globe.

Lincoln would have found unrealistic, in both religious and political terms, the kind of immediatist advice Arthur Tappan gave to Theodore Dwight Weld as an agent of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1834:

You will inculcate every where, the great fundamental principle of IMMEDIATE ABOLITION, as the duty of all masters, on the ground that slavery is both unjust and unprofitable. Insist principally on the SIN of SLAVERY, because our main hope is in the consciences of men. ...We reprobate the idea of compensation to slave holders, because it implies the right of slavery. ...We also reprobate all plans of expatriation, by whatever specious pretences covered, as a remedy for slavery, for they all proceed from prejudices against color; and we hold that the duty of whites in regard to this cruel prejudice is not to indulge it, but to repent and overcome

it.<sup>xix</sup>

Immediatism was not the only religious attitude among the abolitionists that alienated Lincoln. The great obstruction on the road to repentance, according to both the revivalists and the abolitionists, was selfishness. To a certain extent, Lincoln agreed: selfishness described the full extent of human action, and even explained his decision to free slaves as an appeal to the self-interest of the slaves which would impel them to take up arms against the South. For the abolitionists, however, selfishness was exactly what they believed they had transcended, and expected slaveholders to transcend. "We have no selfish motive to appeal to," Wendell Phillips confidently asserted in 1852, "We appeal to white men, who cannot see any present interest they have in the slave question" and ask them to "ascend to a level of disinterestedness which the masses seldom reach, before we can create any excitement in them on the questions of slavery." But *excitement*, the fuel which Phillips hoped to ignite in order to overcome selfishness, was precisely what Lincoln feared to interject into public discourse. In 1838, he warned that the chief threat to liberty was "the increasing disposition to substitute the wild and furious passions, in lieu of the sober judgments of the Courts." And twenty-three years later, on the eve of the secession of the southern states from the Union, he was still warning that "Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection." But Phillips, in outlining the "Philosophy of the Abolition Movement" in 1853 for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, insisted that passion was the only cure for slavery-inspired moral lethargy. Old School clergy and "Cotton" Whigs, Phillips complained, "are ever parading their wish to draw a line between themselves and us, because *they must be permitted* to wait,-- to trust more to reason the feeling,-- to indulge a generous charity,-- to rely on the sure influence of simple truth, uttered in love, &c., &c." He had

no hesitation in accepting the charge that "in dealing with slaveholders and their apologists, we indulge in fierce denunciations, instead of appealing to their reason and common sense by plain statements and fair argument...."<sup>xx</sup>

On no point, though, did Lincoln feel greater shrinkage from the abolitionists than when he heard them speak in tones of temperamental anti-rationalism against the Constitution, or worse still, saw them burn it, as Garrison did in 1854. "As to the governments of this world, whatever their titles or forms, we shall endeavor to prove that, in their essential elements, and as at present administered, they are all anti-Christ," Garrison declared, "and that the followers of Jesus should instinctively shun their stations of honor, power, and emolument. ...Human governments are to be viewed as judicial punishments...." Phillips agreed: "the Constitution and government of his country is worth nothing, except it is or can be made capable of grappling with the great question of slavery. ...The best use of good laws is to teach men to trample bad laws under their feet." Garrison dismissed all talk "about the sacredness of the compact which was formed between the free and slave states, on the adoption of the Constitution" and described it instead as "the infamous bargain." On those terms, the Constitution was actually an obstacle, which trapped well-intentioned abolitionists in its pro-slavery mire.

The ballot-box is not an anti-slavery, but a pro-slavery argument, so long as it is surrounded by the United States Constitution, which forbids all approach to it, except on conditions that the voter shall surrender fugitive slaves -- suppress negro insurrections -- sustain a piratical representation in Congress -- and regard man-stealers as equally eligible with the truest friends of human freedom and

equality to any or all offices under the United States government.

Illinois abolitionist Ichabod Coddington, who tried to nudge Lincoln toward abolitionism, and who Lincoln politely disliked, warned that the Constitution protected no one from sin: "We are implicated in the *Sin* of Slavery.... We stand misrepresented in every case which regards Slavery + yet we are taxed to support it." It is hard to imagine Lincoln having any sympathy with Coddington's fellow Illinoisan, Owen Lovejoy, in calling for blunt disobedience to the Constitution and the Fugitive Slave Law:

I will never degrade my manhood, and stifle the sympathies of human nature.  
 ...Let it echo through all the arches of heaven, and reverberate and bellow along  
 all the deep gorges of hell, where slave catchers will be very likely to hear it;  
 Owen Lovejoy lives at Princeton, Illinois, three-quarters of a mile east of the  
 village, and he aids every fugitive that comes to his door and asks it. Thou  
 invisible demon of Slavery, dost thou think to cross my humble threshold, and  
 forbid me to give bread to the hungry and shelter to the houseless? I BID YOU  
 DEFIANCE IN THE NAME OF MY GOD!<sup>xxi</sup>

And yet Lincoln, in time, paid tribute to the memory of Owen Lovejoy as "my most generous friend" in Congress, and he told Shelby Cullom "that he was one of the best men in Congress." By the same token, Lewis Tappan voted for Lincoln in 1864 ("the first time in his life he had voted for a winning candidate," Bertram Wyatt-Brown reminds us) and William Lloyd Garrison

broke ranks with Phillips and other abolitionists and openly supported Lincoln's re-election.

"There is no mistake about it in regard to Mr. Lincoln's desire to do all that he can see it right and possible for him to do to uproot slavery," Garrison assured his wife after meeting with Lincoln in the White House in the summer of 1864. And in the end, Lincoln (by a path too well-known to need retelling here) did find his way to the abolition of slavery, first emancipating slaves serving the Confederacy's military interests through the Confiscation Acts of 1861 and 1862, then abolishing slavery in the Confederate states through the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, and finally eradicating slavery entirely in the United States forever through the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. Much as he had dreaded the importunities of the radicals in his own party, Lincoln finally had to concede that although they were "bitterly hostile" to him "personally," and "utterly lawless -- the unhandiest devils in the world to deal with...after all their faces are set Zionwards." As he told John B. Henderson, "Sumner and Wade and Chandler are right about [abolition].... We can't get through this terrible war with slavery existing."<sup>xxii</sup>

But Lincoln's affection for Lovejoy had its limitations. "If he ever became too radical," Lincoln assured Cullom, "I always knew that I could send for him and talk it over, and he would go back to the floor and do about as I wanted." And the same was true for the abolitionists in general. "Stand with the abolitionist in restoring the Missouri Compromise," Lincoln advised in 1854, "and stand against him when he attempts to repeal the fugitive slave law," because "in the latter case, you stand with the southern disunionist." Lincoln's explanation to Henderson about conceding the need for abolition to the radicals was the preface to an appeal for Henderson and other Missourians to agree to a compensated emancipation plan, "to turn in and take pay for your slaves from the Government?" Even after emancipation, Lincoln continued to speak of the

abolitionists as though Zion were only occasionally their destination. He told William D. Kelley that he loathed "the self-righteousness of the Abolitionists," and spoke to Eli Thayer of them "in terms of contempt and derision." John Eaton remembered Lincoln exclaiming (of a "well-known abolitionist and orator," probably Phillips), "I don't see why God lets him live!"<sup>xxiii</sup>

Lincoln came to emancipation at last, but came to it by a very different road than the abolitionists. Where they built their argument on the demand of evangelical religions for repentance, Lincoln was reluctant to make religious demands in the public square and instead preferred gradualism and compensation for emancipated slaves; where they preached from passion and choice, he worked from reason and patience; where they called for immediatism without regard for consequences, it was precisely the economic consequences of slavery and its extension which kindled Lincoln's opposition in the 1850s; and where they brushed aside the Constitution's implicit sanctions for slavery, and the Constitution with them, Lincoln would proceed against slavery no farther than he Constitution allowed; while they were racial egalitarians, Lincoln was only a Lockean natural-rights equalitarian, and there is little in Lincoln's writing between 1863 and his death which allows to predict accurately what his policies on the freedmens' civil rights would have been.

And yet, it was the name of Abraham Lincoln – restrained, emotionally chilly, with an unblinking eye for compromise – which ended up at the bottom of the Emancipation Proclamation. This raises, then, the large-scale question which has so often haunted the literature of the abolitionist movement: "What exactly was the function of William Lloyd Garrison and those who acted similarly, in preparing the way for the ending of slavery, and in relation to the

other influences converging toward the same end? Where does the extremist -- the fanatic, the single-minded zealot -- fit in?"<sup>xxiv</sup>

The most recent neo-abolitionist histories from Henry Mayer and Paul Goodman have joined older neo-abolitionists like James McPherson, Howard Zinn and Martin Duberman in answering this question with a resounding affirmation of the strategic centrality of the abolitionists to the end of slavery. Mayer, for instance, identifies the abolitionists as the sine qua non of emancipation. "William Lloyd Garrison," wrote Mayer in the second sentence of his biography of the abolitionist, "is an authentic American hero who, with a biblical prophet's power and a propagandist's skill, forced the nation to confront the most crucial moral issue in its history."<sup>xxv</sup> And if the abolitionists are central to emancipation, so is their movement culture, their strategy, and their rhetoric. By hallowing zealotry, the neo-abolitionists identify direct (even if non-violent) action as the only morally legitimate stance in American reform. Only by means of incessant pushing of the most radical kind was the nation made ready for abolition; only by means of the dauntless radicalism of *The Liberator* was justice achieved and the way paved for further reform in American society. By extension, we are exhorted to go and do likewise.

This is a comforting, and yet troubling, and even self-congratulatory, way of describing the crooked road which led to emancipation. It forgets how many other strands of thinking besides the unction of moral rectitude went into the making of slavery's end, and ignores the potency lent to the anti-slavery cause by the liberal capitalist argument for free wage labor. Even worse, it sanctions a political ethic built on Romantic Kantianism (and hallowed in our times by John

Rawls) that stands in stark contrast to the Enlightenment politics of prudence so dear to Lincoln's Lockean and rationalist sense of politics. Lincoln, by contrast, embodied the complexity of American opposition to slavery. He came at the problem only when slavery ceased being content with living under compromises and tried to assert its extension as a solution to the South's dwindling political influence. The end of slavery owed something to a sense of awakened moral responsibility, but that in itself owed far more than we have been willing to admit to the long swing of ideas about political economy, and to the public revulsion toward specific public events, such as the effort to "gag" debate over slavery in Congress and the resort to pro-slavery terrorism in the organizing of the Kansas Territory in the 1850s. Above all, Lincoln was willing to subordinate his own preferences (including his "oft-expressed wish that everyone ought to be free") to the need to build coalitions rather than purify sects. Lincoln had no illusions about his own sanctity or his enemies' depravity, and he was constantly in mind of the price being paid in human lives and treasure for even the noblest of results.

"If I had my way, this war would never have been commenced," Lincoln told the English Quaker activist Eliza P. Gurney a month after issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. "If I had been allowed my way," he continued, "this war would have been ended before this," perhaps before the Proclamation had ever been contemplated. That sentiment has earned him the execration of every abolitionist and neo-abolitionist, from Garrison to (most recently) *Ebony* editor Lerone Bennett, whose book *Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* depicts Lincoln as a callous white racist, the kind of fence straddler "we find in almost all situations of oppression." For all of his rant, Lincoln biographers will ignore Bennett at their peril, because both Garrison and Bennett had a point: Lincoln's best plan for emancipation (without the helping



hand of war) *was* a gradualized scheme which might have allowed the grandparents of some of today's adult African-Americans to have been born in slavery.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The question Lincoln might have asked the neo-abolitionists was whether the costs of their way of immediate emancipation – costs that included a civil war, 620,000 dead, a national economic body-blow worse than the Great Depression, and the broken glass of Reconstruction to walk over – are also part of their calculation of results. Neither Lincoln's, nor the abolitionists', alternative was particularly pretty. (And of the two, I must be candid enough to confess that I cannot see myself in 1861 applauding Lincoln's strategy). Lincoln never doubted that emancipation was *right* and slavery was *wrong*. But he had an inkling that it was possible to do something right in such a way that it fostered an infinitely greater wrong. There is a zeal which is not according to knowledge, and many of the abolitionists had it in spades, and reveled in it. To be pushed into reform merely by the exigencies of war, politics, and the slowly-shifting weight of economies was, for them, not to have zeal at all. (British evangelical abolitionists, unlike Garrison and Phillips, had a far greater sense of the need to harness moralism to politics and the long movement of society than their American counterparts).<sup>xxvii</sup> Still, because their unyielding campaign was followed in 1865 by abolition, it has been easy to conclude that zeal earned its own justification simply through the end of slavery.

But this may be the greatest *post hoc, propter hoc* fallacy in American history. Between the word of abolition and the deed of emancipation falls the ambiguous shadow of Abraham Lincoln. For more than a century, the genius of American reform has steered its course by the constellation of Garrison and Phillips. The realities of reform, however, may have been another matter.

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<sup>i</sup> Oates, "Lincoln's Journey to Emancipation," in *Our Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, and the Civil War Era* (Amherst, MA, 1979), 61.

<sup>ii</sup> Douglass, in Ronald Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal: American Abolitionism after 1830* (Baltimore, 1978), 126; see also the varying, and conflicting, taxonomies of abolitionism in Aileen Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834-1850* (New York, 1969), Martin Duberman, ed., *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists* (Princeton, 1965), David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 1975), Herbert Aptheker, "Militant Abolitionism," in *The Journal of Negro History* 26 (October 1941), Eric Foner, "Abolitionism and the Labor Movement in Ante-bellum America," in *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York, 1980), and Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery, 1830-1860* (New York, 1960).

<sup>iii</sup> Josiah Gilbert Holland, *Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Springfield, MA, 1866), 347-348; Arnold, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. James A. Rawley (Lincoln, NE, 1994), 342, 345; Burlingame, "'I Used to Be a Slave': The Origins of Lincoln's Hatred of Slavery," in *The Inner*

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*World of Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana, IL, 1994), 20, 357; Donald, *Lincoln* (New York, 1995), 165, 342; Cox, *Lincoln and Black Freedom: A Study in Presidential Leadership* (Urbana, IL, 1985), 6-7; Richard Hart has convincingly shown that, in fact, Springfield had a sizeable and active African-American community, some of which lived in Lincoln's own neighborhood, and that Lincoln could not have avoided contact with numerous African-Americans who were held in *de facto* slavery under Illinois's complicated black codes. See Hart, "Springfield's African Americans as a Part of the Lincoln Community," in *The Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 20 (Winter 1999), 35-54.

<sup>iv</sup> Ray to Washburne, December 22, 1855, in Elihu Washburne Papers, Library of Congress; "The Republican Convention at Chicago," *Oberlin Evangelist*, May 23, 1860, 83; "H.F. Douglas, the Negro Orator," *Peoria Daily Transcript*, October 23, 1858; Douglass, in James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted During the War for the Union* (New York, 1965), 5, 7.

<sup>v</sup> Garrison, "Annual Meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society," *The Liberator*, February 13, 1847; Lincoln, "Annual Message to Congress," *Collected Works*, 5:49; Garrison to Oliver Johnson, October 7, 1861, and December 6, 1861, in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison: Volume V, Let the Oppressed Go Free, 1861-1867*, ed. W.M. Merrill (Cambridge, MA, 1979), 37, 47; Douglass, in "The Inaugural Address" (April 1861) and "The President and His Speeches" (September, 1862) in *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York, 1950), 3:72-75, 267, 270. Douglass's post-assassination comment on Lincoln is less well known than his later criticism of Lincoln as "pre-eminently the white man's president,

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entirely devoted to the welfare of white men," but the latter comment was uttered more than ten years later, after Reconstruction had soured Douglass and swung him back to his former opinion of Lincoln. See Michael Burlingame, "Emphatically the Black Man's President': New Light on Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln," in *Lincoln Ledger* (1996), 1-5.

<sup>vi</sup> Giddings, in J.G. Randall, *Lincoln the President: Volume Two, Bull Run to Gettysburg* (New York, 1945), 209; T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and the Radicals* (Madison, WI, 1941), 10; Allan Bogue, "William Parker Cutler's Congressional Diary of 1862-63," *Civil War History* 33 (December 1987), 320; Francis Fessenden, *Life and Public Services of William Pitt Fessenden* (Boston, 1907), 1:259-260; *The Diary of Edward Bates*, ed. Howard K. Beale (Washington, DC, 1933), 333; Lincoln to John B. Henderson, in Walter B. Stevens, *A Reporter's Lincoln*, ed. Michael Burlingame (Lincoln, NE, 1999), 170-173.

<sup>vii</sup> Phillips, "The Labor Question" (April 1872) in *Speeches, Lectures, and Letters, Second Series* (Boston, 1905), 171; Phillips, in Ralph Korngold, *Two Friends of Man: The Story of William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips and Their Relationship with Abraham Lincoln* (Boston, 1950), 269; Phillips, "Philosophy of the Abolition Movement" (January 27, 1853), "The Cabinet" (August 1, 1862), and "The State of the Country" (January 21 and May 11, 1863), in *Speeches, Lectures, and Letters*, 113-4, 448, 450, 555.

<sup>viii</sup> Sumner, Talcott and Roll, in *Recollected Words*, 433, 442, 383.

<sup>ix</sup> Lincoln, "To Joshua F. Speed" (August 24, 1855), *Collected Works*, 2:323.

<sup>x</sup> Lincoln, "To Horace Greeley" (March 24, 1862), *Collected Works*, 5:169.

<sup>xi</sup> Gilbert Beebe, in Peter J. Wosh, *Spreading the Word: The Bible Business in*

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*Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), 135; Douglas L. Wilson, *Honor's Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1998), 262.

<sup>xii</sup> Lincoln, "Temperance Address" (February 22, 1842) and "Eulogy on Henry Clay" (July 6, 1852), *Collected Works*, 1:279, 2:126.

<sup>xiii</sup> Lincoln, "Eulogy on Henry Clay" (July 6, 1852), *Collected Works*, 2:130.

<sup>xiv</sup> Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2:274.

<sup>xv</sup> Lincoln, "Protest in Illinois Legislature on Slavery" (March 3, 1837), "To Williamson Durley" (October 3, 1845), "Eulogy on Henry Clay" (July 6, 1852), "Speech at Peoria" (October 16, 1854), "Speech at Carlinville, Illinois" (August 31, 1858), "Address before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin" (September 30, 1859), "Speech at New Haven, Connecticut" (March 6, 1860), *Collected Works*, 1:75, 347, 2:130, 274, 3:79, 478; 4:25; Roll, in *Recollected Words*, 383.

<sup>xvi</sup> Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria, Illinois" (October 16, 1854), *Collected Works*, 2:255; Butler, in Allen Thorndike Rice, *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time* (New York, 1886), 150-154.

<sup>xvii</sup> Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York, 1994), 144.; Conway, *Autobiography, Memories and Experiences of Moncure Daniel Conway* (Boston, 1904), 1:184.

<sup>xviii</sup> Burlingame, *Inner World*, 177; Morton Borden, "The Christian Amendment," *Civil War History* 25 (June 1979), 160.

<sup>xix</sup> Lincoln, "Handbill Replying to Charges of Infidelity," *Collected Works*, 1:382; Elizur

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Wright, *The Sin of Slavery and its Remedy; Containing Some Reflections on the Moral Influence of African Colonization* (New York, 1833), 1:42; Tappan, "Particular Instructions," to Weld, in *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke Weld, and Sarah Grimke, 1822-1844*, eds. G. Barnes and D.L. Dumond (New York, 1934), 1:124-128.

<sup>xx</sup> Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address--Final Text" (March 4, 1861) and "To James C. Conkling" (August 26, 1863), *Collected Works*, 4:271, 6:409; Phillips, "Sims Anniversary," in *Speeches, Lectures, and Letters* (Boston, 1863), 83, 98, 100.

<sup>xxi</sup> Phillips, "Sims Anniversary," in *Speeches, Lectures, and Letters*, 91; Garrison, "The Great Crisis!" *The Liberator* (December 29, 1832 and December 15, 1837); "Twelfth Annual Meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society," *Twelfth Annual Report, presented to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society by its Board of Managers* (Boston, 1844), 3; Lovejoy, "The Fanaticism of the Democratic Party," in *Illinois Literature: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. J.E. Hallwas (Macomb, IL, 1986), 81-82; Coddington, "Why Discuss This Subject In the North?" (n.d.), in Ichabod Coddington Papers, Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, IL. Lincoln resented Coddington's attempt in November, 1854, to place Lincoln's name on the newly-organized Republican state committee; Lincoln was at that time still firmly committed to the Whig party, and while he supposed that "my opposition to the principle of slavery is as strong as hat of any member of the Republican party...I had also supposed that the extent to which I feel authorized to carry that opposition, practically, was not at all satisfactory to that party" ("To Ichabod Coddington," November 27, 1854, *Collected Works*, 2:288).

<sup>xxii</sup> Lincoln, "To John H. Bryant" (May 30, 1864), *Collected Works*, 7:366; Bertram

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Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War Against Slavery* (New York, 1971), 337-338; Garrison to Helen E. Garrison (June 11, 1864), *Letters of William Lloyd Garrison: Volume V*, 212; Diary entry for October 28, 1863, in *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay*, 101; Henderson, in *A Reporter's Lincoln*, 171.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Cullom, in *Recollected Words*, 125; Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria, Illinois" (October 16, 1854), *Collected Works*, 2:273; John B. Henderson, in *A Reporter's Lincoln*, 172; Thayer and Kelley, in *Inside Lincoln's White House*, 322.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Eric McKittrick, "The Liberator," in *The New York Review of Books* 46 (October 21, 1999), 57.

<sup>xxv</sup> Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley, CA, 1998), 60; Henry Mayer, *William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York, 1998), xvii-xxi.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Lincoln, "Reply to Eliza P. Gurney" (October 26, 1862), *Collected Works*, 5:478.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Christopher L. Brown comments in terms which Lincoln would have appreciated that "if antislavery argument was to have effect, moralists probably would have to do more than simply insist that slavery was wrong. ...The real burden lay in rethinking the relationship between empire and coerced labor....". See "Empire Without Slaves: British Concepts of Emancipation in the Age of the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 61 (April 1999), 275.