
Book Review

Refuting the Lie That Lincoln Was 'Moderate' on Abolishing Slavery

by Stuart Rosenblatt

Father Abraham Lincoln's Relentless Struggle To End Slavery

by Richard Striner

Oxford Press, New York, 2006

308 pages, hardbound, \$28

Richard Striner takes deadly aim at some of the more vicious myths that have become almost axiomatically accepted in many circles concerning the outlook of President Abraham Lincoln: that Lincoln was a "moderate" and a "pragmatist" on the issue of slavery eradication; and that Lincoln was more concerned about saving the Union than abolishing slavery, and would have maintained the latter to keep the former.

As the author contends, if Lincoln were a moderate, why was it he who challenged Sen. Stephen Douglas to debate the merits of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the doctrine of popular sovereignty, a clearly "moderate" position? Why did President Lincoln reject the Crittenden Compromise (which would have forever prevented the abolition of slavery)? Why did his very election precipitate secession and civil war? Why did Lincoln issue the Emancipation Proclamation and make black freedom a central issue of the war? Why did he introduce and fight for the Thirteenth Amendment to free all the slaves, when it was clear that the war to save the Union was most likely won? As Striner proves, these were not the works of a "moderate" or a racist.

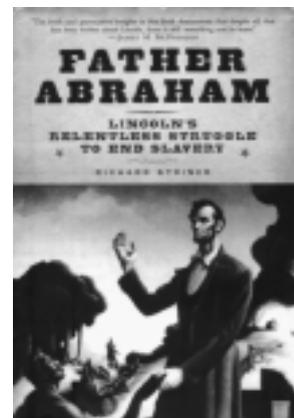
Striner acknowledges his debt to authors Henry Jaffa, William Miller, LaWanda Cox, and James McPherson, who recently published works debunking some of the Lincoln myths; he also refutes recent detractors including David Herbert Donald, TV journalist Ken Burns, historian Barbara Fields, Gore Vidal, Lerone Bennett, Jr., and others.

"For a long time, a significant number of historians," Striner writes, "have argued that Lincoln was a cautious or emotionally tepid man, who was driven by outside pressures and events into anti-slavery leadership. A host of recent commentators have suggested that Lincoln's contributions to the

anti-slavery movement were almost unintentional." Several years ago, historian Allen Guelzo contended in the *Washington Post* that Lincoln was a "reluctant recruit to the abolitionist cause," a "restrained" and "emotionally chilly" politician whose "unblinking eye for compromise" created an "ambiguous shadow" of a legacy.

Striner's book makes a compelling case that Lincoln was a leader in the fight to end slavery, and probably the single most important figure in this effort, without whom it would have failed.

Apart from its historical interest to the general reader, the book is useful as a polemic in today's political battles. Unlike cowardly politicians in today's Democratic Party, who fail to provide leadership in the fight to impeach President Bush and Vice President Cheney, or fight to bring the endless wars in Southwest Asia to a swift conclusion, President Lincoln sought out the most critical battles that needed to be fought, risking his career in many of these fights, and from the onset of the civil war, risking his life.



Waging the Essential Battles

As Striner shows, Lincoln had abhorred slavery, from his early encounters with it. He continually challenged his own thinking on how to rid the nation of the pestilence. As an Illinois legislator in 1837, Lincoln was one of only six in a virulently racist state to cast a vote against slavery; as a single-term Congressman in 1847, he picked up the fight that ex-President John Quincy Adams had been waging—almost alone—for the preceding decade, and drafted a bill to outlaw slavery in the District of Columbia. (Lincoln later withdrew it, upon realizing the strength of the opposition.)

A devotee of Henry Clay, Lincoln first hoped that if slavery could be contained, it would wither and die on its own. He abandoned this view when it became clear, in the 1850s,

that the slaveholders were hell-bent on expansion of the “peculiar institution” into new states and territories. This meant that sooner or later, the slave states would overwhelm the political clout of the free states in the Senate and the House, and thus would be in a position to prevent slavery from *ever* being abolished, while legalizing the introduction of slaves into the free states. Striner points to the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, promoting slave expansion into the western territories, as the great turning point in Lincoln’s life, which convinced him to lead the attack against this mortal threat to the republic.

Lincoln, deeply committed to the principles of the Founders, realized that slavery expansion was synonymous with overturning the principles of the Declaration of Independence.

In 1854, then-private citizen Lincoln chose as his target Illinois Sen. Stephen Douglas (Democrat), a virulent racist and champion of the insidious doctrine of “popular sovereignty”—which meant that the citizens of new states could themselves decide whether to allow slavery within their borders. With no immediate campaign at stake, and no personal glory to be gained by polemicizing against a sitting Senator, Lincoln challenged Douglas’s fundamental assumption: that man is a beast. Lincoln refuted this in his Peoria speech in October 1854:

“Judge Douglas frequently . . . paraphrases our argument by saying ‘the white people of Nebraska are good enough to govern themselves, but they are not good enough to govern a few miserable negroes’!! Well, I doubt not that the people of Nebraska are, and will continue to be, as good as the average of people elsewhere. I do not say the contrary. What I do say is that no man is good enough to govern another man, without that other’s consent. I say this is the leading principle—the sheet anchor of American republicanism.”

The campaign against Douglas catapulted Lincoln into prominence in Illinois, and put his name on the national scene. In 1856 he helped organize the new Republican Party, and over the next year, still in private law practice, he launched attacks on the Supreme Court’s infamous *Dred Scott* decision, which attacks would lay the groundwork for his unsuccessful campaign against Douglas in 1858 for the U.S. Senate.

It was this polemical campaign, whose speeches were reprinted across the land, that carried Lincoln to the Republican nomination for President and election two years later.

Upon being elected President, and with the crisis of Southern secession escalating, Lincoln was besieged by members of his own party to compromise with Southern Congressmen on the issue of slavery extension, so as to avoid a civil war. They demanded that he sign onto the Crittenden Compromise, and postpone the conflict for the short term. The compromise, crafted by Kentucky Sen. John Crittenden, proposed a series of constitutional amendments: the westward extension of the Missouri Compromise line to allow slavery expansion; bolstering the Fugitive Slave Law; protecting the interstate slave

trade; and the end of all future efforts to abolish slavery.

Lincoln did not flinch, and rejected the advice of members of his own party: “Is it desired that I shall shift the ground upon which I have been elected? I can not do it. . . . It would make me appear as if I repented for the crime of having been elected, and was anxious to apologize and beg forgiveness.”

Southern sabre-rattling to take control over Federal military installations, such as Ft. Pickens and Ft. Sumter, began in earnest. Lincoln was confronted this time with members of his Cabinet, including anti-slavery spokesman Secretary of State William Seward, who wanted to back down in the face of Confederate military threats. Lincoln refused, and deployed the mission to resupply the besieged Ft. Sumter that gave the Confederacy the pretext to begin the Civil War.

Organizing the Loyal Citizenry

Lincoln pursued freeing the slaves with the same fervor that he did in prosecuting the war, adapting his views and policies as the situation required. He continually discarded one measure after another if they proved inadequate. He overturned his belief in slave containment, in exchange for the policy of compensated emancipation, but when the border state leadership rebuffed his overtures in 1862 for compensation, he drafted his proclamation for emancipation. In January 1863, the Proclamation went into effect, despite much opposition, and Lincoln waged a relentless campaign among all political forces to see it through. When black regiments were formed, Lincoln promoted their use, and defended them in action.

Realizing that he would face massive opposition among the Northern population to his Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln used all venues to ready the people for this bold initiative. In the most famous, and misinterpreted statement of this effort, Lincoln issued a public reply to Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune*, who had chastised him for moving too slowly on emancipation.

“My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery,” Lincoln said. “If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. . . .”

While many analysts today seize on this statement as proof of Lincoln’s racism or excessive “moderation,” Striner convincingly argues that Lincoln had already decided to issue the Proclamation, had told his closest advisors, and was softening up Northern thinking by posing this most provocative declaration in the subjunctive mood. This letter was one of an escalating series of initiatives to win over public thinking to support emancipation—a necessity in wartime, and constitutional when carried out by the Commander-in-Chief as an act of war—as a radical transformation in the entire military/political effort.

Nobody has put it better than Frederick Douglas, the former slave and abolitionist leader, in a speech in 1876: “[Lincoln’s] great mission was to accomplish two things: first, to save his country from dismemberment and ruin; and second, to free his country from the great crime of slavery. To do one or the other, or both, he must have the earnest sympathy and the powerful cooperation of his loyal fellow countrymen. . . . Viewed from the genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent; but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined.”

Throughout the war, Lincoln held firm. In August 1864, when Union troops were bogged down in battle, and the upcoming election seemed all but lost to the treacherous Democrat George McLellan, Lincoln was asked by the chairman of the Republican Party, Henry J. Raymond, to seek peace with Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Raymond told Lincoln that the cries for peace revolved around the prospect of losing the election and Lincoln’s stubborn commitment to end slavery as a condition for peace. Approach Davis, Raymond suggested, propose peace terms based solely on the supremacy of the Constitution, and settle all other questions by convention of all the people. In other words, separate “saving the Union” from “freeing the slaves.”

Lincoln summoned Raymond to a meeting of his entire Cabinet, and rejected the policy, which “would be ‘worse than losing the presidential contest—it would be ignominiously surrendering it in advance.’”

To some Wisconsin Republicans, Lincoln said that “there have been men who have proposed to me to return to slavery the black warriors of Port Hudson . . . to conciliate the South. I should be damned in time and in eternity for so doing. The world shall know that I will keep my faith to friends and enemies, come what will.”

The Republican Conception of Man

The author develops many of the profound ideas in Lincoln’s mind that drove his actions: the ideas embedded in the Constitution and Declaration of Independence promoting equality and justice for all. He attacked the deeply held assumptions of Senator Douglas, the Southern slaveholders, and many Northerners as well, that blacks were nothing better than beasts.

In his speech at Peoria in 1854, Lincoln challenged his audience to reject white supremacist arguments, “Equal justice to the south, it is said, requires us to consent to the extending of slavery to new countries. That is to say, inasmuch as you do not object to my taking my hog to Nebraska, therefore I must not object to you taking your slave. Now, I admit this is perfectly logical, if there is no difference between hogs and negroes. But while you thus require me to deny the humanity of the negro, I wish to ask whether you of the south yourselves, have ever been willing to do as much?”

Lincoln was keenly aware of the sharp differences between the Confederate view of man and the republican tradition of the nation. For example, the principle of the general welfare, as stated in the Preamble of the Constitution, radiates throughout his thought. The idea of a republic, where all men are created equal and are self-governing, was echoed in the Gettysburg Address and many other speeches.

Lyndon LaRouche has frequently attacked the sophistry that plagues today’s Baby-Boomer politicians, and likens this disease to that which brought down Greece during the Peloponnesian Wars. Lincoln was no less precise in targetting this affliction. In his speech at the Cooper Institute in February 1860, he challenged his audience not to yield to the demands of the Southern racists to give up opposition to slavery:

“Let us be diverted by none of those sophistical contrivances wherewith we are so industriously plied and belabored—contrivances such as groping for some middle ground between the right and the wrong, vain as the search for a man who should be neither a living man nor a dead man—such as a policy of ‘don’t care’ on a question about which all true men do care—such as Union appeals beseeching true Union men to yield to Disunionists, reversing the divine rule, and calling, not the sinners, but the righteous to repentance—such as invocations to Washington, imploring men to unsay what Washington said, and undo what Washington did.

“Neither let us be slandered from our duty by false accusations against us, nor frightened from it by menaces of destruction to the Government nor of dungeons to ourselves. Let us have the faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it.”

Lincoln was motivated, in his efforts to free the slaves and save the Union, by a profound sense of immortality for himself and for the nation he embodied. In the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln is humbled by the brave actions of the soldiers who “gave their lives here,” but he challenges the nation to rise above the battle and “be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.” He then asks for an “increased devotion” to the principles upon which the battle was fought, and further that “a new birth of freedom” result from their death. Implicitly, he was calling for overturning the principle of slavery still embedded in the Constitution.

Lincoln did not answer to suit his critics, as a sophist does, but rather saw himself as an instrument of divine purpose. It was his intention to resolve the critical paradoxes facing the nation, but at a higher level—overturning slavery, but without violating the Constitution; and transforming the nation for the good in the successful prosecution of the war.

This is eloquently captured in the Second Inaugural Address, which identifies the purpose of the war to “scourge” the sins of Southerner and Northerner alike. The President concludes his speech with the agapic precepts upon which a higher resolution to the conflict could be achieved, “with malice toward none, and charity for all.”