

Lincoln, Slavery, and the Nation

Mark E. Neely Jr.

After returning to Illinois from a visit to Kentucky in 1841, Abraham Lincoln described a memorable experience on the otherwise tedious boat trip home:

By the way, a fine example was presented on board the boat for contemplating the effect of *condition* upon human happiness. A gentleman had purchased twelve negroes in different parts of Kentucky and was taking them to a farm in the South. They were chained six and six together. A small iron clevis was around the left wrist of each, and this fastened to the main chain by a shorter one at a convenient distance from the others; so that the negroes were strung together precisely like so many fish upon a trot-line. In this condition they were being separated forever from the scenes of their childhood, their friends, their fathers and mothers, and brothers and sisters, and many of them, from their wives and children, and going into perpetual slavery where the lash of the master is proverbially more ruthless and unrelenting than any other where; and yet amid all these distressing circumstances, as we would think them, they were the most cheerful and apparently happy creatures on board. One, whose offence for which he had been sold was an over-fondness for his wife, played the fiddle almost continually; and the others danced, sung, cracked jokes, and played various games with cards from day to day. How true it is that “God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb,” or in other words, that He renders the worst of human conditions tolerable, while He permits the best, to be nothing better than tolerable.

Readers of Ira Berlin’s *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* will recognize immediately that Lincoln had just witnessed the defining experience of slavery in its “Migration Generations.” From 1812 to 1860 vast movements of slaves to the booming cotton and sugar plantations of the Southwest replicated the horrors of the original Middle Passage across the Atlantic Ocean. Lincoln had also seen, we might say, the makings of the plot of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s brilliant book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which memorably indicted slavery for the horrors of this new migration—separation of families and removal to unfamiliar and harsher conditions. Yet Lincoln did not react as Stowe did.¹

In Matthew Pinsker’s able and comprehensive essay we do not always get a sense of the historiographical trends, such as the developments in the history of slavery, that generally

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¹ Abraham Lincoln to Mary Speed, Sept. 27, 1841, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (9 vols., New Brunswick, 1953–1955), I, 260; Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), 159–244; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly* (Boston, 1852).

shape the historical profession. Pinsker's meritorious essay instead explores the Lincoln field from the inside out. I think it might have been equally useful to write an essay from the outside into the field, analyzing the effects of new methods and viewpoints on this old, mature, and crowded field of study.

The importance of developments in the study of slavery and race makes the best introduction to the idea, but there are also major developments in several other fields with which to contend. The writing of the military history of the Civil War is at last emerging from the shadow of the "total wars" of the twentieth century. The idea that the Civil War anticipated the "total wars" of the twentieth century in indiscriminate slaughter has lost its luster, but it is not clear that Lincoln's role as commander in chief has been reevaluated in light of a new understanding of the nature of the war. Does Lincoln still seem like a military genius, and if so, did his genius lie in something other than maintaining pressure on his commanders and soldiers for hard fighting? Likewise, what has been the effect of the new military history, with its focus on the life and plight of the common soldier, on interpreting this notoriously tough-minded commander in chief? What effect did the arrival of social history and women's history have on Lincoln literature? What was the impact of the collapse of the new political history on our understanding of Lincoln the master politician? What did the arrival of the ideas of political culture and republicanism mean for looking at what was by far the most important part of Lincoln's life—his political career? Did the new constitutional history cast Lincoln's troublesome record on the Constitution in new light?

Taking the military points first, consider Lincoln's famous little memorandum from November 1862 on furloughs in the Army of the Potomac. Andrew Delbanco's excellent Lincoln reader, which includes only complete documents, gives the memo a place in proving that the president "directed the war without relish, but also, in his way, without mercy":

The Army is constantly depleted by company officers who give their men leave of absence in the very face of the enemy, and on the eve of an engagement, which is almost as bad as desertion. At this very moment there are between seventy and one hundred thousand men absent on furlough from the Army of the Potomac. The army, like the nation, has become demoralized by the idea that the war is to be ended, the nation united, and the peace restored, by *strategy*, and not by hard desperate fighting. Why, then, should not the soldiers have furloughs?²

The memo must have stemmed from Lincoln's frustrations over his inability to get Gen. George B. McClellan to press the enemy. But the new military history would have historians look at war from the standpoint of the common soldier and not from the viewpoint of the White House and the commanding officer's headquarters. Strategy, which saves lives and brings victory too, was surely appealing to ordinary soldiers, the men otherwise doomed to do the "hard desperate fighting" Lincoln prescribed. Moreover, it is not true, however tough the wording of the memo, written in anger and frustration, that President Lincoln waged war "without mercy." The quality of mercy is a widely agreed upon characteristic of Lincoln's.

I certainly do not mean to say that the broader historiography has lacked impact, only that we need to appreciate what that impact has been. Except for the new social history,

² Abraham Lincoln, memorandum, Nov. 1862, in *The Portable Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Andrew Delbanco (1992; New York, 2009), 260, 275.

there has been no development more widely felt among historians than the new understanding of nationalism disseminated in three books published a little over twenty-five years ago by Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger.³ Lincoln was America's most important nationalist, but what does his career mean when measured by these new ideas?

We have been reminded of this need for reconsideration of nationalism in the field by perhaps the single most interesting announcement prompted by the Lincoln anniversary of 2009. The curators at Ford's Theatre have revealed the motto that was sewn into the lining of the blood-stained coat in which Lincoln died. Many of us have seen the coat, but from the outside, as displayed in a museum vitrine. The coat's lining bore the motto One Country, One Destiny.⁴

Somehow the idea that every time Lincoln put on his coat he was wrapping himself in nationalist dedication has never been accurately rendered in the vast literature. We do not yet precisely know his role: Did he create "a new nation," and, if so, how? Was he creating the same kind of nation conceived by other great nationalists of the age? Elizabeth Cady Stanton, for example, came to agree with the president. "War, pestilence, famine, anything but an ignoble peace," she exclaimed to "the women of the republic" in the spring of 1863. And Frederick Douglass likewise fully endorsed the national cause. Asked to join an insurrectionary "John Brown movement" to free slaves late in the summer of 1861, Douglass responded sharply, "When I join any movement such as I suppose contemplated, I must have a country or the hope of a country under me—a government around me—and some flag of a Northern or Southern nation floating over me."⁵

Stimulus to the new approaches needed in the Lincoln field may lie as often outside the collected works of Lincoln as within them.

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; London, 1991); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, 1983); Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983).

⁴ Michael E. Ruane, "Ford's Theatre to Curtail Display of Lincoln Coat," *Washington Post*, Jan. 8, 2009, C2. See also Brooks Brothers advertisement in *New York Times*, Jan. 21, 2009.

⁵ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "To the Women of the Republic," April 24, 1863, in *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*, vol. 1: *In the School of Anti-Slavery, 1840–1866*, ed. Ann D. Gordon (New Brunswick, 1997), 484. For an appreciation of feminist nationalism and the nationalism of Frederick Douglass in comparison with Abraham Lincoln, I am indebted to Melinda Lawson, *Patriot Fires: Forging a New American Nationalism in the Civil War North* (Lawrence, 2002), esp. 141–56. Frederick Douglass to Samuel J. May, Aug. 30, 1861, in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Yuval Taylor (Chicago, 1999), 470.