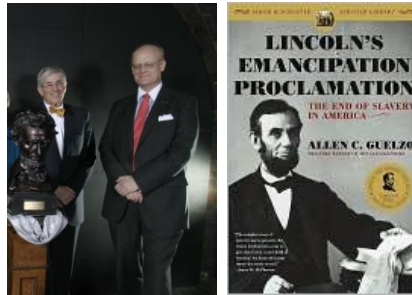


2005 LINCOLN PRIZE WINNER ALLEN C. GUELZO FOR *LINCOLN'S EMANCIPATION*

PROCLAMATION



LINCOLN PRIZE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

At 8.00 on the morning of April 17th, Major General William Tecumseh Sherman was ready to hop aboard a special “car and locomotive” which would take him up the line to Durham Station, North Carolina, there to meet with Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston and discuss the surrender of Johnson’s army on the same terms that Robert E. Lee had surrendered his a week before at Appomattox. Breathlessly, a telegraph-operator in the depot pushed his way through the crowd of Sherman’s staff officers and called to Sherman to wait, that a message was coming through in cipher that he had better see. Curious, Sherman waited while his locomotive huffed and hissed in impatience, until the message had been decrypted and the operator carried it back through the crush of blue uniforms and gold braid to Sherman. It was from Secretary of War Stanton, and it read like a page out of the last days of the Roman Republic: President Lincoln had been murdered by an assassin, another assassin had made an attempt on the life of Secretary of State Seward, and similar plots were suspected for killing “General Grant and all the principal officers of the Government.”

Sherman stuffed the telegram into his coat, his head whirling for the twenty-six miles of track he travelled down to Durham Station. When he met finally met Johnston, he asked to see Johnston alone,

and handed over the telegram. Sherman never forgot the sight of the otherwise-dapper, otherwise perfectly-poised Johnston reading over that fatal telegram. The color drained from Johnston's face, sweat came out in large beads on his forehead, and "he did not attempt to conceal his distress." For weeks, Joe Johnston had known the end of the war was near. He had counselled a fleeing Jefferson Davis at Greensboro that further Confederate resistance would be a crime against humanity. And now this. The shock turned to anger: "He denounced the act as a disgrace to the age," Sherman wrote, "and hoped I did not charge it to the Confederate government." Perhaps not, Sherman replied, but his soldiers would, and the quicker Johnston accepted his terms, the better it would be all around. Even that might turn out to be too little. "Black Jack" Logan had to restrain men of his 15th Corps in Sherman's army from marching on Raleigh, torches in hand and hot ash in their hearts; outside Appomattox, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain had to prevent the division chaplain in the 5th Corps from whipping the men up into a lethal rage by preaching on Mark 6, v. 25: "Give me the head of John the Baptist on a charger." An Ohio artilleryman looked coldly on the prospect of "another campaign...for every man would take it upon himself to do every thing he could to avenge the death of Old Abe, and dearly would he be avenged for the boys would have shown no mercy."

Across the defeated South, people who had never had much reason to love Abraham Lincoln now saw that his death was the worst blow that could have fallen on them. "I fear it will be disastrous to our people, and I regret it deeply," said Jefferson Davis, "He had power over the Northern people, and was without personal malignity toward the people of the South." But quickly the tone of Southern judgement on Lincoln shifted from a tolerable negative to a positive embrace. Not only was Lincoln without "malignity," but he was actually a Southerner himself, and with Southern sympathies. "Mr. Lincoln had Southern blood in his veins, and he knew well the character of that people," wrote Lincoln's friend, Ward Hill Lamon, himself a Southerner with few sympathies for the new Reconstruction regimes. Henry Grady,

the apostle of the New South movement, lauded Lincoln in his famous address to the New England Society of New York in 1886 “the sum of Puritan and Cavalier, in whose ardent nature were fused the virtues of both, and in whose great soul the faults of both were lost.” Walt Whitman, in his famous touring lecture on the death of Lincoln, described him as “in personnel and character, a Southern contribution” to America. In 1901, the American novelist Winston Churchill prompted his fictional Lincoln in *The Crisis* to say, “I have not suffered by the South, I have suffered with the South. Your sorrow has been my sorrow, and your pain has been my pain.” Oh, gushed the Southern-born Virginia Carvel when Lincoln said that, “How I wish that every man and woman and child in the South might come here and see you as I have seen you to-day.” Vachel Lindsay thought Lincoln was “a typical Virginia man.” And from time to time, Southerners who could not believe that Abraham Lincoln could really be the son of a no-good like Thomas Lincoln speculated mysteriously that Lincoln was really the illicit offspring of Samuel Davis (so that Lincoln became Jefferson Davis’s half-brother), Henry Clay, and, strangest of all, John C. Calhoun.

Part of this ironic urge to deck Lincoln in Southern magnolias had a practical purpose: by insisting that they really did, after all, embrace Abraham Lincoln, Southerners hoped to placate the vengeance of the victorious North. Sarah Morgan understood why Louisianans who had always detested Lincoln tied black crepe from their doorknobs after the assassination, “to save their homes,” and a good deal of Southern praise for Lincoln had the same element of the lightning-rod in it. Another part was more sinister: industrious Southern racists – and one thinks here primarily of the novelist Thomas Dixon – found seed with which to sow confusion in the struggle against Jim Crow by underlining stray passages in Lincoln’s writings which seemed to show that Lincoln shared the racism of the Southern ultras “in the natural inferiority of the negro.” And at the height of the Civil Rights struggle in the 1950s, the notorious

Shreveport White Citizens Council delighted in running framed quotations from Lincoln in its newspaper, *The Councillor*, that endorsed racial segregation.

A good deal of this would have amused Lincoln. He was well aware that, during the war, “he had been represented as an evil spirit, a goblin, the implacable enemy of southern men and women,” and he hoped for nothing better from Southerners after the war that “upon a close acquaintance, they would not find him so ugly nor so black as he had been painted.” For his own part, Lincoln preferred to speak of himself as “a Northern man, or rather, a Western free state man with a constituency I believe to be, and with personal feelings I know to be, against the extension of slavery.” Occasionally, he would speak of himself as “a man of Southern birth,” or, as he did in 1860, as “a Southern man with Northern principles, or in other words, with Abolition proclivities.” And he even wondered out loud to William Herndon whether he was, indeed, the illegitimate descendant of some “noble-man so called of Virginia.” But his most abiding desire was to be seen and heard as nothing “less than National in all the positions I may take.”

The one concrete identification Lincoln had with the South was the fact of his birth in Kentucky. But he left Kentucky for good when he was seven years old, and what he remembered most about his Southern connections had nothing to do with blood or soil, but with class, and it was not an endearing memory. “I belonged, you know, to what they call down South, the ‘scrubs’,” Lincoln told the artist, Francis Carpenter, “people who do not own slaves are nobody there.” His loathing of slavery as an injustice to the slave was always bound up with his resentment at the aristocratic airs white people put on from the moment they owned their first slave. “If you had a darkey trudging at your heels every body would see him & know that you owned slaves,” Lincoln complained to Joseph Gillespie, “It is the most glittering ostentatious & displaying property in the world.... Its ownership

betokened not only the possession of wealth but indicated the gentleman of leisure who was above and scorned labour.”

Whatever else in Lincoln’s politics spoke for the West, these two things spoke directly to his Southern origins: his hatred of slavery for what it did to Southern blacks *and* for what it did to Southern whites. Unlike the Garrisonian abolitionists, whose condemnations of slavery extended far back into the Federalist politics of the 1790s, Lincoln was confident that Southerners knew, simply by virtue of natural law, that slavery was wrong: “The great majority, south as well as north, have human sympathies, of which they can no more divest themselves than they can of their sensibility to physical pain,” Lincoln said. “These sympathies in the bosoms of the southern people, manifest in many ways, their sense of the wrong of slavery, and their consciousness that, after all, there is humanity in the negro.” Southerners carried no special gene for oppression within them, any more than Northerners did. “We do not assume that we are better than the people of the South,” Lincoln said in 1860.

But “public opinion is formed relative to a property basis,” and the reason Southerners were so unwilling to give up on slavery was their fear of “any policy which depreciates their slaves as property.” Southerners, he explained to Moncure Daniel Conway, “had become at an early day...deeply involved commercially and socially with the institution. He pitied them heartily, all the more that it had corrupted them.” Like the 18th-century poet, Lincoln could have wished that slavery had never been introduced:

*O, when with slow and hesitating voice
The wily European first proposed
His hateful barter,—that some patriot hand,
Urged with prophetic rage, had stopt the source
Of future ill, and deep within his breast
The deadly weapon buried!—whilst aloof
Stood his pale brethren, paler then with fear,
And shuddering at the awful deed, had learnt
To venerate the rights of man.*

He did not want this empathy treated as a kind of moral relativism, as though to understand the economic anxieties of the slaveholder was the same thing as forgiving the enormity of slavery's wrongs. "When brought to my final reckoning, may I have to answer for robbing no man of his goods; yet more tolerable even this, than for robbing one of himself, and all that was his," Lincoln wrote in 1864, and he harshly condemned "those professedly holy men of the South...who appealed to the christian world to aid them in doing to a whole race of men, as they would have no man do unto themselves."

But for the ordinary Southerner, mired in a system that blasted his moral sensibilities on the one hand and painted him into an economic corner on the other, Lincoln had no personal hatred. "As to any dread of my having a 'purpose to enslave, or exterminate, the whites of the South,'" Lincoln wrote General John A. McClernand just after the issue of the Emancipation Proclamation, "I can scarcely believe that such dread exists. It is too absurd. I believe you can be my personal witness that no man is less to be dreaded for undue severity, in any case." Anyone might examine his speeches, he told former Kentucky governor Charles Morehead in 1862, "and they would find that he had said nothing against the interests of the South." Lizzie Keckley, Washington's bi-racial fashion-designer who worked for both the Davis family and the Lincolns, remembered that though Lincoln's "whole heart was in the war, he could not but respect the valor of those opposed to him. ... Time and again I have heard him speak in the highest terms of the soldierly qualities of such brave Confederate generals as Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Joseph E. Johnson."

Ultimately, Lincoln had not even wanted to go to war with the South. His own plans for emancipation were gradual and compensated – *gradual*, along time-tables set by the slave states themselves, and with generous federal bonuses to help the process along, and *gradual*, with the understanding everyone who had witnessed slave emancipation in the West Indies and the Northern states shared, that gradual timetables always speeded up by their own impetus from decades to a few years. But

even more than having in hand an emancipation plan which would render war unnecessary, Lincoln shuddered at the prospect of a civil war that pitted American against America. For at the end of the day, Lincoln was neither a Westerner nor a Southerner nor a Northerner so much as he was a Whig nationalist in the spirit of Henry Clay, his “beau ideal of a statesman.” Justice for the slave and satisfaction for the Southerner with all his life savings tied to the slave system could be arrived at by admitting that everyone with a stake in emancipation was first and foremost an American. The crime of the 1850s was the way in which this fundamental fact had been forgotten. “The spirit of mutual concession--that spirit which first gave us the constitution, and which has thrice saved the Union--we shall have strangled and cast from us forever,” Lincoln warned. And what shall we have in lieu of it? The South flushed with triumph and tempted to excesses; the North, betrayed, as they believe, brooding on wrong and burning for revenge.”

Lincoln could not believe that this spirit of national unity would not, even in 1860, save the country from both civil war and an unending future of enslaved labor. Even after the secession of the lower Southern States, Donn Piatt believed that Lincoln “considered the movement South as a sort of political game of bluff, gotten up by politicians, and meant solely to frighten the North. He believed that, when the leaders saw their efforts in that direction were unavailing, the tumult would subside.”

And even at the height of the war, Lincoln remained convinced that the war was being conducted by a Southern planter oligarchy, in league with its military chieftains. “The strength of the rebellion, is its military-its army,” Lincoln explained in 1863, “That army dominates all the country, and all the people, within its range.” Any peace overtures ordinary Southerners wanted to make were immediately quashed “because such man or men, have no power whatever to enforce their side of a compromise, if one were made with them.”

Lincoln was never under any illusion that the war was a conflict of righteous Yankees and

depraved rebels. Had the roles been reversed, and the economics of slavery worked to the advantage of Northerners, then Northerners would have been as stubborn in their defense of slavery, and Southerners as furious in their opposition. Southern slaveholders were neither better, nor worse than we of the North, and that we of the North were no better than they, Lincoln remarked in 1860. “If we were situated as they are, we should act and feel as they do; and if they were situated as we are, they should act and feel as we do.” It was the shared national responsibility for having tolerated slavery – not the crime of a single section – that dominated his thinking about compensated emancipation. Slavery was not a Southern crime – it was a national crime, and the price for it had to be borne nationally. His “feeling is against slavery, not against the South...” he told the New York journalist James Gilmore. “The blacks must be freed. Slavery is the bone we are fighting over. It must be got out of the way to give us permanent peace.” But “He believed the people of the North were as responsible for slavery as the people of the South,” and if at any point short of total conquest the Confederacy would lay down its arms, “with the voluntary abolition of slavery by the states, he should be in favor, individually, of the government paying a fair indemnity for the loss to the owners.”

What Lincoln wanted Southerners to acknowledge was that, more than being Southerners, they were Americans. Romantic sectional loyalties were great things to write poetry about and sip mint juleps over, but at the end of the day, Virginians had more at stake in being Americans than they did in being Virginians. Lincoln was “Devoted to the Union--not merely a geographical union, but a true national Union,” wrote Hugh McCulloch, who served as Lincoln’s third Secretary of the Treasury. “His aim would have been to build up the waste places, give new life to Southern industry, and bind together North and South, the people of the country and the whole country, by ties of mutual respect, brotherhood and interest.” The work of American freedom was a work for all hands, black and white, red and yellow, and “this terrible war,” he believed, had come to chasten and remind all Americans that we had fallen short of

that glory, had soiled the robe of the republic. “Let north and south--let all Americans--let all lovers of liberty everywhere-- join in the great and good work,” he said in 1854. And indeed, the war had given him at least the satisfaction of seeing Southerners – white Unionists and freed slaves alike – join hands with their Northern brethren in wiping out the blot of slavery. “The Sunny South too, in more colors than one, also lent a hand,” Lincoln wrote in 1863, “Their part of the history was jotted down in black and white. The job was a great national one; and let none be banned who bore an honorable part in it.

Abraham Lincoln could, dared not, believe that the Civil War was more than a temporary aberration in the great story of American freedom. “Our national strife springs not ...from the land we inhabit; not from our national homestead” he told Congress in 1862. “Our strife pertains to ourselves--to the passing generations of men; and it can, without convulsion, be hushed forever with the passing of one generation.” Perhaps Lincoln was an optimist; perhaps Lincoln’s death cut down the one man who could have lifted both North and South, white and black, out of the dead-end conflicts of race and section to a higher embrace of our single and nobler identity as free citizens of the American Republic.

One hundred and forty years after the news of Lincoln's death brought sweat to the brow of a horrified Joe Johnston, I stand here to thank you all for this double gift – the winning of a second Lincoln Prize. There are so many special people to thank that I know I cannot acknowledge them all – I will single out only these seven very remarkable ones: Michael Burlingame, John Sellers, Thomas F. Schwartz, Budge Weidman, Michael Musick, Robert P. George, and most of all my wife, Debra. But even in the joy of this moment, there is a yearning in my heart to see the work that I have tried to do in *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation* go forward as a small part of the larger reconciliation of all Americans in the great project of American freedom. For Americans we are, and “if we do this, we shall not have only saved the Union; but we shall have so saved it, as to make, and to keep it, forever worthy of the saving.”