Lincoln and the Problem of Race: A Decade of Interpretations

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Long before Alex Haley popularized the idea of “roots,” Americans have been concerned with the search for ancestors. The attempt to answer the question, “Who are we?” has often been answered by another question, “Where did we come from?” Although historians have been responsible for drafting answers to these questions, neither the questions nor the answers are exclusively within the domain of historians. Popular culture has its own answers, and we have, in fact, often witnessed a real tension between popular history and professional history in answering vital questions about who we are and where we came from.

In the 1960s, when race was an overriding concern, our search for self-definition through looking at our roots led to a heated controversy over the real meaning of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was one in a series of American founding fathers, and his views on slavery and race might provide a guide for those troubled days. The popular view of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator could provide a source for an American commitment to racial justice. Yet, this picture could lead to an obvious question—if Lincoln pointed the way to racial justice, why, in over one hundred years,
had we neglected to follow his path? In February, 1968, a prominent black journalist, Lerone Bennett, Jr., offered an answer to the paradox when he charged that we, in fact, had followed Lincoln's path. Bennett stated that Lincoln's path was itself deeply flawed; Lincoln was the embodiment of the American racist tradition.¹

According to Bennett, no American story was as "false" as the traditional picture of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator. Lincoln, he charged, was no idealist; he was a "cautious politician" who was never committed to abolishing slavery but only to preventing its extension. He was motivated by a concern for the interests of his white constituents, not the needs of the oppressed blacks. During the celebrated debates with Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln explicitly supported the doctrine of white supremacy, and he opposed granting civil and political rights to Negroes. As President, he spent the first eighteen months of his administration "in a desperate and rather pathetic attempt to save slavery"; he moved against it only because of circumstances and the pressure applied by a small band of dedicated radicals. The Emancipation Proclamation was not a great charter of freedom; congressional legislation had already gone further, and the Proclamation applied only in areas where Lincoln could not enforce it. Moreover, only a few months before his death Lincoln was still equivocating about immediate emancipation. Lincoln, according to Bennett, never did accept the idea that the United States could be a genuinely bi-racial society, and to the very end the President supported a policy of colonization. Lincoln's reconstruction policies virtually ignored the needs of the blacks. Therefore, Bennett concluded, "Lincoln must be seen as the embodiment, not the transcendence, of the American tradition, which is, as we all know, a racist tradition."²

Bennett's article struck a nerve. His charges were broadcast on radio and television and were debated in newspapers. The issues he had raised were important. For some Americans, Bennett's attack, coinciding as it did with a period of great racial tension, was

¹ Bennett, "Was Abe Lincoln a White Supremacist?" *Ebony*, Feb., 1968, pp. 35-42.
further evidence of an irreconcilable split in American society. The fact that Bennett was a spokesman for blacks contributed to the article's impact because it had been blacks who had, in large measure, made Lincoln a symbol of liberation in the first place. Bennett's article was a literary equivalent of the Black Power movement, of the split in the civil rights coalition, and of the
frightening violence of the summer of 1967. Bennett had not only called into question the reputation of a beloved hero, he had challenged the American picture of our history as the story of measured progress toward liberal goals.\(^3\)

Herbert Mitgang, a member of the *New York Times* editorial board and a Lincoln scholar, was one of the first to reply to Bennett’s charges. Mitgang’s article asked, “Was Lincoln Just a Honkie?”—and the answer was a resounding “No!” Mitgang was quite explicit about the context of the controversy. The article begins: “One hundred and five years after the Emancipation Proclamation—and, what is far more relevant, five months before the feared summer of 1968, when uptight frustration responding to cries of ‘Black Power!’ can again enflame American cities in a new civil war—Abraham Lincoln is being called a false Great Emancipator.” Mark Krug, a historian who also wrote an early reply to Bennett, pointedly noted: “Only harm can result from this unworthy effort to convince the Negro population, especially its restless young generation, that even Abe Lincoln was just another white supremacist.” Both Mitgang and Krug gave the impression that Bennett would be indirectly to blame if racial violence broke out in the summer of 1968.\(^4\)

Bennett’s charges against Lincoln were not so easily dismissed by other historians, however. Although they recognized that Bennett’s charges were not entirely new (several of them had been anticipated by Richard Hofstadter and Kenneth Stampp), Bennett’s picture of Lincoln required careful consideration and

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measured appraisal. In the historians’ dialogue between past and present, the subject of race was increasingly important, and Bennett had been quite correct in his assertion that myths provide little light for present-day problems. Perhaps a reappraisal of Lincoln’s view on slavery and race could help us in avoiding the exacerbation of the racial tensions that beset us. In the dozen years since Bennett’s article, a number of historians have participated in this reexamination. Where has this reexamination led us? What is our understanding today of Lincoln? Was he the Great Emancipator or merely another white supremacist?

Historians who undertook a reexamination of Lincoln’s reputation discussed a large number of issues, but for the purposes of this analysis I shall deal with four major issues raised by Bennett. First, how can we reconcile Lincoln’s popular image with his endorsement of white supremacy during the debates with Douglas? Second, was Lincoln a moral leader in the struggle for emancipation? Third, did Lincoln ever surrender his belief in colonization as the solution to the problem of what to do with the freedmen? And, finally, would he have supported the radicals of his own party in providing for black civil rights and suffrage in a genuinely reconstructed South? The answers to these questions are not, of course, definitive, but a study of recent scholarship will give us a clearer picture of “where we are, and whither we are tending.”

Lincoln’s speeches in defense of white supremacy during the Lincoln-Douglas debates were an important part of Bennett’s charges and in recent years have become among the most fre-

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quently quoted words of Lincoln. In the following remarks made at the fourth debate, at Charleston, he responded to Douglas’s charges that he favored racial equality and amalgamation:

I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races, [applause] . . . 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 I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will for ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be a 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.7

Those who defended Lincoln attempted to dismiss these remarks as unimportant. Mitgang, for example, argued that Douglas “had backed Lincoln to the wall and forced him to temporize,” and that late in his presidential career, Lincoln did, in fact, come out for full Negro citizenship.8

A more fruitful approach is to reexamine Lincoln’s words carefully. George M. Fredrickson points out that although Lincoln argued in the debate at Ottawa that he agreed with Douglas that the Negro “is not my equal in many respects,” the only respect that he was certain about was the physical trait of “color.” Lincoln was tentative in identifying ways in which Negroes were “perhaps” not the equal of whites. Moreover, he avoided using words like “innate” in describing the inequalities between the races, leaving open the question of whether those differences were the

7Ibid., III, 145-46; see also the first debate at Ottawa, ibid., pp. 12–30.
8Mitgang, p. 103. To demonstrate that Lincoln later came to support political rights for Negroes, Mitgang quotes extensively from Lincoln’s letter to General James J. Wadsworth (pp. 106–07). For reasons discussed below, I am convinced that the Wadsworth document is spurious. Fawn Brodie, taking a different tack, argues that in the debates with Douglas, Lincoln was not only debating his opponent but was also “conducting a kind of inner dialogue with himself, coming to terms with his own ambivalence to black men” (“The Political Hero in America,” Virginia Quarterly Review, 46 [1970], 50-51).
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result of circumstance.9 Historian E. B. Smith makes a similar point when he observes that the qualifying words in the Ottawa speech reveal that "Lincoln was obviously playing to his audience, but . . . was also hedging for the benefit of his conscience."10

Don E. Fehrenbacher, an eminent Lincoln historian, sees Lincoln's statements on race as "essentially disclaimers rather than affirmations." According to Fehrenbacher, those statements “indicated, for political reasons, the maximum that he was willing to deny the Negro and the minimum that he claimed for the Negro. They were concessions on points not at issue, designed to fortify him on the point that was at issue—namely the extension of slavery.” Fehrenbacher adds that if Lincoln had responded differently to Douglas at Charleston, "the Lincoln of history simply would not exist.”11 Lincoln adopted the least racist position that would not disqualify him from consideration in the context of a racist society.12

Professor Fredrickson also points out that we should devote careful attention to what Lincoln claimed for the Negro in the Ottawa address. Despite the differences he saw between the races, Lincoln did hold that there was "no reason in the world why

10Smith, “Abraham Lincoln Realist,” Wisconsin Magazine of History, 52 (1968–1969), 163. Smith states that when Lincoln’s remarks at Ottawa are viewed “against the background of its time, occasion, and purpose” they constitute “a rather advanced plea against racial discrimination.”

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the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Judged within the context of his own times, Lincoln, as Fredrickson notes, occupied a middle position between those who, like Douglas, would deny the Negro every human right and the small group of abolitionists who supported the radical doctrine of racial equality.

II

Although Bennett’s claim that Lincoln was a white supremacist jolted the conventional picture of him, the charge that he was not really antislavery and was, at best, a reluctant emancipator, struck at the very heart of the popular understanding of Lincoln’s historic role. If the Emancipation Proclamation was not a charter for black freedom, why were we celebrating Negro History in February? What was the basis for our almost worshipful attitude towards Lincoln?

Stephen B. Oates, recent Lincoln biographer, meets Bennett’s charges head on. According to Oates, Lincoln had been consistently antislavery since his earliest days. Yet Lincoln recognized that the Constitution protected slavery in the South, and in the early days of the war both his constitutional scruples and the need for the support of the border slave states prevented action against slavery. Moreover, Lincoln perceived that emancipation would be unpopular in the North. According to Oates, Lincoln feared that an emancipation policy “would alienate Northern Democrats, ignite a racial powder keg in the Northern states, and possibly cause a civil war in the rear.” By emphasizing Northern

opposition to emancipation, Oates is able to depict Lincoln as being ahead of his times when, in 1862, he moved cautiously towards emancipation.

Constitutional historian Herman Belz agrees with Oates that the Proclamation was the product of a genuine ideological commitment to freedom. The military needs of the nation, invoked by Lincoln in justifying the Proclamation, were merely “legal fiction.” Belz contends that “the real reason for it, considered in broad historical perspective, was hostility to slavery based on commitment to republicanism and the principle of equality on which republicanism rested.”

Moreover, Lincoln rejected the temptation to revoke the Proclamation. Neither Northern pressure nor the possibility of making peace led him to abandon emancipation. Lincoln’s letter to Horace Greeley is seen by Oates not as proof of hesitation or lack of commitment to emancipation but as part of a strategy of making emancipation acceptable as a legitimate war aim. In that letter Lincoln had said that if he could “save the Union without freeing any slave” he would do it, but he went on to say that if he could “save it by freeing all the slaves” he would do that. “What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union.” When he wrote the letter to Greeley, Lincoln had already resolved to issue the Emancipation Proclamation (at Seward’s suggestion he was only waiting for a Union victory before announcing it), and there is no evidence that Lincoln did not intend to follow through on his resolve. What the letter was


18Collected Works, V, 388.
intended to do was to make clear that any action to free the slaves should be understood as a measure to save the Union. Unionists who opposed emancipation were being told in advance that they would be fighting not to free the slaves but to restore the Union, with the help of an emancipation policy. Oates, therefore, sees the letter to Greeley as an example of how Lincoln, a shrewd political leader, was preparing the way for the acceptance of a radical new step.19

Arguing directly with Bennett and other historians, Oates holds that the Emancipation Proclamation "went further than anything Congress had done." The Second Confiscation Act had not only required extensive judicial procedures but had also exempted loyal slaveowners. "Lincoln’s Proclamation, on the other hand, was a sweeping blow against bondage as an institution in the rebel states, a blow that would free all the slaves there—those of secessionists and loyalists alike." Lincoln was not a reluctant emancipator, and the Proclamation "was the most revolutionary measure ever to come from an American president up to that time."20

The revisionist view of Lincoln as a reluctant emancipator was reinforced by an important article by Ludwell Johnson, published the same year as Bennett’s. Professor Johnson argues that as late as February, 1865, Lincoln was still equivocating about immediate and total emancipation. According to Johnson, Lincoln told Alexander Stephens that emancipation might be delayed as much as five years and that slaveowners might still receive compensation for the loss of their bondsmen. Lincoln was willing to make such concessions, Johnson speculates, because he saw the need for a quick end to the war lest the South lapse into chaos and anarchy—conditions that would play into the hands of the radical members of Lincoln’s party. A quick end to the war would forestall a radical reconstruction of the South.21

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19Oates, With Malice Toward None, p. 313.
"Lincoln Entering Richmond" by Thomas Nast
Johnson’s account of Lincoln’s position at the Hampton Roads Conference went unchallenged until a recent article by the editor of *Lincoln Lore*, Mark E. Neely, Jr., who points out that the only record of what was said there is the account, published five years after the event, by Stephens. Even if Stephens’s memory was good, he was by no means an impartial witness. By the time that Stephens wrote, a great deal had happened and there were many reasons why Stephens might cherish the memory of a Lincoln who would have been kinder to the South than the Republicans who eventually took charge of Reconstruction.\(^{22}\)

According to Oates, Lincoln wavered only once—during the dark days of August, 1864—when he considered peace terms that did not include emancipation. “But the next day Lincoln changed his mind. With awakened resolution, he vowed to fight the war through to unconditional surrender and to stick with emancipation come what may.”\(^{23}\) As Lincoln himself put it, once the Emancipation Proclamation had been issued it could not be revoked “any more than the dead can be brought to life.”\(^{24}\)

Finally, even if Lincoln does not deserve the title Great Emancipator for his Proclamation, he is entitled to it for his skillful and determined effort in winning congressional ratification of the constitutional amendment that clearly and unequivocally ended slavery in the United States.\(^{25}\)

### III

Lincoln’s attitude towards the future of the newly-freed blacks has been a perennial historical question. For many years the dominant school of Reconstruction historiography held that Radical Reconstruction was a grievous and tragic error; moreover, the


\(^{23}\) Oates, *Our Fiery Trial*, p. 82.

\(^{24}\) *Collected Works*, VI, 408.

dominant assumption of that school was that Reconstruction under Lincoln would have been milder and much more protective of white Southern rights and sensibilities than was that administered by the Congress. By the time of Bennett’s article, however, the traditional interpretation had been all but replaced by the view that Radical Reconstruction had been necessary in order to safeguard the results of the war and to provide some protection for the rights of Southern blacks and white Unionists. Under these circumstances, the contention that Reconstruction would have been milder under Lincoln depicts the President as unwilling to take the steps necessary to protect the freedom of the ex-slaves; once again, Lincoln was not on the side of those who wanted to further the cause of black rights.

The issues of Reconstruction, particularly what to do with the former slaves, had appeared early in the Civil War. One of the solutions promoted by Lincoln was the old idea of colonization, a plan in which blacks would be asked to leave the United States and to establish their own nation. Bennett and other revisionists have charged that Lincoln’s continuing support for colonization is further evidence of his refusal to countenance full equality for blacks in this country. An important question for those who study Lincoln’s views on race has been: Why did Lincoln support colonization, and did he ever abandon this proposal?

Some of those who defended Lincoln from the charges of racism conceded that although he had been a dedicated colonizationist, he abandoned that position as he evolved “From Intolerance to Moderation.” On the other hand, Oates, who is sharply critical of the revisionists, explains Lincoln’s support of colonization as being, in large part, merely a strategy for easing Northern fears of the consequences of emancipation. Presumably those who feared that the freed slaves would flock to the North would be pacified by

26 For an excellent survey of changing attitudes towards Reconstruction, see Stampp, pp. 3–23.
a proposal to resettle blacks elsewhere. Shortly before issuing the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, therefore, Lincoln "made a great fuss about colonization—a ritual he went through every time he contemplated some new antislavery move." Once he found another answer to Northern fears of black flight—the refugee plan set up under Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas in the Mississippi Valley—Lincoln dropped his public support of colonization.28

G. S. Boritt, who has written a provocative study of Lincoln's ideas, also sees the President's colonization program as motivated in part by strategic interests. Yet, Boritt points out, Lincoln's support for colonization was inconsistent with his deep interest in and understanding of economics. It was clear to anyone who analyzed the question in any depth that the economic resources required to resettle any significant portion of the black population of the United States was simply staggering. Why then did Lincoln support this impractical policy? Boritt draws on the psychological defense mechanism of avoidance as an explanation of Lincoln's behavior. Arguing that the President avoided analyzing the question because he saw no feasible alternative at the time, Boritt concludes, "One cannot escape the feeling that by 1862, even as the colonization fever was cresting, Lincoln began to allow himself a glimpse of the fact that the idea of large scale immigration was not . . . realistic." For Lincoln, the idea served a purpose; it helped to "allay his own uncertainties, and more importantly the fears of the vast majority of whites." After emancipation, however, when it was no longer necessary to believe in colonization, Lincoln abandoned it.29

Although Lincoln no longer endorsed colonization in public after December of 1863, there is still the question of whether he

28 Oates, With Malice Toward None, pp. 312, 342. Gary R. Planck argues that in the early 1850s "Lincoln enthusiastically supported the program of black colonization" and came to reject it only in 1864, after the failure of the Chiriqui and A'Vache experiments (Planck, "Abraham Lincoln and Black Colonization: Theory and Practice," Lincoln Herald, 72 [1970], 63, 75).
ever completely abandoned hopes for resettling blacks. Fredrickson, whose account of Lincoln's racial views is generally revisionist, argues that Lincoln continued his support of colonization to the very end. Fredrickson maintains that in April, 1865, Lincoln told General Benjamin Butler that he still saw colonization as an important step for avoiding race war in the South. "If Butler's recollection is substantially correct, as it appears to be, then one can only conclude that Lincoln continued to his dying day to deny the possibility of racial harmony and equality in the United States."30 That contention is directly challenged by Neely, who, after a painstaking evaluation of the evidence, concludes that the interview with Butler could not have taken place

when Butler said it did and that there is no reason to believe that Butler’s story is anything but a self-serving “fantasy.” In the absence of any other evidence, therefore, we must conclude that John Hay was correct in his assertion that the President had abandoned colonization by July, 1864.31

IV

Once Lincoln rejected colonization he was still faced with the question of determining relationships that would prevail between the freedmen and their former masters. Would blacks have civil and political rights? Should blacks be awarded suffrage? In attempting to ascertain Lincoln’s views on these issues, historians have been forced to interpret a small number of documents for clues to what Lincoln would have done had the assassin’s bullet not struck him down shortly after the war ended.

Hans L. Trefousse has put Lincoln’s Reconstruction policy in a new light by pointing out that the traditional picture of Lincoln as a conservative, struggling desperately to control a group of vindictive radicals from his own party, is simply wrong. Trefousse argues that Lincoln’s differences with the radicals were often merely matters of timing and that Lincoln was able to make good use of the radicals when creating an atmosphere in which his actions on slavery would be accepted.32 If we accept such an interpretation of Lincoln’s relationship with the radicals, it is easy

31 Neely, “Abraham Lincoln and Black Colonization: Benjamin Butler’s Spurious Testimony,” Civil War History, 25 (1979), 77–83. In his 1977 biography of Lincoln, Oates holds that even after the President had ceased to support colonization in public he may have continued to view it, “maybe in the abstract,” as “the only way to avoid racial conflict in America” (With Malice Toward None, p. 342). By 1979, however, Oates had changed his mind, and he chided Fredrickson for relying on Butler’s testimony (Our Fiery Trial, p. 138n).

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to believe that he would have continued to lag only a little behind even the most visionary members of the Republican party as they advocated suffrage and other measures designed to protect the rights of the freedmen.

For the most part Oates follows Trefousse’s views on the relationship between the President and congressional leaders, going so far as to avoid using the term “radicals.” Oates sees a close relationship between a leading radical, Senator Charles Sumner, and both Mary and Abraham Lincoln.33 But in describing Secretary Salmon P. Chase’s role, Oates comes close to the older view of the relationship between Lincoln and the radicals. Oates charges that Lincoln’s reconstruction plan of December, 1863, was praised by virtually all congressional Republicans, including Sumner, but that Chase objected to it apparently for purely political motives.34 On Reconstruction, therefore, Oates suggests there was no real ideological split between Lincoln and his critics on the left. Further, Oates maintains that most biographers have misinterpreted the Second Inaugural Address. Although the President did promise “charity for all” he did not mean that he intended to be gentle with the South: “Still preoccupied with the war as a grim purgation which would cleanse and regenerate his country, Lincoln endorsed a fairly tough policy toward the conquered South.”35

An important document employed by several of those who defend Lincoln from the charges of racism is a letter to General James Wadsworth, said to have been written by Lincoln early in 1864. The letter not only discusses reconstruction but also goes much further than the President’s public remarks up to that time.

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33 Oates refers to the Radical Republicans as “liberal Republicans” and as “so-called radicals.” He sometimes uses the term radicals within quotation marks (With Malice Toward None, pp. 252–53, 364).
35 Oates, Our Fiery Trial, p. 84. Sinkler, on the other hand, supports Bennett’s views; he maintains that Lincoln would have allowed Southerners to decide for themselves how to treat the freedmen, and he adds that “it is not too difficult to infer that the President’s failure to include blacks in his plans for Reconstruction was due in part to his views on the race problem” (Racial Attitudes, pp. 64, 65).
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In the letter Lincoln apparently endorsed Negro suffrage: "I cannot see, if universal amnesty is granted, how, under the circumstances, I can avoid exacting in return universal suffrage, or, at least, suffrage on the basis of intelligence and military service." 36 Lincoln's defenders argue on the basis of that letter that Lincoln had moved far beyond the statements he had made in the debates with Douglas when he denied that he favored black political rights.37 Yet this letter proves to be a very weak reed. Although the original of the letter has never been found, the editors of Lincoln's Collected Works lent it apparent authenticity by including it in their publication. As the editors' footnote makes clear, however, the source of the letter is suspect. It was found in the New York Tribune, which, in turn, claims to have copied it from a periodical called the Southern Advocate. The editors note that "no other reference has been found to the original letter to Wadsworth." 38 Professor Johnson, who conducted a careful study of the letter and the circumstances of its publication, concludes that several paragraphs of that letter are not authentic.39 I would go further. I can see no reason why we should assume that any part of the letter is authentic—it doesn't sound like Lincoln, and the ideas expressed

37Mitgang, pp. 106–07; Krug, p. 2. Robert Durden points out that both Bennett and Mitgang relied on spurious evidence: Bennett accepted Benjamin Butler's story that Lincoln continued to support colonization, while Mitgang accepted the authenticity of the letter to Wadsworth (Durden, "A. Lincoln: Honkie or Equalitarian," South Atlantic Quarterly, 71 [1972], pp. 286–87).
38Collected Works, VII, 101–102, 102n. The Tribune claimed that it printed the letter because it believed Lincoln had endorsed "universal amnesty" and, the newspaper claimed, that desire of the beloved President "is still withheld from the North, notwithstanding it is known that it was his intention to grant, without any exception, a general pardon." That contention is, of course, absurd. If Lincoln had been willing to grant a blanket pardon, most loyal Union supporters would have been outraged. The North had suffered too much to allow the leaders of the Confederate States to resume business as usual after the war. At a minimum, the top leaders of the Confederacy and those guilty of war crimes would not have been eligible for pardons.
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in it are not consonant with what we know about Lincoln’s thoughts at the time he supposedly wrote the letter.

Although Johnson established the dubious nature of most of the Wadsworth letter, those who defended Lincoln’s record on race have been able to argue that other evidence substantiates the President’s generous views on Negro rights. As the eminent constitutional historian Harold Hyman has put it, “Professor Johnson has wasted his efforts to sunder the links that bind Lincoln to the egalitarians of a century past, the chain still holds.” Hyman rests his case mostly on Lincoln’s dealing with the reconstruction of Louisiana. Lincoln not only suggested (in a private letter to Governor Michael Hahn) that some Negroes be given the vote, he repeated the recommendation in his public address; and he further suggested that blacks be provided with public schools. In that final address Lincoln expressed ideas that were not limited to Louisiana, and Hyman contends that Lincoln was moving further along the lines of giving full rights to the freedmen. Although Hyman concedes that it is impossible to say how far Lincoln would have gone, the friends of black rights “shared confidence that Lincoln would keep moving in the happy direction he had already taken.”

The contention that Lincoln’s policies for Louisiana indicate that he was moving rapidly to a revolutionary policy of reconstructing the South on the basis of black suffrage is the thesis of an exciting new study by Peyton McCrary. McCrary moves beyond a

[40]Hyman, “Lincoln and Equal Rights for Negroes: The Irrelevancy of the ‘Wadsworth Letter,’ ” Civil War History, 12 (1966), 259, 261, 262–63, 264. Johnson replied to Hyman, conceding to those who defend Lincoln’s record on race that Lincoln did adapt to circumstances and might well have moved to support the radical position when that was necessary; as circumstances changed, however, Lincoln too would have changed. Johnson concluded: “Can anyone doubt that he would have accepted the reactionary compromise of 1877, if he had been in Hayes’s place?” (“Lincoln and Equal Rights: A Reply,” Civil War History, 13 [1967], 66–73). Johnson’s point is important. If we stress Lincoln’s adaptability too much we concede one of the major points at issue—his moral stature.
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defense of Lincoln from the attacks of revisionists to a new assertion: Lincoln was the revolutionary leader of a revolution in the making. McCrory starts with the assumption that virtually all historians share: Lincoln was a realist. Professor McCrory then goes on to argue that "a radical approach to reconstruction was more realistic than Banks’ moderate policy . . . because the nation was in the midst of a revolutionary civil war, and in such crises only the forceful allocation of governmental power by the victors can produce a stable postwar order." Therefore Lincoln, as a realist, would have continued to move towards the policies advocated by the radicals.41

The evidence that McCrory cites are Lincoln’s approval of the Freedmen’s Bureau legislation and his last speech, which hint that he might soon announce a new policy. Lincoln’s decision to undermine the radicals in Louisiana by calling for elections before a constitutional convention was not, McCrory argues, evidence of Lincoln’s conservatism but rather it was evidence that he had been badly misled by General Nathaniel P. Banks. At last, Lincoln recognized that Louisiana was headed in the wrong direction; he “came to recognize the fragile quality of the Hahn regime’s electoral support and became more comfortable with the prospect of Negro suffrage. As a pragmatic politician, if not as a man with a commitment to social justice for the freedmen, Lincoln could hardly have escaped the conclusion that at the end of the war there was nowhere to go but to the left.”42

Lerone Bennett’s article of 1968 was the product of the times. American blacks and members of the New Left were convinced


42 McCrory, pp. 356, 9, 11, 210; Collected Works, VIII, 399–404. The argument that Lincoln was a revolutionary is developed by a group of socialist historians from DeKalb, Illinois, who argue that "Abraham Lincoln and the broad coalition that made up the Republican Party were revolutionary because they overthrew a fully constitutional property system—because they used every means at their
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that American society was deeply flawed and that it was the product of a corrupt heritage. Moreover, the radicals of the 1960s were impatient with history; they saw the past as a dead weight that could only limit action in the present—and action was what they wanted. Our golden age lay in the future, not the past.

Yet, if the radicals of the 1960s were impatient with history, they performed a valuable service in leading the reexamination of our past from new perspectives, enriching our understanding of our history. Although most historians have not accepted Bennett’s views on Lincoln, we have not merely come back to where we started. We have learned a great deal. We have found out that a number of things probably did not happen—the letter to Wadsworth, the equivocation about emancipation at Hampton Roads, and the interview with General Butler. Our picture of Lincoln’s relationship to the radical wing of his party has also been profoundly altered. We no longer see Lincoln as hapless defender of the Constitution against the onslaught of unprincipled politicians. Lincoln has been put back into the Republican party.

We also have a new appreciation of the Emancipation Proclamation. The Proclamation, despite its pedestrian language, was a revolutionary act that went beyond what Congress had done and that inexorably changed the nature of the Civil War. We also have a new appreciation of Lincoln’s reconstruction policies. We no longer see a Lincoln who was hopelessly wedded to the Proclamation of December, 1863, but one who was moving with the times and had begun to see, as the radicals had, the need for fundamental social changes in the South.

Dwight D. Eisenhower painted this portrait in tribute to the first Republican President.
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As we continue to study Lincoln we continue to define ourselves. Most historians have discarded the myth of the saintly Great Emancipator, but they have also rejected the counter myth of Lincoln as a hopeless racist.²⁴³ We are judging Lincoln by different standards now from those we used a decade ago. Our sense of presidential leadership has changed. We are no longer confident that strong leaders can solve our problems, and in the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate era, the idea of a President who moves far beyond the nation in implementing his ideas arouses our suspicions. We are far more ready now to recognize the conditions that limit the actions of strong leaders for good or for ill.

Within the limits of leadership, which are clearer to us now than they were a decade ago, Lincoln is still a relevant figure. He shows us how, despite fluctuations in the national will, a great President can use his office to support reform. His image is still available as comfort to those reformers who can use a prestigious American hero in their corner.

²⁴³ As Fehrenbacher has pointed out, the use of the word "racist" in describing someone who lived in a different age presents real complications. Moreover, the word itself has been defined in many ways. As I use it here, I mean what Fehrenbacher calls the "doctrine" of racism—"a rationalized theory of inherent Negro inferiority." As noted above, Lincoln did not hold that blacks were inherently inferior to whites (Fehrenbacher, p. 299).