

## **Lincoln's Attitude Toward Slavery**

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To the Negroes of his day Lincoln was a great "emancipator, benefactor, friend and leader."<sup>1</sup> Lincoln's contribution to the elimination of slavery has won him universal and permanent fame in the history of mankind. His monumental achievement is indeed a milestone in the long struggle for human rights. There were naturally many factors which had entered into his winning fame as a great emancipator. But it might be safe to say that the foremost factor lay in his antislavery attitude, for it constantly determined and conditioned his policies in the war against slavery. The main purpose of this paper is to examine the formation of this attitude of Lincoln's. Based on certain spoken and written utterances by him, the present study has found that his attitude toward slavery passed through, roughly speaking, three stages. In the course of this analysis, special attention will be directed to such questions as why he assumed a particular attitude at certain time, whether his attitude at a certain stage was justified, and what effect the particular attitude had on himself and other people. Of course, this division into three different stages is only tentative. It is hoped, however, that an analysis of this subject can bring about a clearer understanding of Lincoln's brilliant career as a fighter against slavery.

From the very beginning of his public career, Lincoln was sympathetic with the enslaved Negroes. His persistent compassion for them was deeply rooted in his heart. He once expressed his reaction to the sight of slaves shackled with irons during a steamboat trip from Louisville to St. Louis. He said that he hated "to see the poor creatures hunted down and caught and carried back to their stripes and unrequited toil."<sup>2</sup> To the sight he referred as "a continual torment to me"<sup>3</sup> and he said that "slave-breeders and slave-traders" were "a small odious and detested class who made their fortunes out of other people's misery."<sup>4</sup>

This compassionate sentiment lay deep in his antagonism against slavery which was bound to grow increasingly firm with the passage of time. During his earlier years Lincoln chose not to make his attitude clear to the public although he was profoundly conscious of the seriousness of the "peculiar institution." As pointed out by Richard B. Hofstadter, he did not denounce slavery in public until October 4, 1854, when he delivered a speech at the Hall of Representatives at Springfield declaring his hatred for the spread of slavery. He said, "I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself."<sup>5</sup> Then in his speech at Peoria, he remarked: "The great mass of mankind consider slavery a great moral wrong."<sup>6</sup> Then in 1855, in a letter to Joshua F. Speed, he wrote, "I now do no more than oppose the extension of slavery."<sup>7</sup> On June 16, 1858, he voiced his opposition to the Dred Scott decision which ruled, among other things, that Congress had no power to prevent the spread of slavery into the territories. He denounced this decision by contending that white men had no right to enslave black men for reasons either of color or of intellectual superiority, as follows:

"You say A. is white and B. is black. It is color then; the lighter, having the right to enslave the darker? Take care. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with a fairer skin than your own.

"You do not mean color exactly? — You mean the whites are intellectually the superiors of the blacks, and, therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with an intellect superior to your own."<sup>8</sup>

Judging from these statements, we can see that Lincoln's antislavery attitude, at the first stage, was based on both moral and philosophical grounds, and that his attitude then led him to oppose only the extension of slavery.

Strangely, however, Lincoln held somewhat unsteady views concerning the Negroes during the first period of the formation of his antislavery doctrines. This was shown in his debates with Stephen A. Douglas in 1858. Douglas rightly observed that there were some contradictory ideas in Lincoln's speeches in the North and in the South. In a speech in reply to Douglas at Chicago in 1857, Lincoln, while speaking of the equality of the Negro with the white man, said: "Let us discard all these things, and unite as one people throughout this land, until we shall once more stand up declaring that all men are created equal."<sup>9</sup> Here Lincoln was seen as a Negro equality advocate. But in another speech delivered at Charleston in 1858 he seemed a pro-slavery man as he said:

I will say then, that I am not nor never have been in favor of bringing about

in any way, the social and political equality of the white and black races; that I am not nor never have been in favor of making voters of the free Negroes, or jurors, or qualifying them to hold office, or having them marry with white people. I will say in addition, that there is physical difference between the white and black races, which, I suppose, will forever forbid the two races living together upon terms of social and political equality, and inasmuch as they cannot so live, that while they do remain together, there must be the position of superior and inferior, that I as much as any other white man am in favor of the superior position being assigned to the white man.<sup>10</sup>

This perplexing fact that Lincoln once did not favor Negro suffrage and the social and political equality of the white and black races may be explained, as suggested by J. G. Randall, in terms of Lincoln's motive of party advantage.<sup>11</sup> These views, apparently, had something to do with Lincoln's belief in Negro deportation, the belief that "colonization would accomplish a dual purpose: rid the South of human bondage and rid the country of the colored man."<sup>12</sup> In spite of the fact, however, one will never doubt Lincoln's humanitarian attitude toward the Negroes. In the above-mentioned debates with Douglas, Lincoln stated, "I, as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong, having the superior position. I have never said anything to the contrary, but I hold that notwithstanding all this, there is no reason in the world why the Negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I hold that he is as much entitled to these as the white man."<sup>13</sup> From this passage we see clearly that Lincoln did not in the least dehumanize the Negroes.

Lincoln's good will toward the Negroes was further reaffirmed in another speech delivered on March 6, 1860, at New Haven, Conn., a speech in response to a shoemakers's strike in Massachusetts. He praised the strike system because under it laborers were not obliged to work regardless of circumstances, and he went on to say: "One of the reasons why I am opposed to slavery is just here. . . . I don't believe in a law to prevent a man from getting rich; it would do more harm than good. So while we do not propose any war upon capital, we do wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with everybody else. . . . I want every man to have his chance — and I believe a black man is entitled to it — in which he can better his condition. . . ."<sup>14</sup> Here we find Lincoln's antislavery attitude was based on an accurate conception of the

system of “free labor,” which is an embodiment of social equality.

In the fall of 1860, Lincoln was elected to the Presidency and this marked the beginning of the second stage in the growth of his attitude toward slavery. Basically, his antislavery ideas underwent no modifications at this stage, but in the face of the secession crisis the President chose to put aside this issue temporarily for the sake of the very existence of the Union. Actually this intention of his had manifested itself in his house-divided speech: “‘A house divided against itself cannot stand.’ I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved – I do not expect the house to fall, but I do expect it will cease to be divided.”<sup>15</sup> Explicitly, Lincoln did not want the Union to be divided by the issue of slavery. And he further justified his firm determination to preserve the Union in his first Inaugural Address by saying that “in contemplation of Universal law, and of the Constitution, the Union of these States is perpetual.”<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, the secessionists of the Confederacy refused to listen to Lincoln’s earnest call for peace. “We are not enemies, but friends,” he said.<sup>17</sup> These powerful words failed to move them and in consequence the Civil War ensued. During the early part of the war, Lincoln’s stressing the Union-policy in preference to the issue of slavery was often questioned. One notable example of this was Horace Greeley’s open appeal to Lincoln entitled “The Prayer of Twenty Millions,” an appeal calling for an explanation of “the seeming subserviency of your [Lincoln’s] policy to the slave-holding, slave-upholding interest.”<sup>18</sup> In reply to this letter, Lincoln wrote: “My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all slaves, I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that.”<sup>19</sup> At this stage, whether the freeing of the slaves was worth doing or not depended wholly on whether it could help achieve Lincoln’s ultimate purpose to preserve the Federal Republic. And in conformity with this policy, Lincoln entirely refused to compromise on the exclusion of slavery from the territories and “never recognized the Confederacy as a nation, nor secession as anything but ‘insurrection.’”<sup>20</sup>

In the course of time, Lincoln began to reshape his policy toward slavery after taking into consideration the persuasive requests to take a more resolute course in freeing the enslaved – the requests from such people as church groups, abolitionists, the workingmen in London and Manchester, and above all, Negroes.

Consequently, he began to adopt several measures for the solution of the Negro problem. Among these measures were the compensated emancipation measure, which was met with coolness in most slave states; the Slave Trade Treaty, which, in Lincoln's own words, effectively put an end to the "inhuman and odious traffic";<sup>21</sup> and the earlier mentioned Negro deportation plan, which failed because of the opposition of numerous Negroes and of the difficulties in finding proper places for the Negroes' colonization. By adopting such measures, obviously, Lincoln intended to handle the Negro problem peacefully.

As the War dragged on, Lincoln's position on slavery underwent definite change, finally reaching the third stage of its development. This stage began when, after reluctantly signing the second confiscation act which Congress passed on July 17, 1862, he came to realize that "he should not limit the war to preserving the Union" and that the main issue had become, as Lincoln put it, "a perplexing compound — Union and Slavery."<sup>22</sup> As the military situation got worse and worse, Lincoln, at long length, resolved to compose the long-awaited edict of emancipation. And on July 22, 1862, to the surprise of his Cabinet, he announced the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation of which the third paragraph reads:

That, on the first day of January in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any state, or designated part of a state, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.<sup>23</sup>

This proclamation marked a drastic change in Lincoln's attitude toward slavery, a change which assured his achievement of undying fame as a great emancipator. It was this drastic change that made rapid progress toward full emancipation possible. And the emancipation movement gained even greater momentum after Lincoln issued his final proclamation on January 1, 1863. By this great document was chattel slavery doomed and Lincoln's fame secured forever.

Although the Proclamation did not immediately end the prolonged war, it did change "the whole tone and character of the war"<sup>24</sup> and "lift the war to the level of a crusade for human freedom."<sup>25</sup> Lincoln himself was fully aware of the tremendous weight of this document and rightly said that it was "the greatest event of the nineteenth century."<sup>26</sup>

Having thus examined the development of his slavery policy, we cannot but conclude that Lincoln's attitude was, as Hofstadter most succinctly put it, "based on justice tempered by expediency — or perhaps more accurately,

expediency tempered by justice.”<sup>27</sup> Lincoln himself must have been conscious of this when he wrote in a letter to a Kentuckian on April 4, 1864: “I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.”<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, his procrastination in waging a decisive war against slavery should not be taken to mean that he was indifferent to this issue. In the same letter just mentioned, Lincoln declared, “I am naturally anti-slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I can not remember when I did not so think, and feel.”<sup>29</sup> There is indeed no doubt about his antislavery position. That he did not solve the thorny problem earlier could be attributed primarily to his intention to solve it gradually and peacefully and also to his justifiable Union-policy, as has been explained. As David Donald has taken pains to expound in his *Lincoln Reconsidered*,<sup>30</sup> the sagacious flexibility which Lincoln distinctly showed in shifting his position on emancipation is an undeniable indication of his pragmatism.

#### NOTES

1. Benjamin Quarles, Foreword, *Lincoln and the Negro* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962).
2. J. G. Randall, *Lincoln and the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1964), p. 29.
3. William O. Douglas, *Mr. Lincoln and the Negroes* (New York: Atheneum, 1964), p. 22.
4. Ibid.
5. Richard B. Hofstadter, “Lincoln and the Slavery Question,” in *Problems in American Civilization, V, 31-32*, ed. Norton Garfinkle (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1959), p. 6.
6. Ibid.
7. Randall, p. 30.
8. Douglas, p. 21.
9. “Lincoln-Douglas: Debates on the Slavery Question,” in *Problems in American Civilization, V, 31-32*, ed. Norton Garfinkle, p. 20.
10. Ibid.
11. Randall, p. 40.
12. Quarles, p. 108.
13. “Lincoln-Douglas: Debates on the Slavery Question,” p. 14.

14. Herman Schlüter, *Lincoln, Labor, and Slavery* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965), pp. 172-73.
15. John G. Nicolay, *A Short Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: The Century Co., 1921), p. 119.
16. Abraham Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address," in *Problems in American Civilization, V. 31-32*, ed. Norton Garfinkle, p. 35.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
18. Schlüter, p. 27.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
20. Richard Hofstadter, William Miller, and Daniel Aaron, *The American Republic* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 586.
21. Quarles, p. 97.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
27. Hofstadter, p. 4.
28. Richard N. Current, ed., *The Political Thought of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), p. 299.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 297-98.
30. See David Donald, "Lincoln and the American Pragmatic Tradition," in his *Lincoln Reconsidered* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. 138.

# 林肯對奴隸制度的態度

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## 〔中文摘要〕

本文主旨在於探討林肯對奴隸制度的態度之形成經過，以期進一步了解他解放黑奴的偉大功蹟。此項研究所用資料以林肯本人所發表的有關言論為主。研究結果，我們發現林肯這方面的態度可以說經歷了三個演進階段。本文即試圖闡釋他在每一階段所持態度及其特殊成因與影響。

第一階段從他服公職開始到當選總統為止，他曾屢次從道德、哲學等不同角度批判奴隸制度，也曾爲了權宜的考慮發表過一些自相矛盾的言論。在第二階段裡，他反奴隸的基本立場並無變化，但是爲了處理南方分離的危機，他不得不將黑奴問題暫擱一旁；然而，分離主義者對他「團結一家」的呼籲置若罔聞。後來，隨着南北戰爭的惡化，林肯對黑奴問題的態度便進入了第三個發展階段。到了一八六二年七月下旬，他決心爲了維護國家統一而徹底解放黑奴。此一態度上與策略上之劇變產生了無比重大的影響；解放黑奴宣言敲響了奴隸制度的喪鐘，同時穩固了林肯的不朽聲名。

總之，林肯對奴隸制度的態度，正如名史學家霍夫斯塔特所言，乃是以「受權宜調和的正義，或更正確地說，經正義調和的權宜」爲基礎。儘管他在實際對付奴隸制度的策略上曾有所更易，但是他同情黑奴追求正義的基本立場却不容置疑。