

THE EMANCIPATION OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN



DAVID LEVINE

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

"The United States is guilty of Original Sin, and that sin is slavery."

~HOBIE TUCKER/et al

"There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges."

~MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States, is 191 years old on February 12. He was born in 1809 and was murdered on Good Friday, April 14, 1865, at the age of 56. He was shot in the back of the head while attending a stage play by an embittered actor who thought his single bullet would reverse the loss of a civil war just ended.

For most of the world Lincoln is the symbol of the United States. For Americans his worn, gaunt and terribly sad face is our conscience. He is revered as almost a saintly human being, and with Karl Marx is probably the other most significant political figure of the 19th century, and certainly the most compelling in American history.

Lincoln grew to power from poverty and obscurity. He was raised on the frontier and taught himself law. He is probably the nation's most successful politician. Just prior to his election as President he was hardly known outside Illinois. At his inauguration in 1861 he was the most reviled man in the country, yet immediately after his death he was regarded the most beloved. He almost single-handedly held the sundered Union to its successful and awesomely bloody purpose of defeating the secession of the Confederacy. More than almost any man of his era he grew to understand the importance of the unity of the United States. Without unity the nation would be the victim of other rapacious powers that wished to obliterate the fledgling split democracy and expropriate its vast spaces and incredibly rich resources. He passionately believed the doctrine of political freedom would disappear from the world if the U.S. dissolved. Ironically, his election as President severed the nation; and just as ironically the division of the nation centered on the question of political and individual freedom of black slaves. Although Lincoln believed that the gradual abolition of slavery was an historical inevitability and the intent of the majority of the framers of the American Constitution, his dramatic act of

emancipation halfway through the Civil War more than any other act made him one of the most memorable and important figures in history.

Lincoln had very little personal acquaintance with slavery, though he had witnessed it on the river landings of Missouri and southern Illinois and in particular during his single term in Congress in Washington, D.C., which at that time, in the 1840s, was a major warehouse for the slave trade, by then illegal but not slavery itself. He thought slavery violated the doctrine of equal rights but he never quite abandoned the idea of white superiority. For most of his struggle against slavery he did not believe that whites and blacks could coexist without economic dislocation and violence, and he preferred establishing colonies of former slaves in South or Central America in much the manner as Liberia in Africa. He was opposed to immediate emancipation and initially believed that slavery could be slowly and patiently eradicated without disunion. He thought a policy of containment by free states would eventually strangle slavery. The secession of the Confederacy altered his hopes. Though he still believed emancipation would lead to catastrophe and initially resisted radical abolitionists, he needed a strong, clear driving force to continue support for the war against the southern states to justify the intensifying bloodiness and appalling Union losses. He also wanted to instill terror in the South which had always been haunted by the specter of a massive slave uprising. Yet he wished no revenge upon the South, unlike many northern politicians and abolitionists, and his original plans for Reconstruction following the war gave no political power to the freed slaves in the defeated Confederacy, nor were they to be allowed to vote. Although he became convinced that blacks and whites would have to remain together because separatism was infeasible, he continued to believe the status quo had to change gradually if change was to be successful. It was his feeling that several generations would have to pass before blacks were capable and educated enough to assume political power. Their chances for economic freedom were nil, and it is probable he was also aware that sudden enfranchisement of power and wealth would result in a brutal backlash against blacks in both North and South.

Lincoln might not have been able to prevent the opportunistic revenge upon the South, but his death ensured it. Its result was a counter-revenge, not upon the white 'carpetbaggers' who infested the South at the end of the Civil War, but upon freed slaves who were terrorized and murdered. White supremacy groups grew up on the fringes of southern anger, the most dominant and ruthless the nightriders of the Ku Klux Klan. Lynchings of blacks were commonplace following the Civil War and lasted until the sixth decade of the 20th century. After more than a century of emancipation American blacks are still without position or power at the beginning of the 21st century, and although the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s dramatized and somewhat improved black prospects, the pervasive racism that saturates American society continues to

strip away the few advances that were made half a century ago. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The word *Wait* has almost always meant *Never*."

American history is taught from primarily a white perspective, which is only a portion of our history, and without integrating it with black American history it is irrelevant, and worse, it is a lie that perpetuates the racism that underlies and embitters our truly pluralistic history.

African blacks and European whites were parallel colonizers of the western hemisphere and together they built the civilizations that currently exist in North and South America. The primary difference is that black immigration was a forced migration. Millions of blacks were brought in chains from Africa as slaves for 400 years. Slavery evolved as the result of the need for an abundant and relatively cheap supply of labor in the American colonies, and the traffic in slaves was itself probably the most profitable international trade in history. Entire industries were built on the commerce of human slaves, and as cruel as it was (which induced an opaqueness to the torment inflicted by the trade), the extent and profitability of slavery built cities and helped raise the capital that started the industrial revolution in England.

Much of Africa was emptied to provide slaves for the European colonies in the Americas, and most of Africa was colonized by European nations. Africans who were not sent across the oceans as slaves were enslaved at home. No one will ever know precisely how many millions of blacks were killed in their villages in four centuries of slave raids, but it is estimated that about one-third of those captured died enroute to the coasts or while imprisoned awaiting embarkation and another third aboard ships in which they were chained and stacked like cords of wood in overcrowded, filthy holds, and during the 'seasoning' process of slavery, worked to death in stifling climates, beaten and murdered if they were slow to obey or attempted to escape.

When the slave trade was finally declared illegal at the end of the 18th century its illicitness made it even more profitable in much the manner as the current international drug trade, and as with illegal drugs when capture is imminent, uncouth thousands of black men, women and children were thrown overboard to drown in the ocean (chained together) whenever a naval patrol caught up with a slave ship.

The trade was also profitable because it was easier to work a slave to death and buy a new one than it was to breed and feed newer generations, although that of course was also done.

Slavery in the Americas took two separate directions. In the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in South and Central America, slavery continued the long tradition of Mediterranean slavery, practiced most famously in classical times, and was incorporated in the Iberian Catholic religious doctrine which claimed that although slaves were of the lowest social order, both masters and slaves possessed souls that were regarded as equal by God. The tendency, therefore, was that slaves were human beings with some rights and some legal means by which they might achieve freedom.* The legal structures of the North American colonies and the British West Indies, and later the United States, did not recognize slaves as human beings entitled to human rights. The ancient and medieval experiences with slavery had been forgotten and northern Europe did not have a comparable tradition with the Iberian nations. There was no slave law and no concern for blacks in their religious doctrines. More problematic for the future was the tendency of northern Europeans and Americans to identify blacks with slavery. The mere fact of being black was presumptive of slave status. Slavery was considered perpetual and chances of working toward freedom were few. To be black was to be a slave, without rights to marriage, children (whose value was only as prospective slaves), property or to the product of their work.

Yet despite the differences of the slave systems of South and North America, they were only differences of degree. Wherever there was slavery there was a slave society, not merely for blacks but for whites also. Blacks and whites were bound together in cruel and bitter antagonism but also in a complex relationship that could not express itself without reference to each other. It was a class relationship that became ever more defined as a racial one. North American southern society



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