

SARAH TRYPHENA PHILLIPS LECTURE

# Abraham Lincoln: The Great Emancipator?

ERIC FONER

*Fellow of the Academy*

MORE WORDS HAVE BEEN WRITTEN about Abraham Lincoln than any figure in American history and perhaps any historical personage other than Jesus Christ. Every generation, it seems, reinvents Lincoln in its own image. Politicians from conservatives to communists, civil rights advocates to segregationists have claimed him as their own. Lincoln exerts a unique hold on Americans' historical imagination, as an icon embodying core American ideals and myths—the self-made man, the frontier hero, the liberator of the slaves. Lincoln has been portrayed as a shrewd political operator driven by ambition and as the Great Emancipator, a moralist for whom emancipation was the logical conclusion of a lifetime hatred of slavery. More recently, the black scholar Lerone Bennett has given us Lincoln as a racist who actually defended and tried to protect slavery.<sup>1</sup> The latest full-scale biography, by David Donald, takes as its motto Lincoln's famous statement in an 1864 letter, 'I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.'<sup>2</sup> Here was a Lincoln for the Clinton era (although not in terms of private escapades), a president of no real vision, buffeted by events, constantly being pushed in one direction or another by outside forces. The newest book on Lincoln, by Professor Richard Carwardine, shows persuasively how Lincoln, despite his own religious scepticism, harnessed the language

Read at the Academy 5 November 2003.

<sup>1</sup> Lerone Bennett, *Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* (Chicago, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> David Donald, *Lincoln* (New York, 1995), p. 9.

and political power of evangelical Protestantism, rather like George W. Bush.<sup>3</sup> There is no question that additional Lincolns will emerge in the future.

I have never written a biography of Lincoln, which may be an advantage in assessing his career. For Lincoln, like all great historical figures, must be approached within his own historical context—in his case, an extremely complex and contentious context. Lincoln's policies regarding slavery cannot be understood without probing the relationship between the man and his times. Bennett's book—really a prosecutorial indictment of Lincoln—is entitled *Forced Into Glory*. It gives us a Lincoln pushed by others to initiate great acts. In a sense, this assessment is not all that different from Lincoln's own comment, quoted above, about being controlled by events. But this argument works both ways. Not everybody is capable of being forced into glory. I doubt whether future historians will see Presidents Bill Clinton or George W. Bush as having achieved greatness, no matter how hard they were pushed. The seed, the potential, the ability to rise to the occasion must be there as well as the outside pressure. In the case of Lincoln, it is important to understand both the attitudes toward slavery that he held for virtually his entire life, and the way he changed under the pressure of world-shattering events.

Lincoln *was* a professional politician. From the age of twenty-one to his death he was either in office or running for office every day of his life with the exception of the period between 1849, when he retired from a rather unsuccessful term in Congress, and 1854, when he returned to politics as a result of the Kansas–Nebraska Act, which raised the prospect of the expansion of slavery into the nation's trans-Mississippi heartland. In the 1830s and 1840s, Lincoln was a vaguely prominent Whig in Illinois, a member of the legislature and presidential elector. But had his career ended in the 1840s, no one today would be writing books—or even Master's essays—about Lincoln. There was very little sign at that point of his potential for greatness.

But during his legislative career Lincoln did articulate a position regarding slavery to which he would adhere for nearly the entirety of the rest of his career. This was in 1837, the year in which the abolitionist editor Elijah P. Lovejoy was murdered by a mob while defending his printing press in Alton, Illinois, not that far from Springfield, where Lincoln lived and served in the legislature. Illinois at this time was largely settled from the South. It was a pro-slavery state, even though slavery was barred

<sup>3</sup> Richard Carwardine, *Lincoln* (London, 2003).

from Illinois by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and by the state constitution. The Illinois legislature passed a resolution condemning the abolitionists and affirming 'our deep regard and affection' for southern slaveholders. This received unanimous approval in the Illinois Senate, and passed by 77–6 in the House of Representatives. One of the six was Abraham Lincoln. The vote could hardly have served any political purpose or ambition. Six weeks later, Lincoln and Dan Stone, an emigrant from Vermont and later a successful lawyer, issued a 'protest'—really an explanation for their vote. 'They believe,' the two wrote, 'that the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy; but that the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends rather to increase rather than to abate its evil.' They added that under the Constitution, Congress did not possess the power to interfere with slavery in the states where it existed.<sup>4</sup>

This was hardly a ringing condemnation of slavery. But in the context of Illinois in 1837, it was a fairly courageous statement. More importantly, the 'protest' enunciated a position to which Lincoln would adhere for many years, until the middle of the Civil War in fact. Slavery was wrong and unwise, but the abolitionists only made things worse. Lincoln was not and never became an abolitionist—an advocate of the immediate abolition of slavery. What, then, was he?

Lincoln did not elaborate his views on slavery until the 1850s, when he returned to public life as a major spokesman for the newly created Republican party, committed to halting the westward expansion of slavery. In that decade, he expanded enormously on that little 'protest'. Why was slavery founded on injustice and bad policy? At the core of Lincoln's critique was a vision of northern society as a place of opportunity for what he and many others called the 'free laborer'. North and South to Lincoln and other Republicans represented distinct societies, based on two different systems of labour. Lincoln read carefully the writings of proslavery writers like George Fitzhugh and John C. Calhoun, who argued that slaves were in fact better off than free workers. Northern labour, they insisted, was more exploited than the slave. Slaves could not become unemployed, were cared for in old age, and guaranteed subsistence. It was better, they argued, to be the slave of a single master than of the impersonal capitalist marketplace, at the mercy of the winds of economic change.

<sup>4</sup> Roy P. Basler (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, 1953–5), 1, 75–6.

Lincoln insisted that this was a complete misreading of Northern society. In the North, he said, 'There is no such thing as a freeman being fatally fixed for life, in the condition of a hired laborer.'<sup>5</sup> Northern society offered workers incentives and opportunities to better their conditions, as Lincoln himself had moved from a humble origin on a small farm in Kentucky to a position of some wealth. His life, he said, exemplified the prospects southern society failed to provide to the labourer.

Rather than viewing the slave primarily as the victim of a moral wrong, Lincoln saw him as a labourer deprived of the fruits of his labour. Slavery was ultimately a form of theft—stealing the labour of one person and appropriating it for another. And African-Americans, he insisted, were entitled to the fruits of their labour: 'I want every man to have the chance—and I believe a black man is entitled to it—in which he *can* better his condition.'<sup>6</sup> The slave should have the same opportunity to move forward in life ostensibly enjoyed by northern free labour. In some speeches, Lincoln explicitly declared that women should enjoy this right as well as men. Lincoln was frequently charged by Democrats with supporting 'Negro equality'. He firmly denied the charge, as we will see. But he referred to a black woman to illustrate the kind of equality in which he did believe: 'In some respects she certainly is not my equal; but in her natural right to eat the bread she earns with her own hand without asking the leave of anyone else, she is my equal, and the equal of all others.'<sup>7</sup> That is the grounding of the notion of equality for Lincoln—the natural right to the fruits of one's labour. It is a vision not bounded by either race or gender. *She* has that right as well as *he*.

Essentially, Lincoln argued that the natural rights outlined in the Declaration of Independence applied to all mankind—life; liberty (thus slavery is wrong); and the pursuit of happiness, which is impossible without enjoying the fruits of one's labour. When Thomas Jefferson substituted the pursuit of happiness for property in the famous Lockean trilogy—life, liberty, and property (estate, actually)—he created an open-ended sense of entitlement and striving which has inspired Americans ever since. Blacks should be part of this striving as well as whites, said Lincoln.

This is why Lincoln could declare, 'I have always hated slavery, I think as much as any Abolitionist.'<sup>8</sup> Why then was he not an abolitionist? He never claimed to be one. The shadow of Lincoln must not obscure the

<sup>5</sup> Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, 3, 478.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 405.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 492.

contribution to the end of slavery of genuine abolitionists like Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Abby Kelley, who fought against overwhelming odds to bring the moral issue of slavery to the forefront of national life. Before the Civil War, abolitionists were a small, despised group. Their meetings were broken up by mobs; one was assassinated, as mentioned above. No one with political ambitions could be an abolitionist unless he lived in a few counties in places like upstate New York and northwestern Ohio, populated by Quakers or certain radical religious sects. If you were from central Illinois, like Lincoln, abolitionism was hardly a viable political position.

I am not saying that Lincoln was a secret abolitionist restrained by political reality. Abolitionists believed that the moral issue of slavery was the paramount, the sole issue confronting the nation, overriding all others. This was not Lincoln's view. In a famous letter to his Kentucky friend Joshua Speed, in 1855, Lincoln recalled a flatboat ride they took in 1841 to St Louis, where they encountered slavery: 'That sight was a continual torment to me; and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio [River, the boundary between free and slave states] . . . . You ought . . . to appreciate how much the great body of the northern people do crucify their feelings, in order to maintain their loyalty to the constitution and the Union.'<sup>9</sup> The Constitution and the Union were equally important, more important in fact, to Lincoln, than the slavery issue. William Lloyd Garrison burned the Constitution on 4 July, 1854, because of its clauses protecting slavery. Lincoln revered the Constitution. He believed the United States had a special mission in the world to exemplify the institutions of democracy and self-government. This rhetoric, needless to say, is very much alive even today, although Lincoln saw American democracy as an example to the rest of the world, not something to be imposed by unilateral force.

In his great Peoria speech of 1854, Lincoln explained his opposition to the expansion of slavery. 'I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites—causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity.'<sup>10</sup> Slavery, in other words, was an obstacle to the fulfilment of the worldwide mission of the United States. He said fundamentally the same thing in the Gettysburg Address in the midst of

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 320.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 255.

the Civil War—that the war’s purpose was not to maintain the United States as a territorial entity, but to demonstrate that government based on the will of the people could survive. To Lincoln, the American nation was not like other nations. It represented a set of universal ideals, centred on political democracy. Slavery undermined this world-historical message. But the nation’s unity must be maintained, even if it meant compromising with slavery. This is why he was not an abolitionist—he was not willing to jeopardise the American Union and its mission.

Lincoln, however, did constantly talk about a future without slavery. The aim of the Republican party, he insisted, was not only to stop the expansion of slavery, but to put the institution on the road to ‘ultimate extinction’.<sup>11</sup> I believe that Lincoln invented this phrase. Its meaning depended on which of the two words one emphasised. Radical Republicans stressed ‘extinction’. Moderates emphasised ‘ultimate’. Lincoln himself said that it might take one hundred years to do away with slavery—very ultimate indeed. But to the South, Lincoln seemed as dangerous as an abolitionist, because he was committed to the eventual end of slavery. And it was Lincoln’s election, not the election of a John Brown or Frederick Douglass, that led to secession, for the reason, stated explicitly by the southern secession conventions, that his administration would be a threat to the future of slavery.

One other element of Lincoln’s thought has attracted considerable attention of late—his views regarding race. Bennett, as I have noted, condemns him as an inveterate racist, citing statements like the following:

I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the black and white races; . . . I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people. . . . And inasmuch as they [the races] cannot so live [in equality], while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.<sup>12</sup>

It is clear that Lincoln held views that by any standard would be considered racist. This has long been known—Richard Hofstadter made the same point in his brilliant essay on Lincoln in *The American Political Tradition*, published in 1948.<sup>13</sup> Where Bennett breaks new ground is in

<sup>11</sup> Lincoln’s *Collected Works* contain dozens of uses of this phrase between 1857 and 1860, the first occurring at vol. 4, p. 453.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 145–6.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York, 1948), p. 150.

emphasising the strength of Lincoln's belief in colonisation—the deportation of blacks, once freed, to Africa, Central America, or the Caribbean. Lincoln's belief in separating the races was hardly his own invention. Jefferson had said the same thing over half a century earlier. It is often ignored in historical writing how prominent and pervasive this idea was. Nearly every major political leader of the Jacksonian era—James Madison, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, John Marshall, Roger Taney, Henry Clay (whom Lincoln called his ideal of a statesman) supported colonisation. In other words, rather than a fringe movement, this was the political mainstream's solution to the issues of slavery and race—gradual emancipation, with compensation to the owners for their loss of property, coupled with the emigration of the free black population to some other country. The idea bore considerable resemblance to Indian removal, the policy carried out during the 1830s and 1840s under which virtually all remaining Indians were expelled from the eastern half of the United States to reservations in the West. Both rested on the conviction that essentially the United States was a country for white people only.

Many historians have ignored or downplayed Lincoln's belief in colonisation. They all quote the Peoria speech, mentioned above. Few add that in the same speech, Lincoln remarked that if given all the power in the world he would not know what to do about slavery. His first impulse, he continued, would be to free the slaves and send them back to Africa, their 'native land'.<sup>14</sup> Easily forgotten is the fact that Africa was no more the native land of African-Americans in 1854 than England was Lincoln's native land even though his ancestors had emigrated from there. The slave trade to the mainland colonies had peaked between 1730 and 1770. Most blacks in the 1850s were American-born, a century removed from Africa. Africa was important to their culture, their sense of identity. But few blacks embraced the idea of separating the races promoted by Lincoln and the rest of the white political establishment. Most thought of themselves as Americans.

It is essential to understand both elements of Lincoln—the racism and the genuine hatred of slavery. For Lincoln was typical of the majority of northerners, who were willing to go to war over the issue of slavery's expansion, yet held racist beliefs. Lincoln's racial views were by no means extreme for his era. The Democratic party was far more virulent in accusing Republicans of belief in 'Negro equality', and in insisting that the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence applied to

<sup>14</sup> Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, 2, 255.

white persons alone. Lincoln as we have seen, at least insisted on equality insofar as it related to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Blacks, he believed, were entitled to enjoy these rights, although not, ultimately, in the United States.

During the Civil War, of course, Lincoln had to do more than talk about slavery. He had to act. How did he become the Great Emancipator?

Between 1834, when the British abolished slavery in their empire, and 1888, when emancipation came to Brazil, some six million slaves were freed in the Western Hemisphere. Of these, four million, two-thirds of the total, lived in the United States. Emancipation in the United States dwarfed any other in the history of the hemisphere in numbers, scale, and the economic power of the institution of slavery. Emancipation meant many things, one of them the liquidation of the largest concentration of property in American society.

The Civil War, of course, did not begin as a crusade to abolish slavery. Almost from the beginning, however, abolitionists and Radical Republicans pressed for action against slavery as a war measure. Lincoln slowly began to put forward his own ideas. I do not wish to rehearse in detail the complicated chronology of 1861 and 1862. In summary, Lincoln first proposed gradual, voluntary emancipation coupled with colonisation—the traditional approach of mainstream politicians. He suggested this plan to the border states—the four slave states (Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri) that remained in the Union. He found no takers. In 1862, Lincoln held a famous meeting with black leaders. This was probably the first time in American history that black persons entered the White House in a capacity other than as slaves or servants. But Lincoln's message was that they should urge their people to emigrate. They refused.

It was Congress in 1862 that moved ahead of Lincoln on emancipation, although he signed all their measures: the abolition of slavery in the territories; abolition in the District of Columbia (with around \$300 compensation for each slaveowner); the Second Confiscation Act of July 1862, which freed all slaves of pro-Confederate owners in areas henceforth occupied by the Union army and slaves of such owners who escaped to Union lines. The Confiscation Act also spoke of colonising the freed slaves outside the country. Meanwhile, Lincoln was moving toward his own plan of emancipation. A powerful combination of 'events' propelled him:

**1** The failure of efforts to fight the Civil War as a conventional war without targeting the bedrock of southern society. Had General George C. McClellan succeeded in the spring of 1862 in capturing Richmond or

defeating Robert E. Lee's army, the Civil War might have ended without emancipation. But the North lost battle after battle. Military failure generated support in the North for calls to make slavery a target.

2 By 1862, the Union's hold on the border states was secure. It was far less imperative than in 1861 to tailor administration policies to retain their loyalty.

3 Many northerners feared that Britain and France might recognise the Confederacy or even intervene on its behalf. Adding emancipation to preserving the Union as a war aim would deter them. These countries did not want to seem to be fighting for slavery.

4 Slavery itself was beginning to disintegrate. Slaves had forged a quasi-independent culture in which the Biblical story of Exodus became central to their distinctive understanding of Christianity and their own history as a people. They saw themselves as akin to the children of Israel in ancient Egypt, whom God would one day deliver from bondage. From the beginning, the slaves saw the Civil War as heralding the long-awaited dawn of freedom. Based on this perception, they took actions that propelled a reluctant white America down the road to emancipation. Hundreds, then thousands ran away to Union lines. Far from the battlefields, reports multiplied of insubordinate behaviour, of slaves refusing to obey orders. Slaves realised that the war had changed the balance of power in the South. In 1862, Union forces entered the heart of a major plantation area, the sugar region of southern Louisiana. Slaves drove off the overseers and claimed their freedom. These actions forced the administration to begin to devise policies with regard to slavery.

5 Enthusiasm for enlistment was waning rapidly in the North. By 1863, a draft would be authorised. At the beginning of war, the army had refused to accept black volunteers. But as the war dragged on, the reservoir of black manpower could no longer be ignored.

All these pressures moved Lincoln in the direction of emancipation. In September 1862, he issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation—essentially a warning to the South to lay down its arms or face a final proclamation in ninety days. On 1 January, 1863, came the Proclamation itself.<sup>15</sup>

The Emancipation Proclamation is perhaps the most misunderstood important document in American history. Certainly, it is untrue that Lincoln freed four million slaves with a stroke of his pen. Many slaves were not covered. The Proclamation had no bearing on the slaves in the

<sup>15</sup> Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, 6, 28–30.

four border states. Since they remained in the Union, Lincoln had no constitutional authority to act regarding slavery in these states. The Proclamation exempted certain areas of the Confederacy that had fallen under Union military control, including the entire state of Tennessee and parts of Virginia and Louisiana. Perhaps 750,000 of the four million slaves were not covered by the Proclamation. It only applied to areas under Confederate control. Thus, there was some truth in the famous comment by *The Times* of London that the Proclamation resembled a papal bull against a comet—both were acts outside the jurisdiction of their authors.

A military measure, whose constitutional legitimacy rested on the ‘war power’ of the president, the Emancipation Proclamation often proves disappointing to those who read it. Unlike the Declaration of Independence, it contains no soaring language, no immortal preamble enunciating the rights of man. ‘It had all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading’, wrote Hofstadter.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, the Proclamation was the turning point of the Civil War, and in Lincoln’s understanding of his own role in history. Lincoln was not the Great Emancipator if by that we mean someone who was waiting all his life to get to the point where he could abolish slavery. He was not the Great Emancipator if this means that he freed four million slaves in an instant. But what I want to argue is that Lincoln *became* the Great Emancipator—that is to say, he assumed the role thrust on him by history, and tried to live up to it.

The Emancipation Proclamation was markedly different from Lincoln’s previous statements and policies regarding slavery. It contained no mention of compensation for slaveowners. There was no mention of colonisation, although this had been included in both the Second Confiscation Act and the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. For the first time, it authorised the enrolment of black soldiers into the Union military (the Second Confiscation Act had envisioned using blacks as military labourers, not ‘armed service’ as the Emancipation Proclamation states). The Proclamation set in motion the process by which 200,000 black men in the last two years of the war served in the Union army and navy, playing a critical role in achieving Union victory. I believe that the need to enrol black troops explains Lincoln’s abandonment of colonisation. He understood that fighting in the army staked a claim to citizenship. You could not ask men to fight for the Union and then deport them and their families from the country.

<sup>16</sup> Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, p. 169.

Even more profoundly, the Emancipation Proclamation changed the character of the Civil War. It marked the moment when it moved from a conventional war of army against army to a war in which the transformation of southern society became an objective of the Union. Karl Marx, then in London writing interesting comments on the Civil War for the *New York Tribune*, put it this way: ‘Up to now we have witnessed only the first act of the Civil War—the constitutional waging of war. The second act, the revolutionary waging of war, is at hand.’<sup>17</sup> In his first annual message to Congress, in December 1861, Lincoln had said he did not want the war to degenerate into ‘a violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle’.<sup>18</sup> The Emancipation Proclamation announced that this was precisely what the war must become. The Civil War would now continue to total victory, and unconditional surrender.

As I have noted, Lincoln took on the role of Great Emancipator. In 1864, with Union casualties mounting, there was talk of a compromise peace. Some urged Lincoln to rescind the Proclamation, in which case, they believed, the South could be persuaded to return to the Union. Lincoln would not consider this. Were he to do so, he told one visitor, ‘I should be damned in time and eternity.’<sup>19</sup> Lincoln, the moderate Illinois lawyer had become the agent of what Charles and Mary Beard called the Second American Revolution. And the Proclamation may not have ended slavery when it was issued, but it sounded the death knell of slavery in the United States. Everybody recognised that if slavery perished in South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi, it could hardly survive in Tennessee, Kentucky, and a few parishes of Louisiana.

Moreover, by decoupling emancipation and colonisation, Lincoln in effect launched the historical process known as Reconstruction—the remaking of southern society, politics, and race relations. I have written a 600 page book on this subject, which I will not attempt to summarise here.<sup>20</sup> I will note, however, that unlike most accounts, my book begins not in April 1865 with General Robert E. Lee’s surrender and the death of the Confederacy, but on 1 January, 1863, with the Emancipation Proclamation. This is not to say that Lincoln, before his death, had worked out a coherent plan of Reconstruction. Winning the war was always his main priority and his efforts to create new governments in the South—in Louisiana, for example—on the basis of great leniency to

<sup>17</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Civil War in the United States* (New York, 1961), p. 200.

<sup>18</sup> Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, 5, 49.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 507.

<sup>20</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution* (New York, 1988).

former Confederates, were efforts to speed Union victory and secure complete emancipation, not to offer a blueprint for the postwar South.

Lincoln knew all too well that the Proclamation depended for its effectiveness on Union victory, that it did not apply to all slaves, and that its constitutionality was certain to be challenged in the future. In the last two years of the war he worked to secure complete abolition, pressing the border states to take action against slavery on their own (which Maryland and Missouri did), demanding that southerners who wished to have their other property restored pledge to support abolition, and working to secure congressional passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which passed by a narrow margin in early 1865. When ratified, the amendment marked the irrevocable destruction of slavery throughout the nation.

I have called Reconstruction ‘America’s unfinished revolution’. It was an attempt, which ultimately failed, to create a genuine interracial democracy in the South from the ruins of slavery. Lincoln did not live to see Reconstruction implemented and eventually abandoned. But in the last two years of the war, he came to recognise that if emancipation settled one question, the fate of slavery, it opened another—what was to be the role of emancipated slaves in postwar American life? The Proclamation portended a far-reaching transformation of southern society and a redefinition of the place of blacks in American life. Lincoln understood this. The Gettysburg Address spoke of the war as ushering in a ‘new birth of freedom’ for the United States, a freedom in which blacks for the first time would share.<sup>21</sup> This meant a redefinition of American nationality itself.

Two of Lincoln’s very last pronouncements show how his thinking was evolving. One was his ‘last speech,’ an impromptu oration delivered at the White House in April 1865, a few days before his assassination. Of course, Lincoln did not know this was his last speech—it should not be viewed as a final summation of policy. In it he addressed Reconstruction, already underway in Louisiana. A new constitution had been drafted there, which abolished slavery yet limited voting rights to whites. The state’s free black community, an educated, propertied group, complained bitterly about their exclusion from the ballot, with support from Radical Republicans in the North. Most northern states at this point, however, did not allow blacks to vote and most Republicans felt that it would be politically suicidal to endorse black suffrage. In this speech, Lincoln announced that he would ‘prefer’ that limited black suffrage be imple-

<sup>21</sup> Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, 7, 23.

mented. He singled out not only the ‘very intelligent’—the free blacks—but ‘those who serve our cause as soldiers’ as most worthy.<sup>22</sup> Hardly an unambiguous embrace of equality, this was the first time that an American president had publically endorsed any kind of political rights for blacks. Lincoln was telling the country that the service of black soldiers, inaugurated by the Emancipation Proclamation, entitled these black men to a political voice in the reunited nation.

Then there is one of the greatest speeches in all of American history, Lincoln’s second inaugural address, of March 1865. Today, it is remembered for its conciliatory closing words: ‘with malice toward none, with charity for all . . . let us strive to bind up the nation’s wounds’. But before that noble ending, Lincoln tried to instruct his fellow countrymen on the historical significance of the war and the unfinished task that still remained. Read as a whole, I find the second inaugural one of the most frightening speeches ever given by an American president, frightening in its candid acknowledgement of the dark evil at the heart of the nation’s history up to the Civil War, and of its possible consequences. One consequence was the Civil War itself, which perhaps, Lincoln said, was God’s way of punishing the nation for the sin of slavery.

It must have been very tempting, with Union victory imminent, for Lincoln to view the outcome as the will of God and to blame the war on the sins of the Confederacy. But Lincoln’s invocation of religion was self-deprecating, not self-justifying. Both sides, he pointed out, believed they were fighting with God’s support, although he could not refrain from adding: ‘It may seem strange, that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces.’ No one, Lincoln went on, truly knows God’s will. God, indeed, may wish the war to continue—and here is the frightening part—‘until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s 250 years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn by the sword’.<sup>23</sup> That is a lot of wealth to sink and a lot of blood to spill. Lincoln, in essence, asked Americans to confront unblinkingly the consequences of slavery—going back again to the right to the fruits of one’s labour (the sweat of one’s brow and those 250 years of unrequited toil), now coupling it with frank recognition of the institution’s brutality (the blood drawn by the lash). What are the requirements of justice in the face of this historical reality, Lincoln asked? What is

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 403.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 333.

necessary to enable the former slaves, their children, and their descendants to enjoy the 'pursuit of happiness' he had always insisted was their natural right, but which had so long been denied to them? The Civil War and the destruction of slavery raised these questions but did not provide an answer. They have continued to bedevil American society from 1865 to the present day.