My wife and I spent most of January traveling in India – our first visit there. Our flight home, with a change of planes in Munich, took about 24 hours. 20 minutes after we got to our apartment the phone rang and there was Lew Lehrman informing me that I had been selected for this year’s Lincoln Prize. I apologize, Lew, if my response was rather incoherent – put it down to jet lag. But now I have the opportunity to thank properly Lew, and Dick Gilder, not only for this honor but for their many years of supporting the study and teaching of American history at all academic levels and throughout this country. All of us in this room who believe that historical literacy is essential to citizenship in a democracy appreciate your efforts.

It is a great pleasure to accept this award among so many friends, some of whom contributed enormously to the book’s evolution. Let me single out a few – my superb editor at W. W. Norton, Steve Forman, and my very talented literary agent, Sandra Dijkstra (who, among other distinctions, was my classmate at Long Beach High School several years ago). I thank James Oakes, a previous winner of this award, for discussing all sorts of issues related to Lincoln, the Civil War, and emancipation, over numerous lunches on the Upper West Side and for reading the entire manuscript and making very helpful comments. Mark Neely, who I believe, along with Carl Sandburg, are the only other winners of the Pulitzer Prize for a book on Lincoln also took the time to read the manuscript. My greatest debt, however, is to my family, who are here tonight – my wife, Lynn Garafola, herself a superb scholar and writer, and our daughter, Daria Rose, who in two weeks will graduate as an art history major from Princeton. I thank them both for
reading every chapter, making suggestions and corrections large and small, and in effect, accepting Lincoln as a house guest while I was working on this book.

Working on The Fiery Trial brought me into contact with the large fraternity of Lincoln scholars. It is easy, as we all know, to poke fun at what one reviewer called the Lincoln-industrial complex. But what impressed me was the generosity of Lincoln scholars, their sense of being involved in a common enterprise, their willingness to share insights and information. All works of history, in a sense, are collaborative projects in that we build on the scholarship of others. Without innumerable previous works on Lincoln, as well as the primary documents related to his life and career that historians have made available in printed and digital form over the past two decades, this book could not have been written.

Working on The Fiery Trial brought back fond memories of two of the teachers from whom I learned what it is to be a historian. First, James P. Shenton, in whose year-long seminar on the Civil War era almost half a century ago I first began to think about Lincoln and his times. And Richard Hofstadter, my phd supervisor at Columbia. Although the answers I propose in this book are different from his, the questions I ask remain Hofstadter questions – about the development of political language, the connections between political leaders and social movements, the intersections of ideological and material forces, and between individual and collective agency, and of course, the enigmatic figure of Lincoln himself, about whom Hofstadter included a brilliant essay in The American Political Tradition.
My book is not a biography, of which there are many, but a study of the evolution of Lincoln’s ideas and policies about slavery, from his early career in Illinois to the end of his life. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Lincoln’s statement in 1864, “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.” But a moral aversion to slavery does not translate into any particular set of policies regarding how to rid the country of the institution, or how antislavery principles should be weighed against other commitments, such as party unity or devotion to the Constitution. It does not tell us what the place of African-Americans should be in a post-slavery America. On these and other questions, Lincoln changed enormously during the course of his life. That Lincoln changed, of course, is hardly a new idea. But I try to tell this story, as it were, forward, not backward – not as a teleological trajectory toward a predetermined goal, but as an unpredictable progress with twists and turns along the way, backward steps and false paths, and with the future always unknown. Viewing Lincoln in this way produced some surprises.

One was how long Lincoln promoted the idea of colonization – encouraging African-Americans to leave the United States for Africa, Haiti, or Central America. Many scholars have simply ignored this aspect of his career as it does not fit easily with the image of the Great Emancipator. A minority have used it to condemn Lincoln as an inveterate racist. I came to believe that colonization must be understood not in isolation but as part of a broader program of how to end slavery in a political system that erected seemingly insuperable legal and constitutional protections barrier to abolition. Lincoln,
like his political idol Henry Clay, long believed that slavery could only be abolished with
the consent of slaveowners, and that this could be accomplished only through a program
of gradual emancipation, coupled with monetary compensation to the owners, and
encouraging blacks to leave the country as white society would never accept a large free
black population.

A very different mode of abolition is military emancipation. War destabilizes
slavery. It strips away constitutional protections and makes the consent of the owners
irrelevant. Contending sides make slavery a military target to weaken their opponents.
They enlist slave soldiers. This happened many times in the Western Hemisphere,
including during the American Revolution, and it happened during the Civil War. For the
first year and a half or more of the war, Lincoln promoted his original plan; faced with
the unalterable opposition even of loyal slaveholders to any emancipation and of blacks
to colonization, Lincoln abandoned it and moved to military emancipation. He now
embraced an end to slavery that was immediate, without monetary compensation, and
severed from the idea of colonization. He armed black soldiers to fight for the Union.
These fundamental changes in national policy, announced in the Emancipation
Proclamation, changed the nature of the Civil War, and of American society.

This mode of ending slavery assumed that freed blacks would be part of the
postwar nation. It thus raised the question of race, and this was my second surprise –
although scholars have debated Lincoln’s racial views ad infinitum, he actually said very
little on the subject. He read proslavery publications but he did not read or contribute to
the era’s discourse about separate genesis, or inborn racial characteristics. Of course, in his few statements, mostly when charged with favoring “Negro equality” during his debates with Stephen A. Douglas in 1858, Lincoln rejected the idea, in words with which everyone in this room is undoubtedly familiar. Only after the Emancipation Proclamation did Lincoln begin to think seriously, for the first time, of the United States as a biracial society. When he did, change came rapidly. Lincoln was the first president to meet regularly – or at all – with black Americans. Another surprise was how many he welcomed to the White House – not only Frederick Douglass, as is well known, but Martin Delany, Sojourner Truth, Alexander Crummell, delegations of black churchmen, representatives of the free black community of New Orleans, and others. Before the war, he had no real contact with politically active, educated, articulate black leaders. I think these encounters, as well as the service of 200,000 black men in the Union army and navy, affected his evolving outlook on black citizenship in the postwar republic. Part of my story is how Lincoln emancipated himself from many of his early prejudices.

One of the pleasures of working on this book was simply reading, slowly and carefully, Lincoln’s writings. Like others who have studied Lincoln, I came to admire his amazing command of the English language. Even the Emancipation Proclamation itself produces surprises when read really carefully. Lincoln enjoined the former slaves to refrain from violence, but he then added, “except in necessary self-defense.” Lincoln was not cowed by widespread charges that emancipation would lead to a racial bloodbath. He did not have to say that blacks had a right to defend their freedom by violence if need be,
but he did so. And, repudiating his earlier commitment to colonization without quite saying so, he urged freed slaves to go to work for “reasonable wages” – in the United States. Lincoln always chose his words with extreme care. With that word “reasonable” Lincoln wanted to make clear that as free laborers, the former slaves had the right to judge for themselves the wages offered them. In other words, in the Proclamation, Lincoln addressed African-Americans not as property, subject to the will of others, but as men and women with volition, whose loyalty the Union must earn.

One final surprise had to do with the complex relationship between Lincoln and more radical opponents of slavery – the abolitionists, who generally operated outside the political system, and Radical Republicans, who represented the abolitionist sensibility in party politics. There is a vast historiography on Lincoln and another one on abolitionism but too often they speak past one another. Lincoln was not an abolitionist and never claimed to be one. But to borrow a phrase from a modern-day politician who was quoted as saying that my first book was his favorite work of American history – of course I am referring to Karl Rove – Lincoln understood that abolitionists and Radicals were essential to the “base” of the Republican party. In 1856 and 1858 Lincoln squelched efforts by more moderate Republicans – some of them his close friends – to deny election to Congress of the Radical Owen Lovejoy, brother of the martyred abolitionist editor Elijah P. Lovejoy. The Republican party, Lincoln said, could not win only with this Radical base, but it needed their enthusiasm, commitment, and impact on public sentiment.

Lincoln is often presented as the model of pragmatic politics, a fair enough
judgment, so long as one does not thereby dismiss the abolitionists and Radicals as fanatics with no sense of the limits of the possible. For as Max Weber wrote in his celebrated essay Politics as a Vocation, “What is possible would not have been achieved if, in this world, people had not repeatedly reached for the impossible.” Every one of Lincoln’s major actions related to slavery – abolition in the District of Columbia, the enrollment of black soldiers, emancipation under the Constitution’s war power, proposing the right to vote for some blacks in Reconstruction – had first been staked out by Radicals. The Fiery Trial tells the story of how the combination of an enlightened public leader and a committed social movement can achieve transformative social change.

Lincoln always hated slavery, but he was not born with a pen in his hand ready to sign the emancipation proclamation. As the stage on which he acted expanded, Lincoln absorbed new experiences and encountered new people, and he learned from them. Unlike many presidents, he did not surround himself with yes men. He was intellectually curious, willing to listen to critics. He combined a commitment to bedrock principles with a capacity for moral and political growth. These are qualities sorely needed in the strange political world we live in today.